



Grey Foundations (installation) at WAYOUT Artspace, Kandos. L: Nicola Mason, GJ Mak, Jennifer Friedland, Kate Patrikeos, Lisa Dwyer, Kayla Amos, Ciara Turnbull, Alex Ryrie, Emily Roebuck, Zoe Ingerson. R: Cam Nugent, Alana Cotton, Kathleen Travers.

Between the Light and the Dark

Grey Foundations at WAYOUT Artspace (December 19, 2022 – January 29, 2023)

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In 2019, I taught a seminar course for fine arts honours students at UNSW Art & Design in Sydney.¹ It was the first iteration of a course designed to give students a supportive environment to develop their final projects. In learning how to ‘do’ research, students are constantly navigating the tricky intersection between theory and practice. In the early weeks of the course, I introduce them to Donna Haraway’s famous critique of the “view from nowhere” and her call for an ethical practice of situated perspectives.² It is important, I tell students, to anchor yourself *somewhere* and to be accountable to specific material conditions. The 2019 cohort of honours students graduated into

a summer of catastrophic bushfires and then rolling lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19. In grappling, once again, with how to 'do' artistic practice in turbulent and challenging times, *Grey Foundations*, curated by Emily Roebuck, meditates on themes of transition. *Who am I as an artist? How should I work with other people? What kind of art world am I stepping into? What does it mean to make art in the midst of climate (and other) crises? What can art be and do when it feels like the world is falling apart?*

WAYOUT Artspace in the regional town of Kandos, New South Wales, is an appropriate location to explore such questions. Kandos is about three hours northwest of Sydney, situated at the foot of the Wollemi National Park on the lands of the Dabee Wiradjuri people. It was founded as a company town in 1913, providing the state with a steady supply of cement over the following decades. Given Kandos is tied to the fate of its local lime and coal reserves, the town's population began to shrink with the closure of the cement plant in 2011. This coincided with the gradual influx of artists, attracted to Kandos as an affordable oasis. The idea for a regional arts festival started to germinate and the first ever Cementa was held in 2013. Transition is at the heart of the biennial Cementa model, inviting artists to create work that responds to the specificities of the region, taking its industrial residue as the basis for cultural transformation. In 2021, the Cementa team purchased the building in which WAYOUT, an artist-run initiative, has been operating since 2019, turning it into a piece of permanent infrastructure. Now, with a firm footing in Kandos, WAYOUT offers a platform to expand the Cementa ethos of collaboration and situatedness, developing

new artistic models and extrapolating possible futures from the precarious conditions of the present.

Cement is a material that conjures up monolithic concrete structures – roads, tunnels, bridges, dams, and high-rise buildings, reflecting a desire for strength and certainty. These are appealing qualities, but *Grey Foundations* is more aligned with the molten state that precedes concrete: a moment of potential for sculpting shapes and scratching into the soft surface before it sets. The transition from student to professional, from art school into the art world, can be a fraught time. The first weeks and months after graduation are full of freedom, euphoria even. Often, however, soon after the academic degree solidifies into a fact (at long last!), things become liquid again. This opens up an even larger expanse of possibilities, difficulties, insecurities, and vulnerabilities. It's not surprising if new graduates feel a crippling sense of unease – *I should know what to do now, I should know where I fit in*. Perhaps the German word *sensucht* can capture some of these complex feelings. It refers to a paradoxical state of loss and anticipation: to hope and make and think without a compass, which can be liberating and disorienting at the same time.

