

Avalanche

Sari Sutton

Set on ancient Targangal (Mt Kosciuszko) in the Australian Alps, *Avalanche* explores the psychological terrain of a world disrupted by pandemic and confronted by the intensifying impacts of global warming.

The rapid escalation and compression of climate and COVID-19 related events force a rethink of how we live in, and with, the natural environment. In *Avalanche*, Sutton reflects upon this shock of disruption to our status quo and the fragility and transience of what we often take for granted. Her works invite reflection upon accepted notions of progress and the contradictions and existential challenges of the Anthropocene.



Sari Sutton, *Stop. Don't. Come back., 2018.* Archival pigment print.

How to survive an avalanche

Slip

I've been reading up on avalanches – the internet tells me that most avalanches involving people are triggered by the victim or someone in the victim's party. The weight of a human is just enough to upset the fragile balance and cause a slab of ice to slip.

Slip sounds innocuous – think of a slip of silky fabric or a pillow slip, and yet it only takes a slip to break a hip – or for an enormous slab of ice and snow to go roaring down a hillside destroying everything in its path.

Is the existence of humanity some form of avalanche? A dislodging of materials, a destructive sweep, a roiling flood, flowing over and around the ancient rocks – breaking the fragile bodies in its path and suffocating all that is tumbled along? And when the avalanche of us comes to a halt – will there be survivors?

Yellow

Each time I drive up into the high country I have a bodily reaction at the point the road markings change from white to yellow. I take a breath, we are here, at the place where the snow will cover the road, where we need the yellow to mark the way. A home place for my heart.

People living in cities talk about escape – about getting out into something that we call wilderness or bush, places that feel separate from human intervention. And yet, it's not that simple – the wild places have been traversed, inhabited, cared for and sung, over millennia. And places that may be imagined as pristine are impacted by the invisible effects of pesticide run-off, shifts in rain patterns, catastrophic bushfires and the hardy incursions of invasive species.

Yellow and orange are colours of warning and safety

– pay attention – this is the depth of the snow – here is the road – here is a hazard –

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Swim

To survive an avalanche, action needs to be taken before the tumbling snow and debris comes to a halt. The victim needs to swim, stay close to the surface if they can, hold an arm up so they are easier to find. If they wait until everything stops, the snow will settle and solidify like concrete around them, they will suffocate.

Are we swimming? Are we allowing ourselves to be pulled along with the rolling mass of catastrophic events, will we start swimming before it's too late?

Words and sensations

There's a moment – when I look at a photograph and my internal word-machine is paused. That fragmentary space without words is also infinite – in that fraction of a second – the looking, recognising, questioning, making connections that opens universes, connects deep feelings, activates memories, emotions, sensations.

And this is the conundrum of responding to images with words – I want to share a feeling – a memory – of time slowing, or of delighted recognition, or of dark foreboding...

What do you remember?

Photographs can turn us into time travellers – we stand here in the gallery looking at a series of images that show us other times and places. We share a little of the experience of the photographer – as we contemplate the light bouncing off a tangle of branches or the delicate balance of ice cracking as the water level recedes and the surface breaks over an emerging rock.

When I see the yellow mustard bottle in the caddy on the table next to the window, I think of clomping through a crowded cafeteria in heavy boots, piling up wet outer clothes and the smell of hot chips; escaping from the blizzard into the fug and clatter. I remember being caught in a whiteout and losing my sense of space and distance. As we look at the photograph Sari draws my attention to the snow banking up against the window and the darkness beyond.

It would be easy to produce a body of work that shows us glorious blue skies, twisting ribbon-skinned snow gums and snowy vistas. Instead, Sari appears drawn to a kind of liminality and discomfort, to the wonder inspired by an empty carpark in the driving snow and the sharp intake of breath triggered by the charred body of a tree suspended between the dead branches of another.

Survivors

The middle of the night – waking out of a confusing dream feeling cold and stiff – I draw the sleeping bag chord tighter so the chill air of the snowy high-country bites only the tip of my nose. A howl breaks the silence – a yearning mournful sound, weird and sad and beautiful. I feel it first in my guts, something deep and uncomfortable. As my word-brain catches up with my sensing body I form the idea dingo. I lie still and listen with all of me as the call is repeated over and over and a distant response is made.

Rescue

Sari's images feel like starting points, she shares moments, brief phrases from an ongoing conversation with places that are compromised, wild, breathtaking, damaged, precious.

When she talks about the places she visits, it is with love.

