

Dissolve

Exhibition by artist Jill Sampson
Foyer Galleries,
Logan Art Gallery
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Staying with the trouble¹

Beth Jackson

... staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or Edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings. [Haraway, p1]

It seems to me that Jill Sampson is a long-time student of learning to 'stay with the trouble'. Her exhibition, *Dissolve*, is an invitation to stay and be held – to inhabit relations rather than interpret meanings, to sit with discomfort, ambiguity, and contradiction, resisting quick comprehension, and to recognise that feelings of confusion and implication are not failures. This exhibition invites the viewer as a fellow witness, one who is also entangled in the trouble, and as a co-learner seeking to practice attentiveness, endurance, and response-ability.

There is so much respect in these artworks of assemblage and configuration – respect for materials, time, labour, resources, histories, uses, other living beings, the land and the waters. But Sampson takes us well beyond objects, representation, and reality, into spaces where things dissolve, where there is only relationship, contingency, entanglement.

There is strong autobiography in these artworks – each artwork is anchored in time, place, personal experience, and story. However, Sampson eschews human-centred narratives. She is not a maker, inventor, storyteller, creator in the individualistic, ego-centric, phallocentric, and imperial understandings of those terms. Rather she is all of those things dissolved within chains of being, embedded in relations of care, adrift in competing systems of knowledge, complicit in capitalist extraction, production and consumption, composted in kinship relations and microbial landform. These artworks are evidence of all this – offered up as 'found' materials, documentation of processes, measurements of time, energy, and the traced flows of blood, fire, and water. This is the artist staying with the trouble, the artist as troubled and troubling, as troublemaker and bringer of peace. This is the artist human living and dying with others – carers, family, medical experts, animals, plants, soils, infrastructure – remaking herself, reworlding her mortal self in myriad real and imagined connections.

The storylines in this exhibition entwine and loop, knot and bind, stitch together and dissolve apart. This is not about straight lines, the celebrated stories of nation building, settlement expansion, wealth creation, and swollen reputations – and shows these narratives to be exhausted, preposterous, unviable. Sampson's works hold things in balance, as though weighing costs and benefits from multiple angles – costs to the environment, to

First Peoples, to animals and plants, to rivers and ecosystems, and benefits to whom? who is thriving? who is surviving? ... her landscape and her own body are on the brink and she holds them there lovingly, staying with the trouble, seeing with open eyes, carefully observing.

Dissolve is installed in the entrance foyer and central passageway of Logan Art Galley – and artworks may be experienced as the vertebrae of a connective spine and central nervous system. *Dissolve* occupies those spaces, troubling them, slowing the flow, ensuring we stay with them, looping back and forth, as they criss-cross our line of sight. Jill Sampson's spine is one site of trouble for her. Myeloma, a cancer of the blood, has weakened and deformed some of her vertebrae. This vital core has become fragile, a place where bone dissolves and nerves are exposed. This exhibition reaches deeply and gently into the viscera of life, death, and disease ... searching for bones, for new architectures and instruments. There are no final solutions, there is only living with ...

Expressed and extruded within the rich materiality of these works, are flows of energy. Life-giving forces of water, blood, and fire pool and dissipate, trickle and spurt, engulf and drain from and into these leaky makeshift artworks.

Water

At the entrance, the work *ism* comprises an interlocking pile of irrigation pipe fittings, salvaged from Sampson's family farm. These are the pipe connectors, the joints of a watering system no longer in use. Their hollow forms now agape, directionless, and dry, like a country in drought, like a pile of body parts dead from thirst, or even the ravages of war. Yet the hollow pockets of silence enter into one another, leading the eye lyrically throughout the form, and the water story is reimagined, made vivid. Stay with this trouble, know droughts will break, see how to live through it together, maintain connections of care.

Water for farm use is taken from underground, but there are also several dams and a stream, Tanduringie creek, that provide fresh water to both cattle and wildlife. In addition to being the title of the exhibition, *Dissolve* is a video work featuring a dead dingo, lying beside the creek. The dingo would likely have come to the creek attempting to quench a raging thirst caused by ingesting poisonous bait. Dingoes are unprotected and still commonly considered pests and a threat to livestock, especially sheep, even though scientists now consider them beneficial for ecologies and pastoralists, as they reduce populations of kangaroos and wallabies, as well as feral animals such as rabbits, pigs, cats, deer, and foxes. Ecological disruption and other colonial legacies resound throughout *Dissolve*, even as this dingo's body decays, soothed by running waters on its return to earth.

