

4 July - 3 August 2024

Kooragang Island

James Rhodes

Kooragang Island combines abstract photography, hand-coloured prints, and projection to highlight the beauty and ecological importance of the Kooragang Wetlands. Located on the northern edge of Newcastle, the site acts as a natural filtration system for water.

Challenging traditional representations of these landscapes, Rhodes invites viewers to appreciate and respect the delicate balance of this remarkable environment.

Second Soil

Belle Beasley

The car stops. I open the door and place my feet on the earth, which is ashen, rocky. The air outside is filled with dewy moisture and I take a deep breath, clearing my lungs. A few feet away, ferns rise up encasing the carpark and slightly obscuring a pathway through the bushes. Vibrant bird calls pierce through the silence, forming a serene polyphonic score. I walk through the clearing.

This is Kooragang Island. Located just outside Newcastle's city centre, the nature reserve stretches all the way from Sandgate at its western borders, down to Stockton at its east. Situated on the unceded lands of the Awabakal and Worimi peoples, the area has a rich and lengthy history: as a site of Indigenous dwelling spanning back thousands of years, followed by colonial occupation and farming from the early 19th century. Today, Kooragang Island is home to a nature reserve, a 19th century schoolmasters house, a heritage air-force station, and series of industrial export plants. It is a landscape pulsing with life and history, energy and memory, scars of colonisation and pockets of vibrant resistance.

Having been based in the Hunter for the last ten years, artist James Rhodes is deeply connected to its landscapes, and his new body of work takes the complexities of Kooragang as its central focus. In *Kooragang Island*, Rhodes ruminates on the quiet mysteries of the Kooragang wetlands, juxtaposing scenes of the estuary against that which cannot be seen. Primarily a photographer, Rhodes' practice has expanded to encompass interdisciplinary ways of working, drawing on painting, sculpture, and video to probe at the affective power of the photographic object. Interweaving these disciplinary approaches, *Kooragang Island* untangles relationship to place, memory, and truth through conceptually charged artefacts to generate imaginative possibility.

Most works in *Kooragang Island* take their basis in images of sceneries developed on silver gelatin. From quietly shuffling shrubs looking up to a lonesome palm tree, to rippling reeds mirrored hauntingly atop a body of water, each of Rhodes' chosen scenes contain both a sense of stillness and movement, as if unfinished stories with answers lying just out of frame. This intentional duality is Rhodes first language, and one he deploys with ease. However, *Kooragang Island* sees the artist extend into new material and expressive realms, liberating the image from its purely mimetic function and transforming it into a site of imaginative possibility.

Mounting his prints on board, Rhodes thickens materiality through hand-painting atop and intervening in the landscapes with geometric abstractions. Placement of the images is paramount, and blank space is deployed to make us aware of that which lies out of view. Scenes end suddenly and jarringly, and unfinished edges recall waste matter left to rot in the estuary, remnants of careless passers-by. Similarly do the abstractions complicate interpretation of the scenes. Mimicking landscape forms and teasing out connections of shape and structure, these abstractions challenge the quiet reprieve of the nature snapshot with a distinct layer of mystery. Like spears thrown just so, they physically impose a weight, movement, and subjectivity that can only be hinted at in the photographs themselves, intervening not just visually, but conceptually too. In their distinct materiality and formal ambiguity, Rhodes' painted interruptions create a mimetic distance, tearing us from the certainty the photograph's objective reality, and creating space for imagination.

Behind The Rough Grass (2024) is perhaps the hungriest of the series, its ring of golden reeds encasing a slither of blue. Here, spear-like marks pull the eye away from the scene's serenity, signaling to stories of land formation that extend beyond the frame, spatially and temporally. Extending, without concluding, we are placed in a question that becomes our own to answer.

In contrast, *Wet Toes* (2024) emphasises the estuary's reflective blue, with muddy interruptions bubbling up and around like birdsong. Engulfed in aqua, a persistent life source in the nature reserve despite isolations and interventions (not unlike Rhodes' treatment of the image), the subtle movement of the abstractions conveys endless extension of a powerful force, imbuing the abstracted object with expansive mystery.

Two video works, *Ash* (2024) and *Kooragang* (2024) present new experimentations with moving image and sculpture. As is characteristic of Rhodes' vernacular, the videos are quiet and contemplative, only subtly pulsating with movement. Using organic sculpture not as sole component but as framing vessel, Rhodes puts the subjective in dialogue with the objective, highlighting the abstract as vital mode with which to comprehend the concrete.

Opposing ideas of nature as untouched or empty, *Kooragang Island* makes apparent the residuals of life, story, and human impact that live in the land. In abstracting, Rhodes employs the power of the shadow, extending the possibilities of photography to reveal how the image is more than a site of memory, a snapshot of a moment, but an ambiguous object that contains its own truth and imaginative possibilities. As such, Rhodes' sceneries gain a second life, a new truth, that lies outside the truth of the image - that exists only between the object itself and our own subjective experience of it. With *Kooragang Island*, Rhodes carries out his own wildlife restoration project through the photographic medium, extending past the reality of the Kooragang landscape, and into the fertile soil of the mind.

Belle Beasley is a curator, artist, and writer based between Newcastle, Australia, and Paris, France.

List of works

- 1 James Rhodes, *Behind the Rough Grass*, 2023, oil paint and silver gelatin on board with Aluminium, 815 x 610mm, \$1,700
- 2 James Rhodes, *Wet Toes*, 2024, oil paint and silver gelatin on board with Aluminium, 490 x 310mm, \$550
- 3 James Rhodes, *Ash*, 2024, video projected on cement, steel, and acrylic paint, 850 x 540 x 310mm, \$2000
- 4 James Rhodes, *Kooragang*, 2024, video projected on cement, steel, and acrylic paint, 400 x 350 x 300mm, \$900
- 5 James Rhodes, *A Warm Morning*, 2023, oil paint and silver gelatin on board with aluminium, 1225 x 810mm, \$3,000
- 6 James Rhodes, *On The Move*, 2024, oil paint and silver gelatin on board with Aluminium, 810 x 335mm, \$1,000
- 7 James Rhodes, *A Chilly Breeze*, 2023, oil paint and silver gelatin on board with Aluminium, 610 x 815 mm, \$1,700
- 8 James Rhodes, *A Slow Evening*, 2023, oil paint and silver gelatin on board with aluminium, 1225 x 820mm, \$3,000
- 9 James Rhodes, *Across the Wetlands*, 2023, oil paint and silver gelatin on board with Aluminium, 815 x 815mm, \$1,700
- 10 James Rhodes, *Reeds*, 2024, oil paint and silver gelatin on board with Aluminium, 810 x 720mm, \$1,800
- 11 James Rhodes, *Stationary*, 2024, oil paint and silver gelatin on board with aluminium, 885 x 810mm, \$2,200

James Rhodes is a multidisciplinary artist known for his work with photo media, painting, and sculpture. Rhodes is driven by a curiosity to unravel the essence of the tangible image. In doing so, he incorporates his acute awareness of time and memory in his art, leaving subtle symbols and ambiguous motifs that encourage the viewer to delve deeper. Rhodes exploits the inherent illusion embedded in the mimetic arts to uncover how the tangible nature of his works can explore a nuanced exploration of Australia's landscape while revealing his unique perception of the world around him.

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