

*Biome / Home:*  
*The fragile exchange between domesticity and ecology in the work of*  
*Jacqueline Spedding*

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*Biome / Home* was an exhibition by Jacqueline Spedding held at the Blue Mountains City Art Gallery, in Katoomba, Australia in the immediate wake of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, from September to November 2020. Looking at these dates, one wonders whether anyone was able to visit the exhibition at all. Imagining this exhibition abandoned, devoid of people due to a biological disaster, is a pertinent association to the images presented across the installation.

At the entrance, stencils in the shape of bracken fern climb up the walls and gently animate the space, meticulously cut and falling from their square paper frames, revealing a dark imprint where they once were. The paper branches are lightly burned at the edges where the thick paper reacted to the heat of a laser cut. Fragile yet resilient, this minimal representation speaks of the decay of urban fabric, when bracken inhabits the cracks in a dilapidated brick wall, or creeps steadily across a forgotten garden bed not fit for any other plant life. The exhibition catalogue informs us that, “Bracken takes hold in degraded and disturbed soil; it is invasive but also regenerative, being one of the first plants to appear after a bushfire.”<sup>1</sup>



Only months before this exhibition opened, the greater Blue Mountains area was devastatingly affected by what Australia has come to call the ‘Black Summer’ bushfires of 2019–20, when megafires burned more than 24.3 million hectares of land across the country;<sup>2</sup> a sombre precursor to the pandemic lockdowns that framed this exhibition. Much of the landscape in this area was charred, devoid of foliage, appearing in places like black and white charcoal drawings that would find their place neatly against Spedding’s monochromatic wall works. The bracken

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<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline Spedding, *Biome / Home*, exhibition catalogue, Katoomba: Blue Mountains City Art Gallery, 2020, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Binskin, Annabelle Bennett, Andrew Macintosh, *Royal Commission into Natural Disaster Arrangements*, 28 October 2020, Commonwealth of Australia, 115.

fern here, climbing high into the ceiling of the arched roof gallery, acknowledges this broken landscape, while promising hope for another phase to come.



Turning into the gallery space, domestic objects are laid out in a homely manner, yet with a desolate lack of human presence. They are at once augmented and dilapidated by the course of time and the presence of nature. A sole armchair sits in the centre of the room. The chair is pale and low, loved yet abandoned. Lining the transparent white upholstery of the armchair is a layer of bracken fern, trapped under the skin of the object, pressed taugt and contrasting against the water-stained fabric. The fern bursts in abundance from the back of the chair, brown and dry, a dying bush of curly branches give the armchair wings that promise to set flight, or, with the spark of a match, set alight. Rocks of coal burst through the threadbare seat of the chair, where a few crisp brown fern leaves seem to have found a resting place from the wind. None but the fern has sat here for a long time.



From under the armchair, across the length of the room, runs a thick black-velvet river of coal. Cascading and pebbly, littered with burnt leaves, it holds the essence of water, a paradox that threatens to dampen the coal's utility as it makes its course to the source of potential heat: a fireplace. Embedded into a floating wall in the gallery, the tiles of the fireplace bear the imprint of the very same bracken fern that bursts from the armchair facing it. Shades of green and off-white run through the delicately handmade tiles that stand as monuments to this resilient plant, as if time will hold the plant accountable for its effect on the house it has overtaken, the imprint of the fern burnt timelessly into the fireplace's clay facade.



The interior of the fireplace is quaint and rusty, with white paint flaking off black metal revealing the beauty of decay. A video projection of a local waterfall surrounded by bracken fern fills the interior of the structure, casting water where fire should be. The fireplace vomits the coal across the floor toward the chair, connecting the two in a violent co-dependence.



Is this a process of decay, or renewal? Who and what are the antagonists? And how do I feel about the absent human subjects, expelled from this once cosy environment?



Behind the fireplace is a chest of drawers. Stark, white and dishevelled, the drawers lay open, suggesting a looting or hurried departure. The absence of any other furniture in this potential

bedroom scene gives no clue as to the identity of its inhabitant, except for one object; on top of the drawers is a music box. A symbol of youth and femininity, the music box still plays. Where I imagine a dancing figure to be, I find a tree, moving in a persistent whirling motion. The box is decoupaged with simple graphic symbols of nature: mirrored green foliage, a sky and hills. Behind the turning tree is a small triangle shaped mirror, giving the box an occult-like presence.