I remember being lost in the snow as a child – plodding uphill through the soft drift amongst tall trees one ski in each hand, until a searcher found me. They got me to put my skis back on and I followed the white cross on the back of the red parka through the trees, to the track and safety.

When multiple people have been caught in an avalanche the advice is to find the shallowest burials first – dig down far enough to free their torso and get them breathing, then move on to the next one. Get as many people breathing as possible, then return to dig them out and treat injuries.

Can we dig each other out – make breathing holes and hold our arms up so the rescuers can find us? Can we rescue ourselves?

The weight of a human is just enough to upset the fragile balance.

Ellis Hutch

Ellis Hutch is an artist, academic and teacher living and working on Ngambri and Ngunnawal Country. She currently lectures in the Sculpture and Spatial Practice Workshop and the Environment Studio at ANU School of Art and Design

Avalanche information source: <https://utahavalanchecenter.org/education/faq>

Sari Sutton | About

Sari Sutton is a Canberra artist and photographer whose practice explores questions of time, space and civilisation. She has a particular interest in current social, economic and environmental themes, order and randomness, the otherworldly and surreal. Her work demonstrates a curiosity about human progress, permanence and transience, destruction, decay, renewal and transformation. Much of her work is documentary, but she also likes to play with constructed concepts and ideas.

List of Works

60	Sari Sutton, <i>Stop. Don't. Come back.</i> , 2018. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 50 x 75cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$680
61	Sari Sutton, <i>Skid</i> , 2020. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 16 x 24 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$150
62	Sari Sutton, <i>Hazard</i> , 2020. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 16 x 24 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$150
63	Sari Sutton, <i>Prophecy</i> , 2021. Digital wallpaper print, 80 x 120 cm		POA
64	Sari Sutton, <i>Barometric</i> . Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 16 x 24 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$150
65	Sari Sutton, <i>Burn</i> , 2020. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 30 x 45 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$325
66	Sari Sutton, <i>Crack</i> , 2019, Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 30 x 45 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$325
67	Sari Sutton, <i>Flame</i> , 2019. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 30 x 45 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$325
68	Sari Sutton, <i>Clamp</i> , 2019. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 16 x 24 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$150
69	Sari Sutton, <i>Cleave</i> , 2020. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 16 x 24 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$150
70	Sari Sutton, <i>Survival</i> , 2020. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 30 x 45 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$325
71	Sari Sutton, <i>Flash flood</i> , 2019. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 16 x 24 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$150
72	Sari Sutton, <i>States of being</i> , 2020. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 30 x 45 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$325
73	Sari Sutton, <i>Grip</i> , 2020. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 16 x 24 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$150
74	Sari Sutton, <i>Holy Grail</i> , 2020. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 30 x 45 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$325
75	Sari Sutton, <i>Last orders</i> , 2020. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 30 x 45 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$325
76	Sari Sutton, <i>Civilisation</i> , 2021. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 16 x 24 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$150
77	Sari Sutton, <i>Immortality</i> , 2021. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 16 x 24 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$150
78	Sari Sutton, <i>Cryophylla</i> , 2020. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 16 x 24 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$150
79	Sari Sutton, <i>Watching the watcher</i> , 2018. Digital wallpaper print, 120 x 180 cm		POA
80	Sari Sutton, <i>Salvation</i> , 2020. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 16 x 24 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$150
81	Sari Sutton, <i>Trace element</i> , 2020, Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 16 x 24 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$150
82	Sari Sutton, <i>Flesh wound</i> , 2020, Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 16 x 24 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$150
83	Sari Sutton, <i>Dominion</i> , 2020. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 16 x 24 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$150
84	Sari Sutton, <i>Reprieve</i> , 2020. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 16 x 24 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$150
85	Sari Sutton, <i>Coconut triple choc-chip</i> , 2019. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 30 x 45 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$325
86	Sari Sutton, <i>Fossil</i> , 2020. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 16 x 24 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$150
87	Sari Sutton, <i>The wisdom in the room</i> , 2021, Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 16 x 24 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$150
88	Sari Sutton, <i>Scattering light</i> , 2021. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 16 x 24 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$150
89	Sari Sutton, <i>Kinetic</i> , 2018. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 30 x 45 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$325
90	Sari Sutton, <i>Storm totem</i> , 2020. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 16 x 24 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$150
91	Sari Sutton, <i>Void</i> , 2019. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 16 x 24 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$150
92	Sari Sutton, <i>Venus</i> , 2021. Digital inkjet print on archival cotton rag, 16 x 24 cm	Edition: 1 of 5	\$150

More Online

Visit www.gallery.photoaccess.org.au to learn more about *Avalanche*.