In *Grey Foundations*, an "ode to transition," there are two distinct themes that cross over. The first is the profound social and psychological effects of COVID-19. The second approaches an environmental politics, weaving between raw and manufactured materials, thinking about how to see and sense things differently. For instance, one of the first artworks visible on entering WAYOUT is Torres Strait Islander artist Ruth Saveka's *Maza*

(*Reef*) (2022), a hanging textile work. It features curving white lines painted onto black duck cotton. If you stand back a few metres, the intricate lines in the midsection start to blur into a dense white mass, like the vast stretches of bleached coral across the Great Barrier Reef. Raised coils of fabric snake up and down *Maza (Reef)*, accentuating the texture of coral formations as seen from above. Saveka connects these glowing limestone skeletons to the limestone used in cement manufacturing. In doing so, she traverses, figuratively and literally, 2,248 kilometres from Cairns to Kandos.

On the adjacent wall, Nicola Mason's *On my concrete floor* (2022) is a series of nine oil paintings. This floor is the basement of her house, a vacated room turned into an artist studio. In recent months, however, flooding has forced her to strip the room back to its bare bones. She turns her gaze downward onto a blank concrete canvas littered with the detritus of daily life: orange peels, sentimental objects, and a few wriggling worms attracted to damp conditions. Tucked around the corner, Owen Hall's *Petrichor* series (2022) consists of photographs ripped and torn into overlapping compositions. In taking these photographs just before a downpour, he captures something of the mineral-rich fragrance melding rocks, trees, birds, and clouds into an environment of humid anticipation. I experienced petrichor when I returned to my campsite at Ganguddy, not far from Kandos, smelling drops of rain on the hard brown dirt. I waded into the Cudgegong River and looked up at the magnificent pagoda rock formations. It struck me that the place where I swam was created with the Kandos weir in the late 1920s, built to give the cement plant access to water.

Turning inward, Alana Cotton's digital video work, *2020*, walks the viewer through a claustrophobic, domestic space. The dull interior walls are interrupted with garish pops of colour, overlaid with an audio track cycling through some of the most divisive and sensationalist headlines of 2020: the COVID-19 denialism of Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro and Gal Gadot's cringeworthy viral video, depicting celebrities covering John Lennon's *Imagine* (1971). Nothing sits quite right; things are fragmented and restless. Cam Nugent's luminous paintings, *Come as You Want* (2022), function as an antidote to the chaos of Cotton's video. In a sequence of three, he explores gentle, undulating gradients of colour: from yellow to blue to purple to red. It is as if the titular greyness of the exhibition is lingering just out of reach, or perhaps it is working as a support, an amorphous infrastructure that holds all the colours together. But it is also a potent reminder to sit with the complex and uncertain, rather than looking for a clear-cut division of black and white.

The most important aspect of *Grey Foundations* is the spirit of care and compassion that radiates through it. This is evident from Emily Roebuck's playful *Untitled (Zoom)* (2020-2022), a series of bulbous little clay heads protruding from the wall in a neat grid, mimicking countless hours of planning sessions over Zoom. In this sense, the 2019 cohort of graduates are not just 'entering' the art world but making one. The idea of 'fitting in' can be a misnomer. In Gregory Sholette's 2010 book, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, he considers the obscure mass of artists that prop up the smaller stage of 'successful' artists. This is an ecology of activist, informal, self-

organised, non-institutional activities that do not fit inside the parameters of the 'official' art world but on which the art world depends.³ The artists who moved to Kandos and conceived CEMENTA set forth as creative dark matter, not fitting into the art world but stretching it. I expect the artists of *Grey Foundations* might do the same.

Grey Foundations artists include Alana Cotton, Alex Ryrie, Cam Nugent, Ciara Turnbull, Clare Scott, Dylan Tinker, Emily Roebuck, GJ Mak, Jennifer Friedland, Kate Patrikeos, Kathleen Travers, Kayla Amos, Lillian Knothe, Lisa Dwyer, Nicola Mason, Owen Hall, Rumpa Paweenpongpat, Ruth Saveka, Zoe Ingerson.

¹ Thanks to Verónica Tello for convening this course and asking me to teach it.

² Donna Haraway, *Situated and Partial Perspectives: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspectives*, *Feminist Studies* 14, 3 (1988): 575–599.

³ Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2010).