

Birrarung/ Yarra River

Voice of the Birrarung 2022

Spoken by Uncle Dave Wandin, Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people,
Naarm/Melbourne region

digital video, colour, sound; 8 minutes 30 seconds

Camera: Nyssa Mitchell

Postproduction: Australian Film, Television and Radio School

Commissioned by the 23rd Biennale of Sydney (2022) with generous
assistance from the Australian Film, Television and Radio School

In September 2017, the *Yarra River Protection (Wilip-gin Birrarung murrn) Act 2017* was passed by the Victorian Parliament to protect the Birrarung/Yarra River for future generations and to recognise the river—and its lands—as ‘one living and integrated natural entity’. The following year, fulfilling part of the legislation that enshrines traditional custodianship of Country in law, the Birrarung Council was created as the ‘voice for the river’. An independent body with Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and non-Indigenous membership, the Council speaks to government on behalf of the Birrarung, providing advice and advocacy towards ensuring the river’s health and wellbeing.

Since then, actions taken to wilip-gin Birrarung murrn (Woi-wurrung for ‘keep the Birrarung alive’) have included the development of a fifty-year community vision, developed by over 2,500 Victorians and launched in 2018, and Burndap Birrarung burndap umarkoo (Woi-wurrung for ‘good for Yarra is good for all’), an initial ten-year Yarra Strategic Plan (2022–32). Traditional Custodian, Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Elder and Birrarung Council member Uncle Dave Wandin says: ‘We hope that this is just the beginning for all rivers and all waterways, but to learn from us about how to care for Country, you have to walk Country, to read Country, so you can heal Country.’

Tania Candiani

Waterbirds: Migratory Sound Flow 2022

wooden structure with tree branches collected on the banks of rivers in Veracruz, Mexico (Red mangrove, Mexican maple, Sabbino and Seagrape); 40-channel electro-pneumatic system and 12-channel sound installation with software for generative composition; hoses, gourds, speakers and 40 clay aerophones

Technology development: Interspecifics

Wooden structure: Juan Rosas

Clay instruments: Gilberto Chávez, Marakame

Courtesy of the artist, Velmelho and Instituto de Visión

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Investment to Sustain and Expand (RISE) Fund—an Australian

Government initiative—and the MUMA Contemporaries

Waterbirds: Migratory Sound Flow is a suspended installation of tree branches collected from riverbanks in Tania Candiani's home country of Mexico, where she lives and works. To derive its composition, the artist consulted aerial views of the ancient waterways of the Murray-Darling Basin, which feed into Australia's longest rivers: the Dungala/Dhungala/Murray and the Barka/Baaka/Darling. This is Australia's most important water catchment area and a critically important cultural site for numerous Indigenous Nations, including the Yorta Yorta and Barkindji peoples. The waterways are subjected to 'water management' practices, including the redistribution of water to the agricultural industry. The health of the Murray-Darling system is increasingly in jeopardy, most dramatically evident in recent mass fish death incidents and ongoing algal blooms.

Candiani's attention focused on the migration of birds along the waterways. The flight paths of these birds connect hundreds of kilometres of water, moving freely as the water once did. Through its network of branches and the sounds of traditional pre-hispanic wind instruments (clay ocarinas, shells and wooden flutes) and field recordings of Australian water birds, Candiani pays homage to the river systems as the life blood of Country.

Jessie French

Old Gold 2023

algae-based material developed by the artist, mineral pigment and *Athrospira platensis* microalgae

Propeller 2023

algae-based material developed by the artist, mineral pigment, *Athrospira platensis* microalgae, mild steel, Tasmanian oak and marine fittings

Mount fabrication: Simone Tops

Courtesy of the artist

Jessie French's new works for *Rivermouth* are supported by the MUMA Contemporaries

In 2020, Jessie French founded the Naarm/Melbourne-based experimental design studio, OTHER MATTER, to engage people in the possibilities of working with algae-based materials, employing skills and knowledge developed through her artistic practice.

In the year 2019, 460 million tonnes of plastic—or petrochemical synthetic polymers—were produced globally. With very little recycled, the majority ends up in landfill or aquatic environments, both physically and chemically endangering ecosystems and wildlife. Naturally occurring polymers, as well as biodegradable plastics, are increasingly attracting attention for their environmental advantages over petrochemical plastics. The latter rely on the extraction of finite materials like crude oil and natural gas, and a string of processes that can involve up to 80,000 additional chemicals being added to provide plastics with their various qualities (for example, colour and texture).

To create her luminous, marbled bioplastics, Jessie French has mixed extracts of two types of red algae (from the *Gelidium* and *Gracilaria* species) with pigments (including some microalgae) to create a thick substance that is poured into moulds to cure. Drawing on her studies in the history and philosophy of science, French is attracted to methods that can be achieved on small, non-industrial scales, as part of a circular model that allows for reuse. For French, algae pose hopeful possibilities in today's context of unsustainable industrial production and overreliance on harmful petrochemical plastics.

Jessie French

Sunk 2023

algae-based material developed by the artist, mineral pigment
and *Athrospira platensis* microalgae

Courtesy of the artist

Jessie French's new works for *Rivermouth* are supported by the
MUMA Contemporaries

Gail Mabo

(anticlockwise)

Mabo Claim I 2022

Mabo Claim II 2022

Tagai 2022

Zenadth Kes 2022

bamboo, twine, shells and polyurethane

Courtesy of Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts, Townsville
Gail Mabo's new works for *Rivermouth* are supported by the
MUMA Contemporaries

Gail Mabo is a Meriam artist from Mer Island in the Torres Strait, a region also known as Zenadth Kes. Her multidisciplinary practice stretches from dance to visual arts and is always grounded in Indigenous cultural knowledges. Mabo's star maps, constructed out of bamboo, cotton and shells, illustrate her people's complex understanding of celestial navigation and have come to define her artistic practice.

In the artwork *Tagai*, this ancestral technology depicts the constellation that the Zenadth Kes nations consult to guide them safely through the seas when they travel from one island to another. The movement of the stars also signals the changing seasons. Named after the Creator Being Tagai, the constellation takes the form of a man standing on a canoe whose left hand is formed by the stars of the Southern Cross and holds a spear.

In 2015, one of the stars in the Southern Cross was named Koiki after Gail Mabo's father, Eddie Koiki Mabo, to mark the 23rd anniversary of the historic Mabo decision that overturned the doctrine of 'terra nullius' (meaning 'nobody's land'). Known as the Mabo Case, the action led by five Meriam people against the State of Queensland and the Commonwealth of Australia resulted in the land rights of Meriam Traditional Owners being recognised.

Diana Scherer

Entanglement 2021–23

soil, seed, grass roots and timber

Courtesy of the artist

Commissioned by the 23rd Biennale of Sydney (2022) with generous support from the Goethe-Institut Australia and with generous assistance from Mondriaan Fund and the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Australia

As part of her long-term project *Exercises in Root System Domestication*, German-born, Amsterdam-based artist Diana Scherer undertakes what she refers to as ‘collaborations with nature’, coaxing networks of roots into unique patterns of woven textiles. Thought of as the ‘brain’ of plants, Scherer draws attention to roots as active, intelligent agents in the process of producing living fabrics.

Entanglement looks at xylem vessels, the tissue responsible for the transportation of water and minerals through plants. The emergence of these vessels in plants is considered one of the most important evolutions in the life of plants. The patterns Scherer creates with roots are inspired by the forms of these transport tissues. Taking geometric and ordering principles and patterns from plant physiology, Scherer’s craft also poses a dilemma, in that it is both a manipulation of natural processes and possible cultivation of a joint path together.

A root navigates, knows what is up and down, perceives gravity and can locate moisture and chemicals. Roots are incredibly strong. In their search for food and space they fight for every space they can find. I use this strength to create my work. I expose the subterranean life and natural network turns into a textile-like material. The dynamism of the plant makes it seem as if the work is making itself. I have learned to deal with the autonomy of nature. Despite my intervention, the outcome is unpredictable every time. The interaction of control and letting go is an important element in my work.

—Diana Scherer

Paula de Solminihac

What Remains of the Other 2017

cotton, linen and canvas fabrics restored with silk crepeline
conservation fabric

What Remains of One 2017

cotton, linen and canvas fabrics restored with silk crepeline
conservation fabric

Black Bark I and II 2021

ink and natural elements printed on cotton Hahnemühle matt fine art
paper

Humus 2019

digital video, colour, sound; 11 minutes 13 seconds

Courtesy of the artist

Commissioned by the 23rd Biennale of Sydney (2022) with assistance
from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Chile and the Catholic University
of Chile

Paula de Solminihac's participation in *Rivermouth* is supported by
Graeme and Mabie Briggs

Paula de Solminihac is an artist, educator at the Catholic University
of Chile and Executive Director of Nube Lab, a non-profit organisation
dedicated to creative practice and education. Likening her practice to
fieldwork and archaeology, de Solminihac's works resemble
note-taking, formed by making, thinking and experimenting with
material processes of transformation. Working regularly with ceramics,
as well as with drawing, photography, film and installation, the artist's
exploratory methods often rely upon more-than-human intervention—
such as the interactions of fire and clay, or textiles and paper
transformed by soil and its agents.

The suite of works in *Rivermouth* document creative human and
organic processes, reflecting a world in flux. Fabric that once held the
root balls of cherry trees has been exhumed and conserved for display,
while the creased black-and-white prints image those same fabrics,
but through photographic and natural processes—the photographs
having been subjected to a period of time and transformation
underground before being exhibited. Accompanying them, the video
Humus portrays the world of material relations and processes that de
Solminihac inhabits, capturing scenes from the artist's workshop and
site-specific projects.

In 2017, I planted two cherry trees in my studio yard. When
they shed their last leaf, I took the trees out of their pots,
which were made of fabric. The eroded remnants of the pots
were taken to a photographer's studio to be captured open like
a flower in a herbarium. I inverted those photos so the white
became black and the black became white. Then I made these
photos into little lumps that I buried in my garden for some
time. *Black Barks* is a sequence of containers that contain each
other and whose creative process lies in the contact with the
silent transformative powers that happen in the soil and that
end when the photos are opened to be shown.

—Paula de Solminihac