The shadow of the music box presents itself much larger than the object suggests possible, with the tree's whirling shape projected in full scale onto the adjacent wall. A ghost of the missing subjects, in the fragile immateriality of light, the tree inhabits the space completely. From the music box, a wound-up version of the song *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* plays with cheerful sorrow, acoustically marked by the mechanism of the music box. The haunting childish sound fills the space with another place, elsewhere, tied up in our dreams, and promising that Dorothy might indeed wake up here tomorrow after all. “For Jacqueline, this song has always represented a longing to escape into other imagined worlds, and the inevitability that we must experience longing and loss alongside the joys of everyday life.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Sarah Breen Lovett cited in Jacqueline Spedding, “Material to Metaphysical with Jacqueline Spedding,” interview by Sarah Breen Lovett, *Hereness*, podcast November 30, 2020, audio, 38:14, <https://www.hereness.org/podcast/material-to-metaphysical-with-jacqueline-spedding> [accessed 11.11.2023]





But if Dorothy does return here, could this place host her? Jacqueline describes biomes as “finely tuned natural systems that allow all life in a particular place to survive.”<sup>4</sup> However this place feels, perhaps thankfully, uninhabitable for the human subject; left to a repair that nature alone can achieve. The exhibition title, *Biome / Home* paradoxically couples the unsustainable systems and spaces of human civilisation with supportive, generative natural ecologies. A dictionary definition of *biome* describes “a major regional ecological community of plants and animals adapted to a particular climate or environment and extending over a large geographical area, as coral reef, tropical rainforest, etc.”<sup>5</sup> And goes on to inform that

Biomes occupy large areas of the earth’s surface, and their distribution is a function of geological factors, seasonal insolation changes and global climate patterns. The essential concept of a biome is of a defined community with interaction between vegetation, animal populations and soil. Each biome is identified by its dominant

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<sup>4</sup> Spedding, *Biome / Home*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> “Biome,” Macquarie Dictionary online, [https://www.macquariedictionary.com.au/features/word/search/?search\\_word\\_type=Dictionary&word=biome](https://www.macquariedictionary.com.au/features/word/search/?search_word_type=Dictionary&word=biome) [accessed 11.11.2023]

vegetation type (for instance, grassland, monsoon forest or desert) and defined by the associated communities of species adapted to the conditions in which they occur.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps humans could adapt to these conditions, but the interactions between life forms in this environment seem one of an expulsion of humans, rather than supportive community exchange. Indeed, the threads of hope offered in this exhibition do not hinge on anthropic actions. Domesticity instead reads like a scar on the natural landscape, that is slowly losing its edges, healing through disappearance. Perhaps this is, as Spedding articulates, “That transitional space between buildings and bodies in the landscape, the extension of the body to the built and into the wild.”<sup>7</sup>

As I assess these fragile and seductively misanthropic symbols, I realise that there is also little hope for the plant life present. All plant life in this exhibition is either dead, displaced, or represented through man-made materials. There is a deep melancholy present, and a cynicism of the possibilities for life. Yet simultaneously, there is an inherent acknowledgement of the capacity for nature to renew itself, and a nod to the deep time that undermines any human contribution to this process, a contribution that is fleeting and momentary when placed within



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<sup>6</sup> Macquarie Dictionary, “Biome”

<sup>7</sup> Spedding, *Hereness*, 19:38

the scale of geological time. For Spedding, this dystopia is coupled with an insatiable sense of fascination with decay.

It's also something that is very unsettling because it really is the disintegration of our protection from the environment. ... We build houses for security and safety and when you see an abandoned house there is a kind of fascination with what happens to that space once it's weathered and the humans have disappeared, nature takes over and it does remind us, because often it happens so fast, ... of our transience. But it also echoes deep time. The world moves in deep time and we move in a fleeting moment within that.<sup>8</sup>

As I exit, I want to return. To find my bed there, *my* home in this biome. To clean it up and pull out the weeds. But I also want to leave it as it is. To surrender to the inevitable and exhausting reclamation nature has to undertake to heal the wound of humanity's touch.

## References

Spedding, Jacqueline. *Biome / Home, exhibition catalogue*, Katoomba: Blue Mountains City Art Gallery, 2020.

Binskin, Mark; Annabelle Bennett; Andrew Macintosh, *Royal Commission into Natural Disaster Arrangements*, 28 October 2020, Commonwealth of Australia.

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<sup>8</sup> Spedding, *Hereness*, 20:49



**Honi Ryan** is an artist, writer, and educator with a nomadic social practice. Born in Melbourne and based between Berlin and Paris, Ryan holds an MFA from the Transart Institute and is adjunct faculty at Paris College of Art. Ryan's work is socially motivated and engages participatory action to develop political and ecological issues. Ryan is the founding artist of the international performance art project the *Silent Dinners* which she has performed in 20 cities across 12 countries. Her work and critical writing was recently included in *Creative Paths* at Gaiás Museum Galicia, Spain alongside artists including Francis Alÿs, Mona Hatoum, and Marina Abramović. Ryan represented Germany at the Lahore Biennale 2016 and Karachi Biennale 2017. She has exhibited, performed, taught, and participated in residency programs internationally, with recent focus in Australia, Pakistan, Germany, and France.