



Lloyd Godman *entropy string* 25, 110 x 194 cm - consisting of Triptychs 354 - 1062 photographs.

CONTACT LENSES

Lloyd Godman's ecological art ■ Helen McDonald

In terms of our relationship with the environment in Australia, the word 'fortitude' connotes the rugged bushman struggling to survive in an unforgiving land of 'droughts and flooding rains.' Disaster is understood as an external 'natural' event, according to this 'man against nature' narrative, while survival is explained in terms of individual acts of moral and physical courage. Such acts are reasons to be hopeful, but focussing on them helps conceal a more complex scenario. When thinking of the environment, especially in Australia, individual acts of bravery pale in comparison with the fortitude of Indigenous populations, displaced from the lands on which they survived for millennia. Climate change forces a rethinking of how we all as humans are implicated in global ecologies and, as eco-critic Timothy Morton argues, how aesthetics might be involved in creating sustainable solutions. New Zealand-born ecological artist, Lloyd Godman, who now lives in Australia, has in his own determined way for over thirty years, pondered and acted upon these questions. The rest of this essay will outline three of Godman's multimedia projects with reference to Morton's critique of "ambient aesthetics."

Godman's first project *The Last Rivers' Song*, (1983-4) consisted of five large composite black and white photograph mural displays and thirteen smaller multi-image panels of the

Clutha and Kawarau River valleys, before they were flooded for the high dam project at Clyde in the South Island of New Zealand. During the filling of the dam in 1992-3, he staged two performances, *Lake Fill 1* and *Lake Fill 2*, using photography as documentation as well as an incorporated medium in the performance.¹ The second project is *Entropy*, a set of digital colour photographs based on the St Andrews Kinglake area of Victoria, following the catastrophic bushfires in Australia in 2009.² When taken out of context and discussed together the flood and fire suggest climate's extremes of wet and dry and the increasingly violent oscillation between drought and flood, which global warming accelerates. A certain degree of fortitude was required of Godman in the making of these projects. He was on the site before the flood occurred then as it was happening and he photographed the burnt-out valley in the bushfire's hazardous wake. He photographed the site again at regular intervals over a period of two years, to document the regeneration of vegetation and rate of species survival. The third body of work is Godman's living plant sculptures, designed to survive in a dry or drying future climate without watering. Pitched at a predicted dry future for south-eastern Australia, the sculptures are based on decades of ecological experience and patient, open-minded experimentation. Courage springs from determination to press on regardless of danger, obstacles and chaos.

OPPOSITE FROM TOP: Lloyd Godman *Entropy* triptych series: frames 77 - 78 - 79 *Controlled burn St Andrews* - April 15, 2012; frames 69 - 70 - 71 - *a walk from the end of Ninks Rd towards Kinglake*, March 22 2010; frames 0507 - 508 - 509 *Kinglake in the snow*, Oct 16 2010; frames 36 - 37 - 38 *a walk from the end of Ninks Rd up the valley on the left towards Kinglake*, Nov 25 2009; frames 126 -127 -128 *from Kinglake looking down the valley toward St Andrews*, Feb 17 2009.

