



craft

50 YEARS | Victoria

Elemental

19 June – 17 July 2021

Elemental

Craft Victoria respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the place now called Victoria, and all First Peoples living and working on this land. We celebrate the history and contemporary creativity of the world's oldest living culture and pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

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Elemental brings together six First Nations artists each working with the base elements of Earth, Air, Water and Fire as inspiration, material, process, and subject. These elemental forces are deeply entwined with expressions of Country and have been expertly applied as methods of making, processes of transformation, material for creation as well as a means of healing both ourselves and the land we are connected to. With links to the 2021 NAIDOC theme of *Heal Country!* this show presents the omnipresent ways in which the elements of the land shape and influence every stage of the creation process, inherently capturing these forces in all their power and beauty.

This show came about through my own reflections of the 2021 NAIDOC theme *Heal Country!* As a Larrakia woman living away from my country (Darwin NT) here in Naarm I found myself thinking of the ways in which Country itself influences my art practice. My pulped paper works have a fundamental connection with the element of Water, without which I would not be able to break down and re-work paper to create new forms. Fire and Earth also play a significant part in my work as I use heat and Larrakia ochre as mark making mediums. I am drawn to these elements for the connection they provide

to a place so far away. Working with Water, Fire and Larrakia ochre evokes memories of early morning beach fires on my saltwater country; or sunsets on the ochre rich cliffs, the fading light reflecting the sun with the splashes of bright oranges and purples on the rock face.

Elemental is a show of passion and obsession with the elements that make up Country. Each of the six artists embodying a respect and mastery of these elements within their practice.

Earth for its grounding

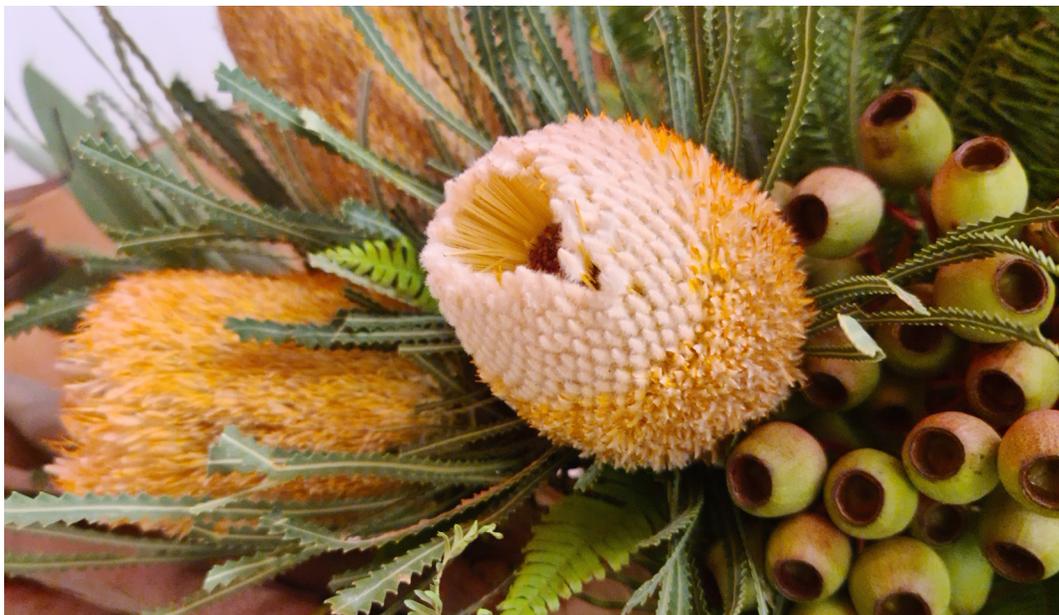
Country, land and place are a fundamentally important aspects of First Nations culture and can be best demonstrated by the omnipresent use of elemental Earth in our art making and ways of being. This literal representation of our Country is used to adorn our bodies, as a medium for painting and sculpting and represents the oldest form of art known to this continent.

Earth is our grounding element, and this property is stunningly demonstrated by Taungurung artist, master weaver, traditional dancer, bushtukka woman and educator; Cassie Leatham. *Derri Mon Daanak (Clay Healing Pots)* are four clay healing pots centering this exhibition, each holding significant meaning as an individual element of healing:

'Healing began with our ancestors and to carry knowledge forward in sacred medicine pots the old ways continue.'

– Cassie Leatham

Opposite: Shahn Stewart, 'Wednesday' (detail) 2021 Site responsive installation. Australian natives. Courtesy of the artist



Air for its breath

While its physical and material properties might be the antithesis of Earth, Air as an element is intrinsically connected to First Nations concepts of Country. Our relationship with Country, land and place has always been extended to the Air and sky above. Air fills our lungs and gives us breath to tell, share and sing our stories, many of which are acted out within the skies above.

Air is our element of breath and story, and is magnificently manifested within the practice of Lisa Waup, a multidisciplinary artist and curator of Gunditjmarra, Torres Strait Islander and Italian heritage. *Blue Bird*, is a feather woven vessel expertly crafted using Peacock and Emu feathers. This use of feathers connects the physical object with the creatures who call the Air home. The Peacock feathers hold further relevance to the element of Air as these feathers are said to 'have eyes to the stars'.

'...the peacock symbolises vision, spirituality, awakening, guidance, protection and watchfulness.'

– Lisa Waup

Displayed alongside *Blue Bird* is Waup's *Continuity of Protection* series, a selection of screen-prints representing the protective elements of a shield. The connection with wooden objects, grown from Country, offer a symbolic story of protection of personal and family history.

Water for its sustenance

Water is a fundamental building block of all life on this planet. As First Nations People we are not only connected to Water but identify ourselves based on our relationship to it. I, myself, am a Saltwater women; a term used to describe my deep connection with the saltwater ocean of my Larrakia Country. This Water is as much a part of my Country as the land it connects with.

Water is our element of sustenance, nourishment and life. These qualities are faultlessly demonstrated over multiple mediums by Edwina Green, a Trawlwoolway interdisciplinary artist, producer and writer. The collection of works featuring moving image, sound, painting and kelp objects explores, in its fullest, the fluidity and vitality of Water.

Fire for its healing

The final element within the show is Fire. While left unchecked, Fire can be a force of destruction, one that can unleash havoc on our land and homes. Fire consumed our consciousness after the devastating events of 2020 as flame tore through much of the Southeast. Yet, for First Nations People, the relationship with Fire has always been one of deep respect and healing. Many will be familiar with a smoking ceremony. This bathing of a site and people with smoke is one of cleansing and welcoming.

Fire is our element of healing, and its radiant living beauty has been captured by Moorina Bonini, a Yorta Yorta, Wurundjeri-Woiwurrung and Italian artist, in her video work *Bitja (Fire)*. The movement within the piece depicting the living, breathing pulse of the flame and its healing revitalisation by means of smoke and charcoal.

'Bitja(Fire) revitalises, and through the smoke and charcoal Country heals.'

– Morrina Bonini

The physical act of applying heat to make marks known as pyrography, poetically translated from Greek as 'writing with Fire', has been expertly applied by Tibrean (Torres Strait) and Taungurung artist, Iluka Sax-Williams on possum skin. *The Wiinj Element* looks at fire as not a solitary element but as being deeply connected with mind, body and spirit as well as the cyclical nature of its connection with the other elements.

'When Wood is burnt it produces Fire, and after a while the ashes will enrich the Earth, then from Earth, Metals are extracted, and when melted it resembles Water, and with its tools are made that can be used to cut more Wood to make more Fire'

– Iluka Sax-Williams

We have a desperate need to return to Indigenous Fire management methods on this continent. A need that has been articulated in the work of Badtjala and Burmese artist Mia Boe. Boe's paintings respond, sometimes obliquely, to Empire's deliberate, violent interferences with the cultural heritages of Burma and K'gari (Fraser Island). Seen for the first time within Craft Victoria, this message has been applied directly to the gallery's walls in the form of a mural - a monolithic message which cannot go ignored.

'We have come to expect catastrophic bushfires annually...This could have been avoided if land was handed back to Aboriginal people and were trusted to practice traditional fire methods' – Mia Boe

For over 60,000 years, First Nations People have thrived on this continent of extremes by connecting, respecting, harnessing, and mastering the elements. We work with Earth for its inherent ability to ground us, Air for the breath it gives our lungs - allowing us to tell stories, Water for its selfless sustenance of all living things, and finally we work with Fire for its glowing warmth and regenerative healing.

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Jenna Lee is a mixed-race Larrakia, Wardaman and Karajarri woman whose contemporary art practice explores the acts of identity/identification, label/labelling and the relationships formed between language, label and object. Being a Queer, Asian (Japanese, Chinese and Filipino), Anglo Australian, Aboriginal Woman, Lee's practice is strongly influenced by her overlapping identities, childhood memory as well as maternal teachings of subject and process.



