

## Up in the Air

### Claire Grant

Claire Grant worked in aviation for over a decade. *Up in the Air* surveys her unique perspective as a flight attendant, flying throughout the major upheavals of the COVID-19 pandemic. She takes inspiration from the aerial viewpoint and restricted perspectives observed in-flight.

An aisle of plane-windows evoke gazing out at the landscape 25,000 ft below. Skies filled with blueprints of flight navigation charts form abstracted vignettes of Australian destinations. Ominous text has crept off the departures board, reflecting our collective uncertainty. Everything feels *Up in the Air*.

Stretched taut and suspended by harsh metal fixtures, Grant's pre-employment dental x-ray gives us a playful smile/grimace, revealing a dark reality beneath the omnipresent face mask.

Photographed en route over an outback mine, the large-scale composite panoglitich purposefully exploits the iPhone camera's technical limitations, resulting in pixelated motion blurs and repetitive glitches. Translated from digital to analog, the expansive aerial view sweeps across multiple sheets of fragile paper ephemera, carefully hand printed in cyanotype. Each printout contains a detailed itinerary of routes the artist flew over the past year. These crew briefings, kept neatly folded in her pocket each day, capture a timely self-portrait of life as a regional flight attendant.

## Catching the Sun

After viewing the exhibition *Up in the Air* I find myself thinking of Icarus. It is not only the presence of wax, the enveloping blues of sky and sea and the perspective of giddy heights. It is also the wonder and exhilaration of soaring over serene pools of whiteness and discombobulated horizons. There is the eye navigating complex layers, tonal shifts and a majestically clouded vision. And there are the precise lines and potent dangers of miscalculation. All of these impressions come together in an atmosphere of beauty and tension to evoke the freedoms and fragilities of human flight.

Like many story-telling traditions, the Icarus myth serves as a cautionary tale, a moral guide, an exemplar. But why is it that this particular narrative from ancient history remains so familiar in the twenty-first century? I imagine that Icarus persists not simply as an allegory of over-confidence (ie. it teaches us to not aim too high) but precisely the opposite. Icarus encapsulates a wish and the promise of potential, enabling us to imagine ourselves as something else – a bird, a heavenly creature – somehow capable of going beyond the seemingly possible.

Greek mythology also brought us the story of Narcissus: a beautiful young man who fell in love with his own watery reflection. Unable to break his stare, he ultimately perished.

While Narcissus may be read as a lesson on the power of the gaze and the captivating potential of the image, Icarus demonstrates an enduring human desire to elevate our bodies above the earth. Centuries later, in a world where airplanes take off every few seconds and selfies are at our fingertips, it is easy to forget just where these technologies have taken us. *Up in the Air* provides a series of insights and an open space to contemplate this journey.

In this exhibition Claire Grant marries the astounding technologies of instant image capture and air travel, through her own lived experience as an artist and flight attendant. Moreover, she has done so at a time when much of the global population was undergoing a strange and profound stillness. As such these artworks provide us with a unique outlook on the pandemic (when most of us were grounded from flying) and an aviation sector under threat of collapse. Through the integration of everyday and specialist materials, new and old photographic techniques, Grant elevates the mundane routine of her daily work on a regional charter aircraft to a complex and thoughtful study.

It is difficult to imagine the pressures that Grant and other airline crew would have faced during this turbulent period. As Ireland, Hobbins and Black (2020) point out, there is significant affective labour expended in being a flight attendant, not least “the hard work of endlessly smiling and always being polite – and the personal sacrifices of the job.”<sup>1</sup> An enlarged cyanotype of the artist’s x-rayed teeth hints at the demands placed on the bodies (and wellbeing) of airline cabin crew. Whether it be the long-term effects of excessive pleasantries, cascading cosmic rays or the ‘unlikely event’ of other impacts, Grant’s dental records (a requirement on commencing employment) point to the darker aspects of the aviation sector.

This skeletal smile hovers ominously at the end of the corridor, both punctuating and linking the window glimpses and aerial vista on either side. It might be seen to stand in for the attendant at the front of the cabin signalling for us to pay attention and returns us to the fact of the artist’s own body as a central medium in the making of these artworks. For despite the representational emphasis on aerial vision, cloudscapes, and topography, and the data required to navigate, the aviation experience is inherently mediated through Grant’s creative and professional work. Her presence is encountered differently in each piece. In the series of window views it may be sensed in the tremulous trailing line of a hand applying wax resist. In the large-scale installation it is clearly observed in handwritten notations made onboard during flights. Here the very fabric of the image is comprised of ‘worn’ materials; both in the sense that they are repurposed papers marked and created from use and in the fact that they were folded and carried in the pocket of Grant’s uniform.

This large assemblage is then, figuratively speaking, a kind of long exposure—a durational work of art that enfolds the space and time of multiple flights. It blurs the boundaries between the pressurised cabin and the atmosphere outside. An assemblage of 57 individual cyanotypes assembled into a stunning panorama of cloud and atmosphere that mirrors the mass and void of the open cut mine below. This hollowed out landscape was a familiar sight for Grant, a route she travelled regularly, as the airline ferried mineworkers through the skies of regional Queensland. With the skies closed many flights were cancelled while provisions afforded for ‘essential’ industries, such as mining, ensured that some flights remained on schedule. This work subtly alerts us to the prevailing priorities of industry and government, and recalls how the aviation industry has familiarised a new aerial vision that alters

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<sup>1</sup> Ireland, T., P. Hobbins, P. Black, ‘Home away from home’: reflecting on past airline collapses in Australia. *The Conversation*. April 22, 2020.

conceptions of scale, time, and humanity's place in the world.

The rich blues and whites of the cyanotype is well suited to depictions made of and in the sky. And drawing on her training in batik technique Grant brings a unique approach to the process. The cyanotype was developed in the mid-nineteenth century and involves the application of a photosensitive solution to an absorbent surface such as fabric or paper. When exposed to sunlight (UV rays in particular) the solution undergoes a photochemical reaction and is converted into Prussian Blue. Where sunlight is blocked, the underlying substrate remains unexposed and will keep its original colour when the solution is washed out and fixed. This early form of photography was taken up by amateur and established scientists as a way of recording and cataloguing the natural world. Engineers and architects soon adopted this contact printing technique to reproduce their line drawings as 'blueprints', hence the strong legacy of association between the cyanotype and scientific illustration, technical plans and design work.

Many of Grant's cyanotypes share the clarity of line and crisp detail inherent to this design aesthetic. However the exacting sensibility of measured drawing and clean text is diffused by the frayed and torn edges of the washi and the delicate expanses of encaustic. To make these artworks Grant has drawn upon a personal archive of images and materials, ranging from the repurposed navigation guides used by pilots to her own photographs of the flight information board. These different perspectives of air travel (from the ground, on take-off, at high altitude) are layered together to create a unique multi-planar viewpoint. Consequently, we are presented with an imaginary airspace that mediates the landscape, the atmosphere inside and outside the plane, the personal impressions and the collective experience.

As a rumination on modern technologies of the air and the image, *Up in the Air*, is a bold vision made in an uncertain era. Like the stories of Icarus and Narcissus it issues a beautiful and beguiling alert. But unlike these mythic characters Grant does not underestimate the gaze or the powers of the sun. Instead, she carefully harnesses its rays to generate a unique body of artworks that open up shut down skies. Nonetheless, through her use of everyday materials and through lens of her own lived experience Grant brings us back to earth. This is a significant aspect of the work. It provides an unusual perspective on everyday life during the Covid-19 pandemic and is an important intervention in histories of aviation dominated by narratives of heroic male pilots. By bridging the speed and slowness of digital and alternative processes and human and machinic vision, Grant invites us to give deeper consideration to the image, ethics, and impacts of aviation on contemporary and future life.

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1	Claire Grant, Domestic Travel Restrictions May Be in Place (nothing's as precious as a hole in the ground), 2021 – 2022, Cyanotype and pen over laser print on paper (57 sheets), 90 x 400 cm.	\$9,000
2	Claire Grant, Dental Record (Employee 152578), 2022, Cyanotype and encaustic on cotton, stainless steel, 62 x 75 cm.	\$3,500
3	Claire Grant, CANCELLED (PER to BNE), 2022, Cyanotype and encaustic on washi paper, 34 x 24 cm.	\$1,250
4	Claire Grant, OOL Climb Gradient, 2022, Cyanotype and encaustic on washi paper, 34 x 24 cm.	\$1,250
5	Claire Grant, PLO to ADL, 2022, Cyanotype and encaustic on washi paper, 34 x 24 cm.	\$1,250
6	Claire Grant, SYD to HBA, 2022, Cyanotype and encaustic on washi paper, 34 x 24 cm.	\$1,250
7	Claire Grant, CANCELLED (SYD to CBR), 2022, Cyanotype and encaustic on washi paper, 34 x 24 cm.	\$1,250
8	Claire Grant, CANCELLED CANCELLED CANCELLED, 2022, Cyanotype and encaustic on washi paper, 34 x 24 cm.	\$1,250
9	Claire Grant, CANCELLED (MEL to LST), 2022, Cyanotype and encaustic on washi paper, 34 x 24 cm.	\$1,250
10	Claire Grant, CANCELLED (CBR overnight), 2022, Cyanotype and encaustic on washi paper, 34 x 24 cm.	\$1,250
11	Claire Grant, DRW to CNS, 2022, Cyanotype and encaustic on washi paper, 34 x 24 cm.	\$1,250

## About | Claire Grant

Claire Grant combines landscapes and personal experiences with alternative photography, working primarily in cyanotype and often incorporating encaustic wax into delicate prints on paper or textiles. Using light as her medium, she works with the sun, natural botanical elements, and water to form environmental imprints of time and place.

Her practice extends the historic printing style typical of cyanotype into abstraction and experimentation. Landscapes are suggested through simplified horizon lines and hints of floral forms, or printed on fragile paper ephemera.

Originally from Aotearoa New Zealand, she studied Photography at the University of Canterbury and Museum Studies at the University of Queensland. Recent exhibitions include: solo show In-Flight at Vacant Assembly (2021); finalist in the Milburn Art Prize for Landscape (2021) and Banyule Award for Art on Paper (2021); group shows at Brisbane Powerhouse, KEPK Space, Side Gallery and Byron School of Arts. Grant currently lives in Meanjin (Brisbane), Queensland.