

'Woven Histories' included the depiction and reference to a more recent history symbolised by one central pine tree painted in red-ochre and covered with green gum leaves to symbolise the Stolen Generations and the Ballarat Boy's Home, where artist Les Griggs (Evan's late husband) had once been forced to stay as a child. Such a significant personal reference is accompanied by the ways in which Evans questions her own relationship to nature, investigating nature's relevance and meaning for her personally. In the exhibition *It's so still there's not a leaf moving* (Ochre Gallery, 2007), which followed Evans's collaborative work with Maddigan, Evans created a number of works, which may be described as botanical in form. Larger than life-size drawn and painted leaves and sticks were juxtaposed with actual leaves and sticks often placed side-by-side.

In the exhibition *Precious* (Ochre Gallery, 2008), Evans acknowledged the leaf in all its gentle simplicity, using it as a bridge to teach people about the value of the natural world. She used (imitation) gold-leaf, applying it to leaf after leaf, and even framed these leaves, arranging them in jewel-like compositions, in order to comment on the preciousness of nature. They seemed reminiscent of religious icons.

In this current exhibition, the artist returns to the power of nature's raw, unadorned beauty. The leaf is no longer gold—the preciousness of the leaf is in its materiality—in nature's offerings, because ultimately, once awakened to nature's relevance, nature does not need to be changed in order for us to really 'see'. The ways in which Evans arranges the leaves is intuitive, and somehow swarm-like. It is as if she wants to connect with the intuitive power of the swarm and the ways in which creativity and creation overlap, connect, and are completely integral and indivisible to one another. Nature and creativity, intertwined and inspiring with layered dimensions of ways to see, work together in the expression of striving for a healthier place for the children of our world.

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Earth, Our Shared Heritage

Megan Evans's travels over many years have taken her to the cathedrals of Europe and the temples of India. Each time she returns to the bush, and sees in it 'cathedrals of Australia'. Nature has been a friend to Evans throughout her life. In Evans's recent work she has sought to know the natural world more intimately. This exhibition is testimony to this desire. The earth is inspirational. Evans investigates 'self' and her connection to environment. She questions her relationship with the earth, not in order to remove herself from nature, nor to place herself 'above' or 'beyond' nature, but to acknowledge and to make better sense of what nature is as 'heritage'. Evans seeks to understand and to acknowledge Aboriginal relationship to the earth, but never to appropriate it.

Evans wants to 'see' differently, beyond her European heritage that 'views' landscape from a perspective of ownership. She seeks to know nature's secrets, and also to embrace nature's mysteries. One such mystery is that of the 'swarm'. While an individual ant may not be intelligent, for example, a colony of ants has the ability to organize itself into a wonderful complex unit, working in collective harmony. The investigation of nature's intelligence has in this way helped biologists and other scientists to better understand how people too, might work together more effectively. The idea of a 'self-organising' system fascinates Evans. Perhaps this is the model which human beings need to learn from, so that we might consequently take better care of our earth. This insight is especially vital and important today in the light of crisis over climate change. The ant colony does not have a leader telling them what to do. Colony behavior is dependent on simple actions of ants who do not individually 'see' the bigger picture, and yet with each ant's contribution, the colony functions perfectly. What is it that makes several thousand birds flying through the air, or a multitude of fish in the sea, swarm and move as if one being? What is it that the natural world can teach us about community? If all of the peoples of the earth were able to acknowledge and to celebrate their individual uniqueness and yet somehow move as one family towards wholeness and love, would it reflect nature in all its awe-filled wonder? What does nature teach us about the ways in which we have collectively behaved as a human community?

While Evans does not speak explicitly about holistic ways of being which the peoples of the world might collectively strive towards, she nonetheless seems to be seeking to come back to the earth as a source of nourishment and sustenance—now and for future generations—yet at times it is an earth of quiet fragility and fierce surprises. After fire swept through the bushland surrounding her mother's home at Chum Creek Victoria in early 2009, Evans walked through the charred forest picking up blackened leaves. These too were special. They conveyed the rugged ferocity of nature and simultaneously a strange and unexpected beauty.

Megan Evans

Selected Exhibitions

- 2008 *Precious* – Ochre Gallery, Melbourne
- 2007 *It's so still there's not a leaf moving* – Ochre Gallery, Melbourne.
- 2006 *Woven*, collaboration with Gayle Maddigan, Ballarat Fine Art Gallery
- 2003 *The Sublime Sleep*, Span Galleries, Melbourne.
- 2001 *Sleepwalker*, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne.
- 2000 *Velvet Blue*, collaboration with Lisa Young, First Floor Gallery.
- 1997 *Im material*, Westspace Gallery, Melbourne.