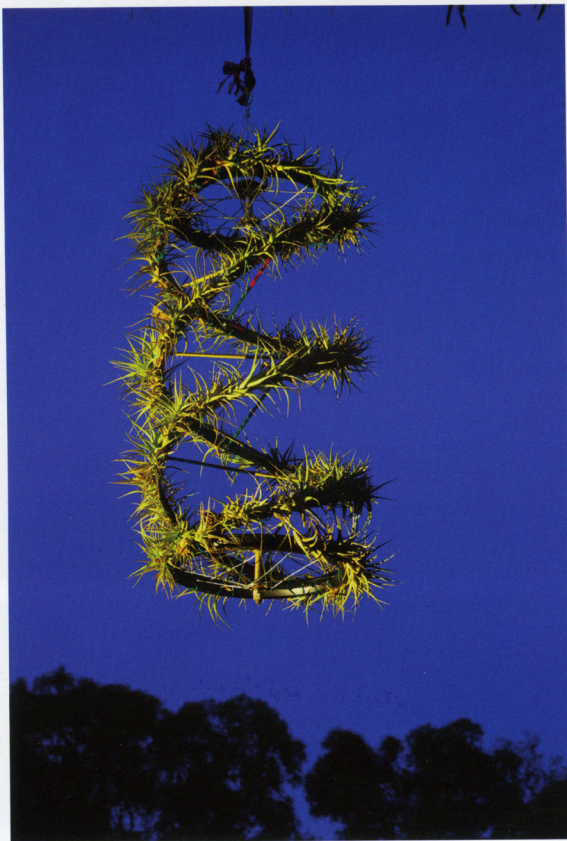


All the projects might be described as "ambient aesthetics", to use Morton's term, "a materialist way of reading texts with a view to how they encode the literal space of their inscription." Ambient aesthetics such as nature writing and landscape art denote "a sense of the surrounding world", the "atmosphere" or the "environment." Hence they serve to maintain a distance between subject (the self) and object (the environment) reinscribing the man versus nature dualism underpinning Western metaphysics. Dualistic art and thinking, warns Morton, automatically assume dangerous hierarchies and value judgements such as human superiority over and right to dominate other living things on earth. A viable alternative, he suggests, is "dark ecology", which involves sinking deeper into non-identity and groundlessness in anticipation of the non-human to come. He cautions that getting rid of distance too hastily risks aestheticising death among other things, and advises politicising the aesthetic with what "feels like dualism", but is "a more non-dual approach".

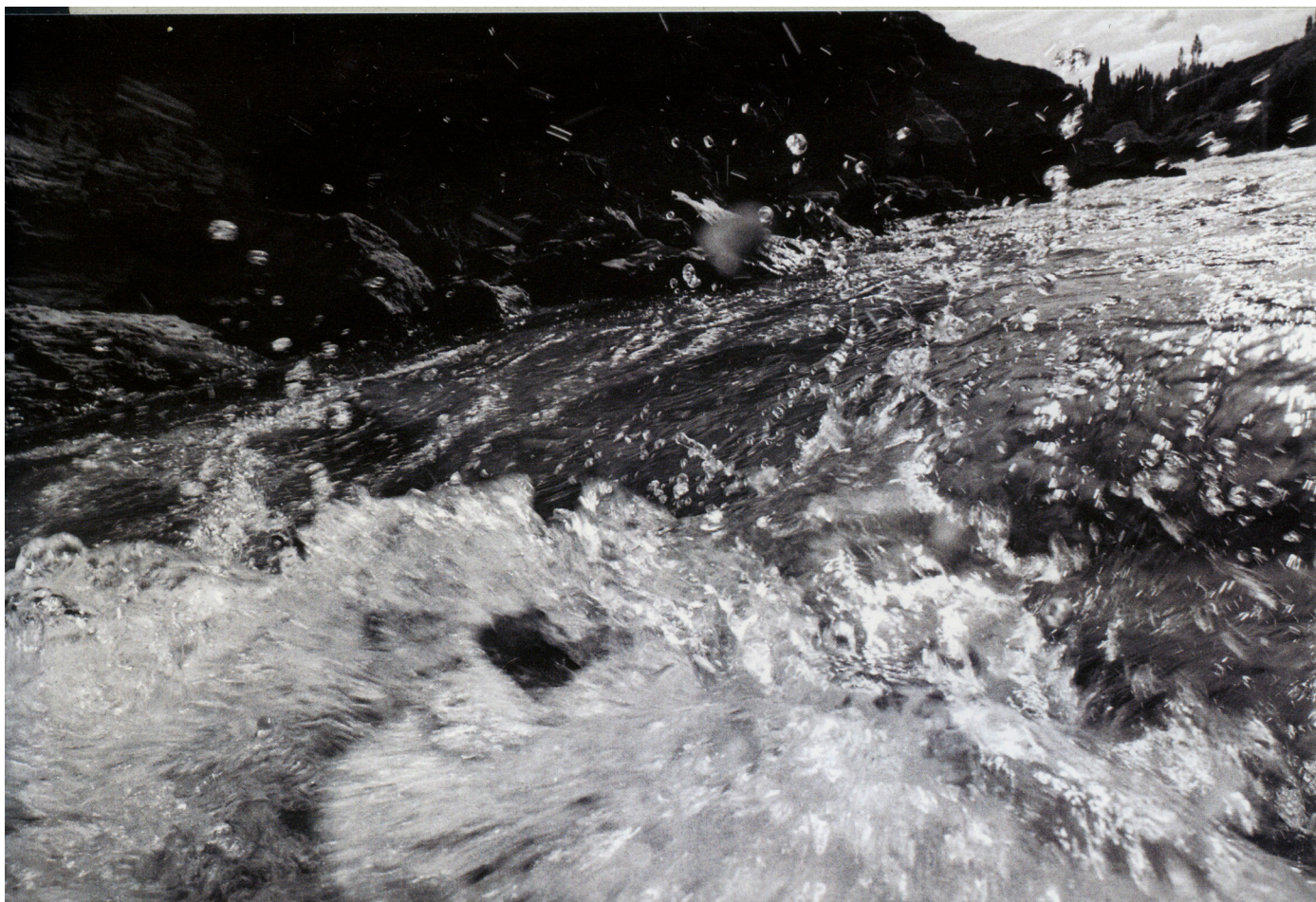
Since the 1970s Godman and other artists influenced by deconstruction have striven to blur the dualism framing art practices. In *The Last Rivers' Song*, Godman conveyed the wild force and massive impact of the Clutha and Karawau rivers in terms of his camera lens's physical contact with the water, a gesture towards closing the gap between the viewer and the landscape. Water on the lens partly obscures the perspective view of the river, giving the illusion of closer proximity between the artist's body and the environment. It serves

as an allegory for ecological disaster in which the human population of New Zealand is implicated. In addition, Godman intervened in the printing process by using gold, which had been retrieved from the threatened river, to replace the silver usually imported from elsewhere in the silver toning process. Including part of the river itself into the work coloured the contrast between the black and white or dark and light of the imaged rock and water, thereby symbolically polluting the dualism of representation.

Ten years after *The Last Rivers' Song* during the filling phase of the Lake, Godman made *Lake Fill 1*, (1992) a time-based photographic documentation of the event that incorporated the medium in a performance. At the site of the flood, he positioned his camera, which he had placed in an underwater house, in order to record the rising water as it covered the lens, eventually obliterating the vista of the river basin. Thus two ways of seeing – one in terms of spatial perspective, the other haptic – work in tandem symbolically to implicate the human body in the disaster. During a second performance, *Lake Fill II*, the camera was positioned on the ground when the water level was at the bottom of the frame. Its motor drive was connected to a series of wires that fastened various organic elements – leaves, tree branches, ferns, bones and fabricated brass pseudo-artifacts – to metal plates laid on the earth. Throughout the performance Godman, who had metallicised his hands, touched the plates, completing the electric circuit and triggering the camera. In this material and



Lloyd Godman *Nature reclaims the Helix* 2012, 800 x 500 mm diameter approx, recycled bicycle wheels, steel, Tillandsia plants - super sustainable rotating Tillandsia air garden, ecologically active art.



Lloyd Godman *Mural three* 1984, 6.8m x 2m SG Prints, Dunedin Public Art Gallery installation.

symbolic way, art that was aiming to inspire empathy and a sense of union with place simultaneously undermined a hydro scheme designed to drive consumerism.

The title *Entropy*, which denotes disorder of a scientific system, contrasts with *The Last Rivers' Song's* nostalgia. The St Andrews/Kinglake disaster was the most extreme bushfire ever recorded, a fact that many scientists believe was a symptom of climatic disorder caused by global warming. *Entropy* took the form of an extensive series of photograph triptychs, which comprised large composites that create abstract patterns. There was also a randomised infinite projection. The series was shot with a digital camera and appears to be more objective than Godman's earlier works and there were no performances, the apparent immediacy of moving imagery or the self-reflexivity that the image of water on the lens produces. The aesthetic effect of *Entropy* derives partly from its formal qualities, with exquisite balancing of colours and shapes. On the other hand the project of charting the re-growth of vegetation with photographs taken over a period of two years recalled scientific method. Initially undertaken in dread of species extinction, the photographs document extraordinary regeneration and species survival following the record-breaking wet period that followed. The cyclic change from order to disorder to a new order is conveyed aesthetically in the way "the work explored elements connecting to suggest order but also breaking, falling apart in visual disjunction".

In the twenty-first century, Godman set about making "art as active solution." While he was exploring the ecological status of expansive landscapes, he also worked on a small scale with his plant works. Alert to possibilities for sculpture and urban green architecture, he investigated the adaptive properties of a genus of the bromeliad family called *Tillandsia*. This rootless plant has the capacity to survive in arid conditions while suspended in air. Much lighter than a hanging garden and not needing to be watered, Godman's *Tillandsia* air sculptures, such as *Expanding Dimension Cube* provide carbon capture, oxygen release and thermal insulation by reflecting ninety-three percent of sunlight. He is currently collaborating on a plan for suspended *Tillandsias* forming a "tidal garden" for the façade of a waterfront building, which in connection with a cantilever underwater float system, would rise and fall with the tide. The garden might also be expected to respond to rising sea levels over time. In these plant works, Godman has embraced a more collaborative, practical and interdisciplinary aesthetic, enabling him better to challenge "ambient aesthetics" in favour of interconnected ways of working and thinking about ecological aesthetics. Fortitude resides in his relentless analysis and documenting of ecological phenomena and his physical and intellectual commitment to achieving a sustainable aesthetic life. ■

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