

Earth to Images Melanie Cobham

Earth to Images addresses migration, colonisation and belonging through a conscious observation of nature and its unfolding. After moving to Australia in 2019, and as migration became an increasingly tense subject in the face of the pandemic, Cobham started considering more abstract ways to understand borders, identity and belonging.

The artist surveyed landscape and language, with her work manifesting in the form of drawings, prints, installations, and weavings. Earth to Images embodies the fraught translations between the analogue and the digital, between gesture and image, and between communication and misunderstanding.

Heavy Metals by Zoë Croggon

In the Gospel of Matthew, Judas turned Jesus over for thirty silver coins. Silver's reflection was said to be a reminder of his betrayal to God.

Pure silver is the most reflective element across the visible spectrum, reflecting 95 per cent of light. Humans have sought their own reflection for centuries, from Narcissus' pool of water to Anatolian obsidian and polished copper. But the modern mirror owes its invention to silver. In the seventeenth century, silver nitrate was melted down and used to coat glass sheets in a process called "silvering", allowing us to gaze into the seductive pool of our own reflection.

Silver is also integral to another kind of mirror: the photograph. Silver was an essential component of the photographic process; light-sensitive silver halides and silver bromide are used to make photographic film and paper. Only decades ago, photography was the primary use of silver in 1999 photographic use represented 25 per cent of total silver fabrication.

Uruguayan artist Melanie Cobham is, among many things, a photographer. Her work wrestles with the often complicated reality of damaging the environment while venerating it through the creation of art. Cobham works across mediums, examining migration, colonisation and language. The wealth of silver has interestingly followed the same migratory path as Cobham, shifting between Latin America and Australia, which now has the second highest silver resources globally.

Silver was the single greatest source of wealth to the Spanish Empire, which during its reign colonised great swathes of the Americas, Western Europe, Africa, Oceania and Asia. Between 1550 and 1800, Latin America provided about 80 per cent of the global production of silver, overseen by the crushing rule of the Spanish Empire. Spain's silver reserves not only financed their conquest of the New World, but also the European Renaissance; the exalted "rebirth of art". The Incas, many of whom were enslaved to work in silver mines, believed that gold was the sweat of the sun and silver the tears of the moon.

To create her work FROST (Documenting Winter in the ACT), Cobham left photographic paper overnight in below-freezing temperatures, exposing it to the intricate webs of frost forming on foliage. The camera-less images complicate the micro and macro dichotomy, appearing at once like magenta ropes of muscle fibres and aerial photographs of seared landscapes of mines.

The largest colonial silver mine in the world was built in the southern highlands of Bolivia, near the mountainous city of Potosí. It was believed that 'Cerro Rico' (rich mountain), was a peak of solid silver, such was the abundance of wealth it provided to the Spanish Empire from the sixteenth century onwards. During the Spanish Colonial era, two billion ounces of silver were extracted from the mountain. Some three million Quechua Indians and thirty thousand African slaves were forced to work at Cerro Rico over the years, with casualty estimates ranging from a horrifying five to eight million. The site was so renowned for its treacherous and exploitative conditions that it became known as the 'mountain that eats men'.

To mitigate the risk of working in such perilous conditions, colonial era miners began worshiping satanic deity "El Tio" (The Uncle), believed to be the lord of the underworld. Cerro Rico is home to more than 600 shrines in his likeness, to which miners leave offerings of cigarettes, alcohol, and cocoa leaves in exchange for protection. Locals perform a ritual sacrifice at the beginning of each agricultural cycle, where the blood of a sacrificed llama is smeared over the entrance of the mines to feed El Tio's bloodlust. Worship of El Tio is virulently condemned by the Catholic church, but miners believe that although a Christian god rules the earth, another god presides underground. Christian symbolism is forbidden in the mines, (including the pickaxe, whose form mimics the cross), and in turn images and icons of El Tio do not surface aboveground. He demands to be fed but never feared, El Tio eats the souls of those who fear him, and his greed is never satiated.

Cerro Rico is still in operation, employing approximately fifteen thousand miners, with casualties currently estimated between five to fifteen a month. The truncated life expectancy of miners working in Cerro Rico is forty. Although large-scale mercury production and use has halted, the mercury used historically in silver mining remains bioavailable, continuing to contaminate soil and waterways in Potosí. The earth takes its own photograph: a grim afterimage of centuries of excavation and exploitation. After five hundred years of exhaustive extraction, honeycombed with mining tunnels, the mountain is now under threat of structural collapse. In 2011 the silvered cap of the mountain caved in.