Blood

Also in the foyer, a suspended work, *Tethered*, divides and veils the space. A salvaged sheer blind is stitched with empty blister packets of medication – floating, shimmering silverfoil that softly clatters with any movement. Hundreds of threads in varying shades of red and pink trickle down the surface as capillaries across a membrane. Two bundles of matt rushes and three river stones anchor the work. Like the dingo, Sampson mentally lies beside the

stream after swallowing the medicated poison which treats her blood cancer. *Dissolve* upwells with yearning for rest and recovery.

Every bandage stitched together to form the artwork *Hold me close* represents a needle's puncture to Sampson's skin, incurred during her cancer treatment. Another suspended fabric, this work cradles *Cut before the Fall*, a bundle of the artist's hair. The body is everywhere and nowhere. Life hovers, held in other people's hands.

Fire

Deeper into the exhibition is the central installation *fire-ways*. A suspended thick canvas tarp shrouds a miniature forest of inverted dead weeds, while a video projection of grassfire plays across the scene. The video documents a cool burn undertaken by Sampson on the farm, following involvement with Firesticks Alliance and Bunya Peoples' Aboriginal Corporation. Cool burning is a traditional cultural First Nations practice which has nurtured Australian landscapes for millennia. During a cool burn, fire moves slowly, trickling through the landscape with a flame height not much higher than the grass, allowing animals to move away. The fire is patchy, unburnt areas around fallen logs become havens for wildlife. The tree canopy is never burnt, and the bark of trees rarely blackened. This experience contrasts starkly with today's destructive hot bushfires that are increasing in frequency and ferocity, accelerated by climate change.

*One of the worst syndromes of continuous wildfire or bad fire practices is upside-down country. I call it upside-down country because it looks like the trees are upside-down. The long dead branches of the trees represent the roots sticking up in the air, while the thickened mess of invasive plants and dead vegetation on the forest floor represents the canopy. It is the worst case when you see beautiful woodland countries looking like this. Most of the plants and animals that make up those systems are not there anymore.*² [Victor Steffensen, p.167]

fire-ways generates a space for staying with this trouble, for living in upside-down country. A space for apprehending that the problem is not fire, but our relationship with it. First Peoples have been removed from the environment and entire ecosystems suffer. New/old forms of stewardship, of eco-relations beckon our humanity, embracing humanity's ancient relationship with fire.

Reworlding

Sampson's artworks embody the flows of water, blood, and fire, interweaving patterns of restorative care. Bundles of grasses wrapped in hospital wrist bands offer measured healing to land and self, inseparably entwined. A welder's mask offers protection from firestorms of the future, real and imagined, the world reflected in its visor. Large etchings, printed from salvaged zinc plates ground and scored with creek-bed gravel and industrial tools, reveal new imaginary cosmologies. Discarded equipment becomes a map of stars and moon, mortality cradled in deep time and space.

Dissolve is not a reflection of the world but a reworlding. It is a slow remaking that has involved salvaging, repurposing, recovering, unravelling, threading, stitching, combining,

connecting, making do, giving in, digging, gathering, receiving, listening, and observing ... and patiently understanding the vitality and value of these practices.

There are no final solutions. There is no cure. Staying with the trouble is hard. To understand one's place is to feel implicated in the histories of invasion and dispossession, in the processes of extraction and industrialisation, in the food chain and the biosphere, in the microbial swarms and biochemical reactions of organic life. *Dissolve* is a place portrait alive with the trails that Sampson has found and forged enabling her to act with response-ability, to nurture caring companions, to give back, to make worlds, and find new oddkin of all kinds.

1. Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2016.

NOTE: This essay not only borrows the title of Haraway's book but also attempts to apply her eco-feminist concepts throughout, including reworlding, oddkin, response-ability, and more. The intention is not to appropriate but rather to promote and propagate Haraway's eco-sophy.

2. Victor Steffensen, *Fire Country: how Indigenous fire management could help save Australia*, Harie Grant Explore, Melbourne, 2020.