

NGUNUNGULA

Retford Park
Southern Highlands
Regional Gallery

Tamara Dean: High Jinks in the Hydrangeas

As our daily lives suddenly transformed due to COVID-19 I embraced this period of self-isolation, using my photographic process as a form of escapism from my pandemic induced anxieties.

I have been creating a series of photographs in private gardens, using myself as the figurative element in the landscape. At times emboldened within the landscape, at times fleeing from an invisible threat. Reflecting the dual aspects of my psychological response to the virus and the social isolation – from a feeling of claustrophobia and anxiety, to a sense of release and connection to nature.

Also referencing that while we have slowed down, the natural life and life cycles continue on around us as they always have.

There is something in the air, 2021

Dimensions variable

Hedging shears and monofilament

A savage murmuration/swarm-like formation of hedge shears soars through the gallery. A visualisation of the invisible aerosol transmission threat of covid-19.

The shears are positioned high in the room, their trajectory swooping towards the front of the gallery, turning in at head height emphasising the deadly potential of their impact.

Using the familiar well-worn garden tool, I reference the hedges of the Southern Highlands and play with the idea of this object coming to life and potentially turning on its master/mistress. The idea that something thought familiar and within your control has the ability to suddenly turn and become a threat.

The physically imposing installation gives an insight into my emotional response to the pandemic, my anxiety and fear of the life-threatening airborne particles potentially coursing through the air around me.

Dysrhythmia, 2021

Single channel HD 16:9, stereo

16 minutes duration

Christmas, 2019 my family and I drove a few hours south to stay with my mother-in-law near Cobargo.

Living in the Shoalhaven, we had been existing in a smoke haze for a while with fires burning around the region. That trip to Cobargo felt like an escape, a sanctuary, somewhere to take refuge from the smoky air we had been breathing.

A few days later we drove back home, and as we approached the Bendelong turnoff we found ourselves held up in bumper-to-bumper traffic on the highway as a fire was crossing the highway a few kms ahead of us. There were spot fires dotted all along the road ahead.

This was the first real sense of fear I felt for our lives that summer, the first experience of the fire encroaching into our reality. We had little food or water with us and anxiously ate the broken pieces of gingerbread house the kids had made for Christmas as we waited and hoped that the fire would pass ahead without incident and we could have safe passage. The fire passed, we drove on and made it home without further incident.

On New Year's Eve, 2019 the Badja Forest Road fire devoured my mother-in-law's house and property near Cobargo. We had spoken to her early that evening and she did not seem concerned about the fire. It wasn't until she was evacuated in the dark of night that the enormity and ferocity of the approaching fire became evident.

It sat uncomfortably in my mind that we had felt so safe there when we had visited, completely unaware of what terror was to come less than a week later. And that this fire had caught the region off-guard and that it was only that my mother-in-law's neighbours woke her and alerted her to the approaching fire that she was able to evacuate.

The fire continued north to join the behemoth Currowan fire, and within a short amount of time our property was overcome by smoke and a number of fire fronts were in sight. The sky turned a deep, disturbing orange, a tinge I had not seen before and ash rained down on us. It looked and felt apocalyptic. The dry grass crunched underfoot and it was clear we could not stay and defend our home with the inability to source water if the power went down.

The evacuations began, three in total. On one particular day our home was looking to be in the path of the fire and we had no idea of whether it would be standing that evening.

Thankfully for us, although unfortunately for our neighbouring towns, the wind took the fire in another direction, and we were fortunate to be able to come back to a home.

Our house survived, but the feeling of 'home' as somewhere safe was taken from us.

I can't remember exactly when it started but I recall that each evening when I would sit down at the end of the day to watch the news, I started sensing an unusual feeling in my chest. It felt like a flutter or an echo in my heart. I developed an awareness about a part of my body I had never experienced before. This carried on for a month or so, I found it deeply disturbing so went to my doctor who had me wear a heart monitor to see what was happening.

It turned out that I was having ventricular ectopics, a type of abnormal heart rhythm caused by the electric signals in the heart starting in a different place and travelling a different way through the heart caused by the heightened anxiety I was experiencing. I was informed I had essentially gained a heartbeat.

This was the first unconscious body rhythm I became conscious of in 2020.

The stress of this period became clear both in body and mind. As well as the abnormal heartbeat I was grinding my teeth at night so vigorously that it caused cracks in my molars and I had to start wearing a mouth guard while sleeping. We seriously considered moving house as fear of the possibility of having to go through another summer like that.

And then, March arrived, and along with it Covid 19. The world turned on its head.

Home went from being a place of abject terror to a refuge in which to escape to as the social isolation measures came into place. We had space and quickly adapted to the new existence of lockdowns.

Next came the surreal experience of grocery shopping with the growing awareness of the new invisible threat. I began holding my breath as I passed shoppers, ending up wandering the aisles in a light-headed state of anxiety. Whilst trying to remember not to touch my face, not to touch surfaces, and to sanitize everything.

Breathing became the second unconscious body rhythm which I suddenly grew a consciousness around. The threat of invisible air particles, laboured breath through the mask. The fear of something dangerous and potentially life-threatening that I could not see.

Dysrhythmia is a response to this fraught time.

The movement of particles through the air a visualisation of aerosol transmission, with a backdrop of orange smoke particles from the bushfires.

I stand, stoic, taking each bombardment. The gradual chipping away at my resolve becomes evident. But as with each lockdown, I pick myself up again, drawing from my inner strength steeling myself against each new blow.

The emotive score by composer Damien Lane incorporates my laboured breath, and an unusual electrical tick which came through in the recording. Referring to my now conscious breathing anxieties and dysrhythmic heartbeat.