Unlike the voracious mines of Cerro Rico, which mutilate and sterilise the earth, the subterranean mines built by termites fertilise and hydrate the soil. Termite mounds store nutrients and moisture, working symbiotically with their environment and supporting the growth of vegetation. Termites are also prodigious colonists, occupying, with the exception of Antarctica, all landmasses on earth. Their colonies range in size from a few hundred to several million individuals, with a strictly integrated and organised caste system. Colonies are often classified as “superorganisms” because individual termites form part of an automated entity; the collective mind of the colony.

Termites are also formidable architects. Their dynamic mounds can reach up to nine meters and are a product of rich cognitive intelligence or “swarm intelligence”. The mounds are temperature-controlled, with intricate ventilation systems that function like lungs, inhaling and exhaling through porous walls, despite their durability.

In her work ‘The colony reclaims the land’, Cobham left photographic negatives of Australian landscape in the elements over several days. The negatives were crossed over by a colony of termites, leaving a smattering of dark, rhythmic sweeps and gestural smears. The work is generous and benign, playing with the dialogue of living on colonised land by inviting a native colony to reclaim its own image. Cobham invites the insects, generally considered a pest, into a collaboration that reveals both their individuality and uniformity, even their beauty.

Recent studies of termite nests in West Australia reveal that termites ‘mine’ and stockpile precious metals, notably gold, while gathering subterranean material for their nests. Their nests are said to be a potential indicator of valuable mineral deposits, usually several metres below the ground. Mining companies hope to save millions of dollars in drilling by using the location of termites’ nests for prospecting.

In the same way that termites mix their saliva with debris to build nests, caddisfly larvae build cocoons using freshwater sediment such as leaves and rocks. They fuse the collected debris together with silk excreted from salivary glands near their mouths to protect their developing bodies. The larvae spend three weeks metamorphosing in their protective cases before emerging as a fully formed caddisfly.

Similar to Cobham’s termite interventions, French artist Hubert Duprat collaborates with caddisfly larvae, providing them with an aquarium of precious stones and jewels with which to build their cocoons. In his work ‘Trichoptères’, caddisfly larvae use the jewels as they would silt or leaves, industriously sculpting delicate thimbles of gold, punctuated with clusters of pearl, ruby and sapphire. The larvae are indifferent to the value and beauty of their cocoons, flying away and leaving them behind as soon as they reach maturity.

In her novel *The Underpainter*, Jane Urquart says that ‘art is a kind of mining ... the artist a variety of prospector searching for the sparkling silver of meaning in the earth’. Cobham’s work shows us that excavation does not have to mean degradation and that precious jewels do not have to be mined.

Image list

10	Melanie Cobham, FROST (Documenting Winter in the ACT) #1, 2022, digitised lumen print, 86cm x 120 cm	Ed.3 + 1AP	\$2,000
11	Melanie Cobham, FROST (Documenting Winter in the ACT) #2, 2022, digitised lumen print, 86cm x 120 cm	Ed.3 + 1AP	\$2,000
12	Melanie Cobham, FROST (Documenting Winter in the ACT) #3, 2022, digitised lumen print, 86cm x 120 cm	Ed.3 + 1AP	\$2,000
13	Melanie Cobham, Liquid spiderwebs, 2022, digitised lumen prints, 21 x 29.7 cm each	Ed.3 + 1AP	\$100 each
14	Melanie Cobham, The Colony Reclaims the Land #1, 2022, gelatin silver print, drawing, 58 x 38 cm	Ed.3 + 1AP	\$1,000
15	Melanie Cobham, The Colony Reclaims the Land #2, 2022, gelatin silver print, drawing, 58 x 38 cm	Ed.3 + 1AP	\$1,500
16	Melanie Cobham, The Colony Reclaims the Land #3, 2022, gelatin silver print, drawing, 58 x 38 cm	Ed.3 + 1AP	\$1,000

About

Melanie Cobham

Melanie Cobham is a Uruguayan Artist and Designer based in Melbourne, Australia. Her work permeates the familiar to pose questions on language, colonisation, migration and identity.

Cobham has studied Design, Fine Arts, Filmmaking, Communication and Silversmithing. Her diverse range of interests is reflected in a vastly interdisciplinary practice that manifests in the form of drawings, prints, installations, photographs and weavings. She has recently completed a Master of Contemporary Art at Victorian College of the Arts, and actively participates in talks and exhibitions both nationally and internationally.

Zoë Croggon

Zoë Croggon is a Melbourne-based photographic artist . She has held solo exhibitions at the National Gallery of Victoria, Gertrude Contemporary, Centre for Contemporary Photography and Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery and has participated in group exhibitions at Heide Museum of Art, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Samstag Museum of Art and Monash Gallery of Art. Zoë is represented by Daine Singer, Melbourne.