/ **Cassie** Leatham

Healing began with our ancestors, and to carry knowledge forward through these sacred medicine pots, allows for the old ways to continue. Each clay pot holds a significant purpose, as each vessel represents an element for healing. The brown ochre earth pot is for grounding, the white ochre earth pot is for mind and spirit, the red ochre pot is for the body, and the yellow ochre pot is for nurturing the soul. Each vessel is coated with an infusion of native plants, emu fat and beeswax, providing further healing through the senses - as we inhale and exhale the scent of earth, air, fire and water, we become empowered and strengthened.

Cassie Leatham is from the Taungurung people from the Kulin Nation. An Indigenous artist, master weaver, traditional dancer, bushtukka woman and educator, she is passionate about teaching her skills to Indigenous and non-Indigenous students of all ages. Her aim is to give participants the opportunity to learn and understand Aboriginal culture and develop knowledge of both historical and contemporary Aboriginal history. Leatham is self-taught and influenced by the stories from her Elders.

Cassie Leatham, 'Derril Mon Daanak (Clay Healing Pots)' (detail), 2021 Earthen clay, pipe clay, emu fat, wattle sap, ochres, silcrete, feather, charcoal, abalone shell. Image courtesy the artist

/ **Edwina** Green

How do we reclaim, and do it in a way that is respectful, connected, and acknowledges the damage of colonisation, without centring this damage? At what point can we interact, and centre our language and culture, and create a safe, accessible way to connect our mob who have not had the privilege to be involved on Country?

Edwina Green is a Trawlwoolway interdisciplinary artist, producer, writer based in Narrm. Her practice utilises sculpture, installation, painting, mixed-media, fibre, and film, in order to cross-examine the post-colonial paradigm and its effects on people and place. By acknowledging disconnect in former, contemporary and emerging narratives, she initiates discourse through revitalisation that engages, provokes and creates shared discomfort where necessary. Completing a Bachelor of Fine Arts, from The University of Melbourne in 2019, she has since been exhibited in an extensive range of exhibitions both nationally and internationally, inclusive of CollarWorks, New York, EFFA (Environmental Film Festival) SEVENTH gallery, Melbourne, and Firstdraft, Sydney.

Edwina Green, 'Oyster, First' (detail), 2021 Acrylic on canvas. Image courtesy the artist

/ **Shahn** Stewart

'My work focuses on challenging the pre-conceived notions of what constitutes floral art by recontextualising mundane and unconventional materials, transforming them into Organic Architecture.'

Alchemy Orange was founded in 2019 and is the physical expression of Yorta Yorta Artist, Shahn Stewart. With over ten years of experience in the Floristry industry, her work is a proud reflection of who she is as an artist and her connection to Country.



/ Iluka Sax-Williams

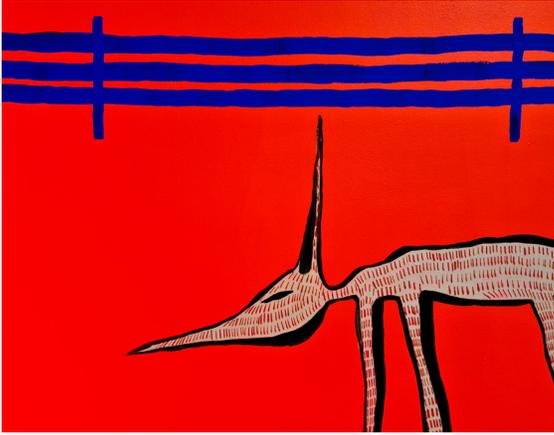
The divine element of Wiinj or Fire is symbolic universally both in the physical realm and the spiritual. It is a source of energy that requires careful moderation and control as it consumes both passionately and powerfully but not without giving back light and warmth. The strength of our emotions and energy originates from our internal Wiinj and allows us to realise our dreams, passion and beliefs. When Winj is used wisely, it becomes a conqueror because it has no fear, doubt, Boorders, nor does it succumb to any obstacle, and consumes all in its path. By incorporating the other elementals, we are able to creatively understand, both the physical, spiritual connection and cycle that all of the elements generate. When Wood is burnt it produces Fire, and after a while the ashes will enrich the Earth, then from Earth, Metals are extracted, and when melted it resembles Water, and with it tools are made that can be used to cut more Wood to make more Fire.

Iluka Sax-Williams is a proud Tibrean (Torres Strait) and Taungurung artist. His broad artistic practice involves acts of cultural reclamation, pyrography, traditional dance, fashion and modelling. Sax-Williams' love for sharing his culture was born from spending his childhood accompanying his mother to teach Koorie education in Early Childhood settings. Living in a city filled with other dynamic and visionary artists of colour, Sax-Williams sees the power of collaborating and what can be achieved together. Sax-Williams is dedicated to enhancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation throughout the creative industries and revitalisation of Aboriginal culture in Victoria.

