



Catherine Larkins, Lennie Hayes and Frances Harrison *FIRE-place* (detail), Lakes Entrance, 2011. Photo: Catherine Larkins.

Promoting the **LONG VIEW**

■ Malcolm McKinnon

Australia, I think, is a nation of champion forgetters. We seem to have an unfortunate indifference to our own history. An impact of this popular ahistorical mind-set is the phenomenon of ‘predictable surprise’, wherein we tend to repeatedly make the same errors and fall victim to the same cruel twists of fortune, decade in and decade out. The bushfire history of south-eastern Australia presents a classic case of this perpetual amnesia. In this most fire-prone region on the planet, we can recite the litany of “holocaust” fire events that have occurred in the relatively short period of whitefella residency. We can also discover within our archives an epic repetition of the same passionate rhetoric every time the great fire *flume* wreaks havoc upon us.

On the day before what would subsequently become known as Black Saturday in February 2009, I participated in a discussion between a group of artists and various people involved in policy and program initiatives within the Victorian Country Fire Authority, the State Department of Sustainability and Environment and the Office of the Community Services Commissioner. In the calm before the storm, we were developing plans for an art project that would seek to engage a range of communities in lateral and long-term thinking and

imagining about the place of fire in our lives and in our local environments.

Black Saturday was a truly traumatic event, vivid and visceral enough to shake all of us from the complacency of our day-to-day lives. Here was Promethean violence played out upon our very doorstep, reducing us to horrified silence. And then, after the period of initial shock and awe, we started saying exactly the same things that we always say after events of this type and scale. Fortunately however, not all responses to Black Saturday and the issues it raised were repetitive and predictable.

Illuminated by Fire, an initiative of Regional Arts Victoria, was a state-wide project conceived before Black Saturday but possible to enact only after the smoke had cleared and the blackened trees had produced their inevitable and prolific epicormic buds. A project about fire, art and resilience, *Illuminated by Fire* involved a dozen artists working with eleven different local communities across regional Victoria, supported by Donna Jackson as Artistic Director and myself as Curator of Stories.

Ultimately, artworks from across Victoria were presented to a large metropolitan audience at Federation Square in

OPPOSITE TOP: Catherine Larkins, Lennie Hayes and Frances Harrison *FIRE-place* (detail), Lakes Entrance, November 2011. Photo: Susan Purdy. OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Catherine Larkins, Lennie Hayes and Frances Harrison *FIRE-place* installation at Federation Square, Melbourne, 2011. Photo: Catherine Larkins.



Melbourne in mid 2011. Seen together on one site, this was art exploring difficult truths about understanding and living with fire, promoting the long-term view and stimulating a sense of context and continuum. *Illuminated by Fire* worked as a prompt for lateral thinking and for liberation from what the journalist Annabel Crabb (originally in reference to the rhetoric of Tony Abbott) has called the “exuberant simplicities” that pass too frequently for public and political discourse in contemporary Australia.

For some of the artists and communities involved, *Illuminated by Fire* was part of a larger process of healing the wounds of Black Saturday, as well as a means for moving beyond the blame-game that played out in the wake of those particular fires. For others, the project was a means to talk about fire in a variety of other ways and other contexts.

At Portland in south-west Victoria, artist Carmel Wallace told instructive and evocative stories about a couple of unlikely and little-known subjects. One of these is the story of a ship, the *New Zealander*, conveniently burning to the waterline in Portland harbor in 1853 so that reluctant passengers became free to head off to the Victorian goldfields. The other is the story of Mellblom’s Spider Orchid, an extravagantly beautiful, fire-dependent plant once thought extinct but recently discovered in the nearby heathland. The culmination of Wallace’s project was a nocturnal performance in the harbour where a ship full of sculptural orchids became, quite literally, illuminated by fire. Here was a celebration of the power and impact of fire framed not in the language of catastrophe but rather as a prompt to appreciate the power of flame to create and liberate as well as to consume and destroy.

In the southern Grampians town of Dunkeld, artist Trevor Flinn is sensitive to a rich local heritage of wood gathering and cooking on wood-fired stoves. His project *The Cook and the Woodcutter* was a beautiful, multi-layered celebration of this particular cultural heritage, featuring a collection of stories told on screen accompanied by much live action. Wood was chopped, stacked and carried, wood-stoves were lit and modulated by expert operators, large numbers of scones were cooked and eaten and special recipes were published in a little book. This was work about the role of fire as the well-harnessed friend, an element to be respected but also to be embraced in a skilful manner. I was especially taken with an event staged as part the local launch of this project, where primary-school-aged children raced each other to light small fires and bring whistling kettles to the boil. While local Country Fire Authority volunteers looked on from the back of their big red trucks, here was a demonstration of fire as a force for good rather than evil.

Meanwhile, at Lakes Entrance in East Gippsland, artists Catherine Larkins, Lennie Hayes and Frances Harrison constructed *FIRE-place*, an elaborate cross-cultural interpretation of the hearth, a place of warmth and communion attracting different peoples in similar ways across the millennia. Again, this was a work combining sophistication and accessibility. The exposed brick chimney has long been emblematic of bushfire wreckage, but here the artists built a chimney from briquettes, compressed from the ancient coal of the Latrobe Valley, complete with an electric

fake-coal fire element and embellished with simple paintings of the fire-tail finch, the central character in a popular creation story of the Gunai- Kurnai people. An experience of this artwork involves being seated on a beautifully crafted kangaroo-skin covered couch, while the fake-coal fire flickers away and video of a fiery performance event plays on a boxy old wooden television set embellished with intricate paintings and hot-poker work.

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In the course of my own creative work for *Illuminated by Fire*, I found myself in the hills outside of Healesville, east of Melbourne, interviewing Phillip Wierzbowski at the burned-out site of a house that he and his wife had spent ten years building. Wierzbowski tells a considered, personal story that I interpret within a short film I end up titling *The Price of Paradise*, articulating deeply nuanced and unresolved feelings about a place where the spectre and the physical evidence of fire is ever-present. While there is certainly a palpable sense of loss and hurt in this story, there is no accusation of blame or claim of victimhood.

A month or so later, I find myself wandering around a little patch of the Wombat Forest in central Victoria with fire ecologist and deep-time-traveller Kevin Tolhurst. Tolhurst articulates his thesis about the need for us to appreciate fire as an inextricable component in the long-term, ongoing evolution of the natural environment in which we choose to live, something that we need to understand and come to terms with rather than something that we should necessarily fear and insulate ourselves from.

This kind of long-term perspective has been clearly hard-won by the resilient people I meet at Flowerdale, a place largely decimated by the Black Saturday fires. There are lots of stories here still too painful to tell, so I recorded material for a short film about a graphic emblem of a blackened tree with a new, green leaf that scores of Flowerdale locals have had tattooed on their skins as a personal mark of their survival and their commitment to rebuilding their lives and their community.

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My feeling is that *Illuminated by Fire* created abundant evidence of a great wealth of knowledge, experience and imagination that needs to be more commonly held. Together, the art and the stories that emerged from this project suggested that, really, we are quite capable of learning from our own shared history and environment. For me, the most striking thing was the way in which audiences all over Victoria as well as in Melbourne so clearly engaged with the meanings of this work. Perhaps one of the good things to emerge from Black Saturday has been an increased willingness to think deeply and laterally about difficult truths. ■

Malcolm McKinnon is an Australian artist and filmmaker working mainly in rural communities. His current practice is mainly focused around documentary filmmaking and social history, motivated by an appreciation of living memory and local vernacular.

(A documentary archive of diverse artworks created for *Illuminated by Fire* is accessible on-line at: www.rav.net.au/storyboard.)

Carmel Wallace OPPOSITE TOP: installation (detail), Portland Victoria, January 2011. Photo: Carmel Wallace. OPPOSITE BELOW: installation (detail), Portland Victoria, January 2011. Photo: Grant Wallace.

