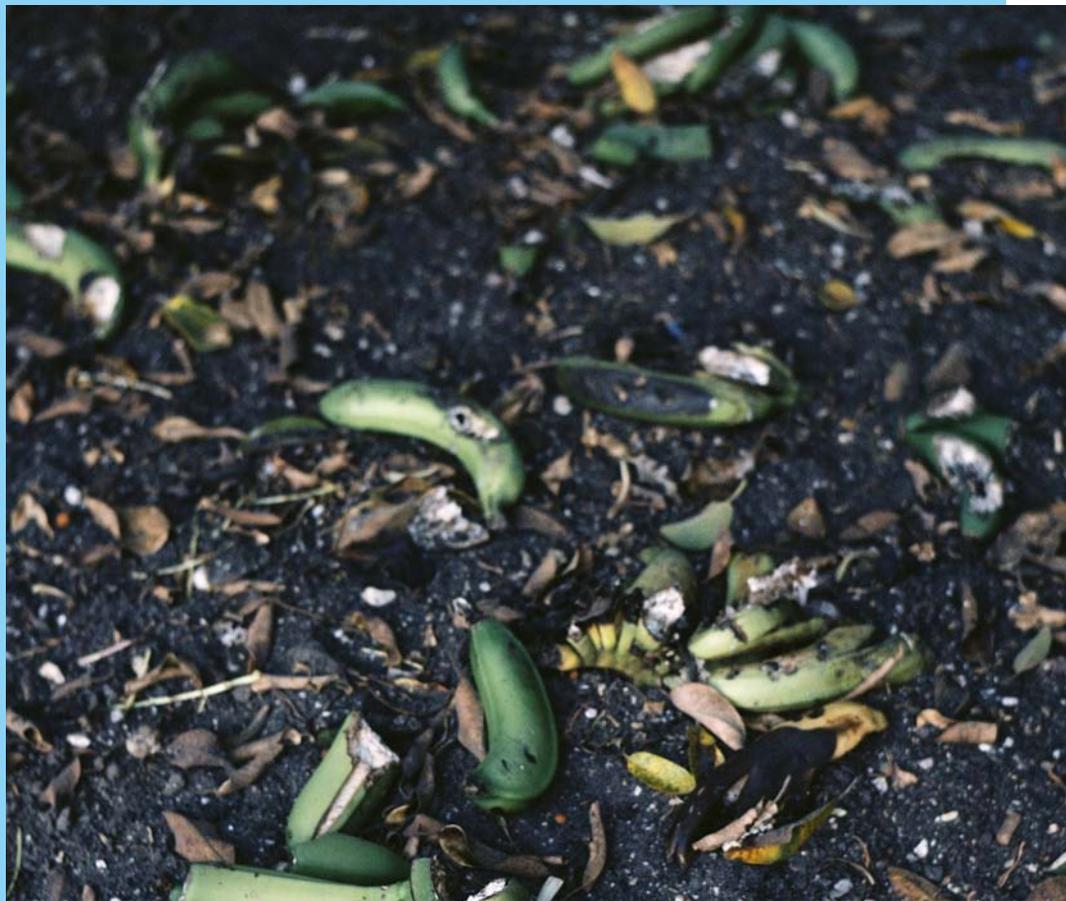


METRO ARTS // EXHIBITION PROGRAM



***THE HEIGHT OF A MOUNTAIN, THE WIDTH OF A VALLEY /
BRIDIE GILLMAN, SARAH POULGRAIN & KYLIE SPEAR***

22 JULY - 8 AUGUST 2015

MONUMENTS TO UNCERTAIN MEMORIES

Ella Cattach



*All the new thinking is about loss.
In this it resembles all the old thinking.
The idea, for example, that each particular erases
the luminous clarity of a general idea. [...] Or the other notion that, because there is no one thing
to which the bramble of blackberry corresponds,
a word is elegy to what it signifies.*

Robert Hass, 'Meditation at Lagunitas'

Bridie Gillman, Sarah Poulgrain, and Kylie Spear's collaborative exhibition *The height of a mountain, the width of a valley* puts forward in its title a luminous clarity about landscape that is teased apart and erased through the particularity of its work. Through attempts at measurement, various forms of reproduction, and acts of intervention both wilful and uncertain, the artists draw us to a particular landscape – Spear's family property in rural New South Wales. Their representation of it not only undermines the clarity of ideas we have about the Australian landscape but also resists the geographic and scientific certainty of its specific elements.

