

firstdraft

Gallery 3

8–29 Oct 2020

Ribwreck

Tamara Baillie

A glistening shipwreck rests in a darkened gallery: a monument to the past and spectre of our future.

Working primarily in sculpture and installation, **Tamara Baillie**'s practice is located at the convergence of identity and memory. Her work plays with concepts of presence and absence, to explore and question accepted historical narratives. Emerging from explorations of her own elusive familial and cultural histories, her practice often considers strategies for masking, concealment and control. In 2019, Baillie was a studio resident at ACE Open, Adelaide, and in 2018 was awarded a Helpmann Academy residency at the British School in Rome.

The artist would like to thank Kate Kurucz, Jenna Pippett, Julia Robinson, Jesse Rye and Jasmin Stephens.

Artworks

Ribwreck, 2020

HCFC free polystyrene, sequins, fishing sinkers, sound
250 x 400 x 100 cm (approx.)

This exhibition has been supported by a grant from Arts South Australia. This work was conceived and developed during residencies funded by ACE Open, Adelaide City Council and Helpmann Academy.



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Gillian Kayrooz

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Eddie Abd

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Tamara Baillie's *Ribwreck* and the Disaffections of Making

Jasmin Stephens

As a maker of objects, images and installations, many of Tamara Baillie's works have a geographic sensibility. Whether domestically-scaled or more expansive, these works represent a dwelling on and a lingering in places personal and collective. Through processes of memory, observation, research and narrative, Baillie traces their contours – literally and metaphorically – primarily through the selection and treatment of her materials. In the shape and texture of much of this work it becomes possible to discern a sense of consolation through the quiet agency of pattern-making.

This geographic influence has its origins in Baillie's Port Lincoln, regional South Australian family, whose livelihood and milieu is bound to the sea. Baillie's pursuits have also accorded with the emergence of cultural geography and its disassembling of the divisions between the discipline's physical and human strands. Another shift has seen the spatial frameworks of geographic enquiry challenge time as the undisputed driver of historical events. Likewise, the complexities of time have become more central to geography. The remit of the geographic which ranges from the microscopic to the systemic has a correlation in Baillie's desire to connect her studio practice to planetary concerns. As someone on whom the environmental consequences of colonial capitalism weighs heavily, a separation is not an option.

Baillie's intention is that her installation *Ribwreck* be viewed in the context of the European voyages of navigation of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Dominated in 2020 by the 250th anniversary of Cook's landing at Kamay Botany Bay, the connection between these events and ongoing violence is being voiced by Gweagal traditional owners, other First Nations Peoples and non-Indigenous Australians.

Ribwreck's maritime associations are accentuated by its siting in the prow-like former City of Sydney Works Depot. Its partially buried form presents alternately as the hull of a ship, the ribcage of a mythical beast, the talons or tusks of an even more formidable creature or an altar of standing stones submerged beneath the floor. As this skeletal form has sunk into Woolloomooloo's sandy basin, the gallery has assumed the sombre atmospherics of a burial ground. What lies beneath are the claims of the Eora Nation.

Baillie's feel for pattern is apparent in the installation's moveable arrangement of voids and solids and interchange between abstraction and figuration. Taking up a central vantage point in the gallery provides a more condensed wave-like abstraction while circling the installation emphasises its figurative aspect. The work's fabric coating suggests a life form now dormant which excreted the matter that produced its silvery cover. Signs of growth and decay in the work's uneven silhouette are inscribed in the irregularities of hand-carving and stitching. Once animate, the work's organic wood and

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(cont.)

bone has hardened into stone and in a certain light its shimmer may still convey a glimpse of life or treasure. That life force is also felt in the breath that rises and falls across the space – barely audible yet sentient.

Partially obscured, *Ribwreck* is reminiscent of unkempt memorials in suburban parks and rest stops in country towns. Now weathered, these memorials which have generally taken the form of the pedestal or the obelisk rather than Baillie's 'gathering' are increasingly regarded as perpetuating a selective view of history. As the role of these memorials is being fought on the streets and in the academy, Baillie would contend that painful but more private deliberations are going on in extended families in regional Australia.

Baillie's inclination in all this is to question how any act or object of memorial can adequately account for the past. She has couched her work in terms of a simulacrum, as an unsatisfactory imitation or substitute, in its attempt to draw closer to rather than shy away from the wrongs of the past. Despite these reservations, Baillie is seeking to 'stay with' the ugliness and the injustice by fashioning a space where ritual might transpire.

In ritual, a set of codified gestures assumes a significance for an individual or for a group. The ritual is deemed to effect or to give expression to change that may be inward or outward and which signifies passage from one state to another. Throughout time, natural phenomena and human affairs have been marked by ritual. With the advent of European modernity, the impulse to ritualise has arguably been superseded by the erecting of civic institutions and monuments. Although ritual can appear to have been overtaken or interrupted, in contexts where Indigenous, environmental and non-Western knowledge is preeminent, there has been continuity – visible and invisible to the outside. In these contexts, ritual extends beyond humanity to include wider kin relations.

Across an exhibition practice complemented by writing, Baillie is asserting that our need for ritual and the comfort and clarity that it can afford has never been greater. Without shared acts of commemoration we cannot envisage a future that has any hope of addressing environmental catastrophe. To this end, in her recent video *Saltwater Feelings* (2020), Baillie is contemplating crying as a transitional state as much as recording an environmental lament which she achieves through the generalised nature of the work's mannequin and costume jewellery.

Here, the persistence of shiny materials in Baillie's works is notable. Catching the eye and quickening the heart, their presence underlines that we not only need ritual but ritual that is immediate and tactile. These materials lead us to consider Baillie's practice in relation to aesthetic traditions occurring in all cultures that deploy beauty to disarm the viewer and heighten the senses. While not wishing to

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superimpose ritual on art, despite the overtures of practitioners who famously include Marina Abramović, a facet of ritual is beauty in its widest sense.

That said, I believe that it is more appropriate to view Baillie as a fellow traveller in reparative aesthetics, a field which is led by Brisbane scholar Susan Best. In her book, *Reparative Aesthetics: Witnessing in Contemporary Art Photography* (2016), Best examined the work of Anne Ferran (Australia), Fiona Pardington (New Zealand Aotearoa), Milagros de la Torre (Peru) and Rosangela Renno (Brazil), artists of the Global South, who she characterises as ‘pioneering a reparative approach’ to the representation of our most ‘shameful’ histories. According to Best, these artists ‘break with the dominant anti-aesthetic approaches to political art’ – a tradition that rejects a concern for ‘beauty, feeling, expression and judgement’.

If the future demands a politics of thinking and feeling then a revival of these modalities is imminent as we have recently seen in *NIRIN*, the 22nd Biennale of Sydney, directed by artist Brook Andrew. In *NIRIN*, named for the Wiradjuri word for edge, its First Nations artists invoked a reparative approach in a ‘space to gather and to share, rejoice, disrupt, and re- imagine’. Following Best’s account of a reparative approach as more than ‘undoing or reversing damage’, many artists presented work that inhabited and refigured trauma wrought by dominant symbolic orders and ingrained knowledge systems. The restless visuality of Andrew’s own vitrine installations, included in the Biennale, exemplifies this approach to critique.

Baillie too does not distance herself from uncomfortable truths. The schematic register of politicking is not for her. Reckoning with the past entails self-scrutiny as much as hard argument and difficult choices and as an artist, this accountability is infused by an allegiance to her materials. Baillie’s closeness to her materials provides solace but, as Baillie has observed, art’s oblique relations with the world can be frustrating. Art and life’s meanings can seem ‘just beyond the horizon’. Baillie’s response is to ‘stay with’ the ambiguity and to find impetus in art’s approximate relationships – in the tension between its defining and ambivalent effects. Her sense is that it is only by dwelling in these disaffections that the potentialities in the shape and texture of our lives can be released.

Jasmin Stephens
Sydney, September 2020

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