/ Lisa Waup

'Blue Bird' has been woven with assorted feathers including peacock and emu feathers. The peacock feathers were given to me by a dear friend who has peacocks on her property. For me, the peacock symbolises vision, spirituality, awakening, guidance, protection and watchfulness. Throughout different mythologies and cultures, the peacock has extensive meanings, such as 'having eyes to the stars', or representing patience, kindness, and luck. The colours of the feathers are vibrant and variant in hues, and glow and pick up the light - flickering a multitude of colours. The 'Continuity of Protection' series came from a drawing in my visual diary some years ago. The work intended to detail the protective elements of a shield. This drawing symbolically became a protector of my history and in turn a protector of my family. The screen-prints were created at Spacecraft and have been printed on handmade paper.

Lisa Waup is a multidisciplinary artist and curator of Gunditjmara, Torres Strait Islander and Italian heritage. Her studio-based practice weaves stories of her past, present, and future into contemporary forms and objects. Working across weaving, printmaking, photography, sculpture, textiles and installation, Waup highlights the importance of tracing lost history, ancestral relationships, Country and motherhood. Waup holds a Bachelor of Fine Art in Printmaking/Photography from RMIT and is currently undertaking a Master of Contemporary Art at Victorian College of the Arts. Waup has exhibited extensively nationally and internationally, and has been acquired by many state institutions and private collectors, including the NGV and Ararat TAMA.



/ Mia Boe

My mural looks at the violent consequences of lost Indigenous Fire management. We have come to expect catastrophic bushfires annually, it is, one could say, the 'new normal'. At the end of 2020, on K'gari (Fraser Island), a small campfire set off a two-month long bushfire. It ultimately burnt more than half (200,000 hectares) of the island. This could have been avoided if land was handed back to Aboriginal people and were trusted to practice traditional fire methods. Governments continue to support coal and gas industries, fully aware of the consequences. Environmental destruction is a continuation of violent colonialism.

Mia Boe is a Brisbane-born artist whose practice seeks to record and recover Indigenous histories. Her work is informed by her matrilineal family, Badtjala, from K'Gari (Fraser Island), and her Burmese ancestry. For the artist, the practice of recovery is urgent in contemporary Australia as 'the patient work of tracing historical trauma and violence can open new perspectives on the reasons for Aboriginal Australians' present suffering.' Boe has exhibited work in both solo and group exhibitions. She has recently completed an 'at home' residency with the Museum of Brisbane.

Mia Boe, 'K'gari means paradise in Butchulla', 2021 (detail)
Mural, acrylic

/ Moorina Bonini

Caring for my Country

Breathing

Country pulses and the blood in my veins pulse in response

I walked outside and I put my feet into the sand

Dirt

Water

Country I covered my feet with Country one handful after another

and buried myself in the space

Where I have always belonged.

Bitja(Fire) revitalises, and through the smoke and charcoal

Country heals.

Listen.

Moorina Bonini is a Naarm-based artist and a proud descendant of the Yorta Yorta Dhulunyagen family clan of Ulupna and the Yorta Yorta and Wurundjeri-Woiwurrung Briggs/McCrae family. Informed by her experiences as an Aboriginal and Italian woman, her practice is driven by a self-reflexive methodology and a re-examination of lived experiences on the construction of cultural identity. By unsettling the narrative placed upon Aboriginal people due to the colonisation, her practice is based within Indigenous Knowledge systems. Bonini holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from RMIT and a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours) from the Victorian College of the Arts. Bonini is currently a research candidate at Monash University where she is undertaking a PhD within the Wominjeka Djeembana Research Lab. Bonini has exhibition nationally and has produced and co-curated art and cultural programs with RMIT and the University of Melbourne.

Moorina Bonini, 'Bitja (Fire)' 2020 Video, 6.03 min (still).
Image courtesy the artist

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Elemental is presented as part of the 2021 NAIDOC Week program, 4 - 11 July.

NAIDOC week celebrates the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This year's theme – Heal Country! – calls for stronger measures to recognise, protect, and maintain all aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage.



**HEAL
COUNTRY!**
4-11 JULY 2021

Craft Victoria is supported by the Victorian Government through Creative Victoria. Craft Victoria is assisted by the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, an initiative of the Australian, State and Territory Governments. Craft Victoria is also assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

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CRAFT VICTORIA
Watson Place (off Flinders Lane)
Melbourne VIC 3000
9650 7775
craft.org.au

HOURS
Monday to Friday, 11am-6pm
Saturday, 11am-4pm
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