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2008 *Crossing Current – New Indigenous Perspectives*, Maroondah Art Gallery.
- 2005 *Waterhouse Natural History Art Prize*, South Australian Museum.,
- 2002 *Synthetic Image*, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne.
- 2001 *Stellar*, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne.

Selected Publications

- Internal Landscape*, in Artlink Sept issue, Rational Emotional 2009
- Aboriginal Art: Creativity and Assimilation* by Donna Leslie, Macmillan 2008
- The New Indian Express*, Chennai, Reuters, 14/3/06
- The Makers Mark* by Julie Shiels, in Artwork issue 62 Sept 2005
- Cross Currents in Contemporary Australian Art* by Traudi Allen, Craftsmen House, 2001.
- Geographies of Resistance*, ed Steve Pike, Michael Keith, Resisting Reconciliation, essay by Jane Jacobs
- Sightlines, Women's Art from a Feminist perspective*, by Sandy Kirby Gordon and Breach.

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The Fall

by Megan Evans

Evans collected leaves, classifying and sorting them as a botanist might do. The process allowed her to also investigate her love of colour, shape, and pattern. It provided opportunity to 'look' more closely: to see, feel, and to question. It was as if every leaf was imbued with story and metaphor, symbolic of life's journey. Even mistletoe, an introduced, parasitic plant, holds an astonishing attractiveness. Its leaves are fine and visually striking when arranged in composition on a white ground, and yet its meaning and metaphor as a plant symbolising colonisation, is also a poignant indicator of the relationship between the coloniser and colonised.



'The Coloniser' - Mistletoe leaves, pins. 2009

Evans's rediscovery of the 'leaf' began in earnest after her contribution to the collaborative project, 'Woven Histories' (2004), which she undertook with artist Gayle Maddigan (of the Wemba Wemba, Wertigikia and Nari Nari peoples of Victoria), to acknowledge Aboriginal history in relation to the Eureka rebellion of 1854. The Eureka 150th commemorations included the commissioning of a public sculptural installation by the State Government of Victoria, to consider the Aboriginal experience during the same period. Maddigan and Evans chose a circle of Pine trees at the Ballarat Botanical Gardens in country Victoria to work with. Willow sticks gathered after the pruning of a stand of willows on a small island in the Indigenous wetland area of the gardens were gathered and creatively made use of to distinguish the pine trees as living sentinels of remembrance. Willow sticks were bound around the circumference of each tree which was painted with white ochre. The trees, like giant painted ceremonial ancestral beings, were responded to by local Aboriginal Elders who conducted a Smoking ceremony at the site for the opening of the Eureka 150th International Music Festival (2004). The Ballarat community loved the installation. As a consequence, Evans thought deeply about the ways in which nature can bring a community back to the source of 'being' itself, and to that which is fundamentally important to life.

If a community can work together to honour shared histories and to acknowledge nature's primacy and presence through commemorations as well as present day acknowledgment, perhaps it might also rethink the meaning of its own survival in regards to the reality and threat of climate change and how we might care for our earth.

To reconnect with nature and to provide a creative context in which the natural world can become a catalyst for positive change and healing of our earth has become increasingly vital to Evans. She seeks to encourage and contribute to this process. She asks whether or not the Western world might collectively find a way of re-'viewing' nature—not from the 'outside'—but from within. Evans seeks to speak of the possibility of a connection to the earth which is akin to an Indigenous relationship, although she knows that such a bond can never be the same, because the Indigenous legacy has evolved over more than 2000 generations. It is inspiring, because it is a relationship to the earth that is not one of separation. Looking differently is a necessary step enabling change to occur to save our earth. Likewise, a reconsideration of the Eureka rebellion as a history significant to white colonial ancestors and its implications as an early sign of democracy, alongside the recognition of Aboriginal ancestors who died defending their land, was another layered history.

For Evans, the urgency of seeing nature differently is not simply a moral dilemma, but one of survival. Can we respond to our collective sadness in relation to the terrible changes made to the natural world, the threat to native wildlife, plant life, and even the very air we breathe? Can we make use of our shared fear of further negative change as a catalyst to make a difference for the better? What can we do as a human community to flag the importance of taking care of our earth—to touch people—and to move them in a way that rhetoric often does not?



Detail of Swarm, Eucalyptus leaves and pins, 5.5 x 3m