The exhibition is born of rigorous inquiry – the artists engaged in an extended collaborative process over the course of a year, before and after a one-week residency at the property in the summer of 2014-15. Despite the disciplined nature of their investigation, we are given no strong sense of the location of the landscape; we are held at a distance to it, remaining strangers to the idiosyncrasies of its terrain. We are given these glimpses: two video works in which figures quietly and awkwardly trace through static shots of the landscape; four large photographs of un-manipulated scenes found on the farm's banana plantation; and a sound piece that collages recordings made on the property and disperses them, at varying pace and tenor, through the gallery space. The second strand of work in the exhibition, distinguished here through its non-technical representation of the sensory experience of the landscape, is composed of sculptural works: a collection of small vessels hand

built from clay from the farm and mounted on the board on which they were made; Poulgrain's *Mountain*, which accompanies one of the video works and inaccurately recreates the hill that commands it; and a sculpture of Gillman's, which forms an awkward contrapposto as a weighty piece of blue gum held in tension at an angle from a gallery wall by taut yellow rope.

In the video work *Measuring a mountain*, we observe a person use a length of rope to measure the height of a hill. To return to an insight in the epigraph: there is no one thing to which *mountain* or *valley* corresponds. The mountain of this video work, of the exhibition's title, and of Poulgrain's *Mountain* corresponds not to a mountain at all, but to a hill on the farm. Yet the grandiosity of *mountain* is not entirely wry: the figure who measures the hill is dwarfed by it as they scale their way up, pausing periodically to collect the rope, and disappearing out of view at its summit. We watch as they try to quantify their sensory experience – to translate it to a measurement or a work of art – into something more tangible than a memory but still inescapably subject to the same inconsistencies and impossibilities. The time-based nature of the work draws attention to the temporal parameters of memory itself: contrary to a linear succession of time, it is a looping, non-linear overlapping of past, present, and future.

The gesture made in *Measuring a mountain*—its attempt to grasp the proportions of the landscape through what appears a ritual physical act—takes a different form in *Mountain*. The precarious construction of Poulgrain's sculpture is markedly unscientific: its open arch form, a cross-section of a hill made from quilting fabric draped over thin gauge pieces of pine, is naïve and curious. It is a nostalgic monument that seems to declare its difference to the brutal, mathematical precision of architectural model making. The exercise here is one of memory, not reproduction. And what is memory, but a fuzzy, inventive approximation of a place or an event? The sculpture, like a memory or a word, becomes elegy to what it signifies. The ambiguity of the sculpture lies in the question of what exactly it is elegy to: it is uncertain whether it is monument to the hill itself or to the experience of having tried to measure it, to understand its form, in another way already.

Width of a valley, the second video work in the exhibition, presents an intervention in the landscape that is both awkward and absurd. A figure clumsily attempts to cross the field or valley inside a circular, cage-like object. The imperfect geometry of its circle recurs throughout the exhibition in various forms. Where the recurring shape of the arch suggests, even if absurdly, the monumental, the circle becomes something shakier and less complete than its geometry would normally indicate. We see in it something uneasy about the landscape – an awkwardness that undoes the luminous clarity of that old cliché about nature – the circle of life. The uncanny effect produced is *unheimlich*: it locates the foreign at the heart of the familiar, producing uncertainty in familiar shapes and phrases, within a landscape that is familiar to one of the artists. It undoes the familiar sense that we each know what the height of a mountain or a width of a valley might mean; the more we try to define it, the more we realise it is utterly unknowable.

A residency that meditates on a particular landscape is already, in the very conditions of its possibility, a transposition of an artistic practice to a new place. It is a reconfiguration and a recontextualisation of work, ideas, and experience. It is in some ways a matter of pushing one's practice in that place—whether it already bears personal significance or whether it is arbitrary and alien—and seeing if and how it pushes back. Gillman, Poulgrain, and Spear's collaboration, with its performance of a quasi-scientific inquiry is an experiment hinged on the contingencies of three practices and three subjectivities, with all their memories, associations, and agendas. In turn that landscape is recontextualised here in this place, with its elegies to the mountain and the valley, pushing us towards the unfamiliar, to memories we do not have.

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CREDITS

Cover / *The height of a mountain, the width of a valley*, 2015

Inside left / *The height of a mountain, the width of a valley*, 2015

VOTE OF THANKS

The Spear family, Amy-Clare McCarthy, Llewellyn Milhouse, Luke Kidd and Reuben Schafer.

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Metro Arts acknowledges the assistance of the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland.