

GUNS LO TO ROSES





GUNS TO ROSES

LIFE IS AS FRAGILE AS PAPER

The image of a gun is loaded with meaning. It is a symbol of violence and war, and of human suffering inflicted at the hand of others.

Guns to Roses is an exhibition from the Maitland Regional Art Gallery Collection in which artists have grappled with major issues that impact on our lives and the world in which we live; not only gun violence and global conflict, but also climate change and the multitude of tragedies that confront us via the media on a daily basis. *Gun No 1*, by Li Hongbo is a central element in this exhibition and key to the exhibition concept, illustrating how artists can create artworks that navigate complex subject matter with a gentle delivery. Like Li Hongbo, the artists in this exhibition have addressed complex issues and transformed emotive motifs using delicate materials, seductive images and symbolism from across art history.

**ESSAY BY
CHERYL FARRELL**

Collection Management Curator
Maitland Regional Art Gallery

Guns to Roses is an exhibition full of beauty and colour with artists deconstructing and diffusing reminders of violence, man-made and natural disasters, and our own mortality in order to entice audiences to look closer and provide another frame through which to contemplate these issues. Artists care about the world we live in, and this exhibition includes artworks of beauty and diverse materials that illustrate their concerns about the precariousness of our times and the fragility of life as impacted by weapons and warfare, political unrest and the increasingly imposing threats to our fragile environment caused by climate change.

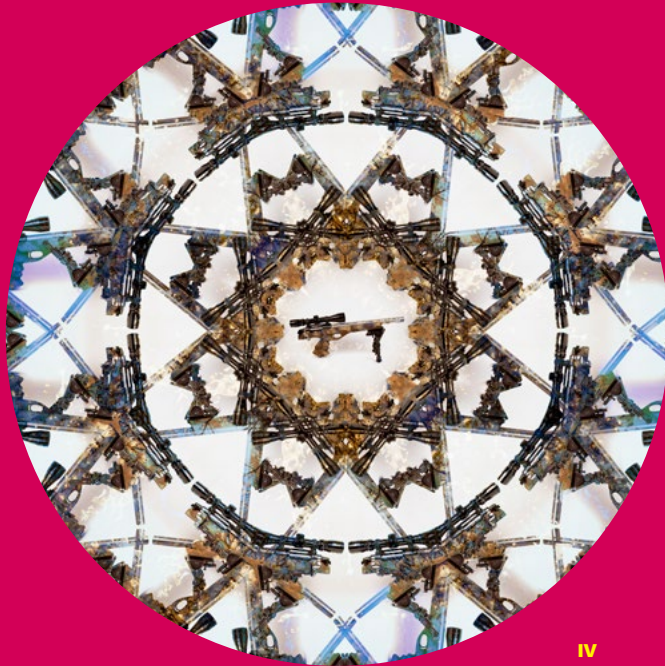
A machine gun, hand guns and bullets are unrecognisable in the colourful paper landscape installation created from Li Hongbo's paper sculpture, *Gun No 1*, 2016, but are at the core of this work both physically and conceptually. Before this work is unpacked the solid forms of these weapons are tightly secured in a military-style gun case. When removed from their crate the compact blocks of paper are expanded and transformed into colourful rosettes and decorative shapes - recontextualising the original object and its meaning. Li Hongbo not only uses paper to reference the long history of paper and paper making in China but also to reflect the Chinese saying that 'life is as fragile as paper'. Once transformed into a beautiful garden of colour the symbols of pain and even death become unrecognisable, emphasising the possibility for transformation.



Dr Simone Paterson draws upon centuries old Asian artforms in her gun mandala series, *108: everything nothing infinity*. Traditionally used as a meditative practice in Hindu and Buddhist cultures, mandalas are intricately patterned motifs, often painstakingly created with multicoloured lines of fine sand that are then swept away once completed. Fragile and impermanent, a mandala is a symbolic picture of the universe that also reflects the impermanence of life. The patterns and shapes in Paterson's mandalas are created with multiple coloured images of guns, emanating a sense of pain as visibly contained in and carried by the object and an unsettling essence of the violence these objects can cause.¹ These mandalas were created by Paterson in 2014, during her tenure as Associate Professor at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, in response to the university's horrific 2007 shooting when 33 students were killed by a lone gunman. Paterson's mandalas represent her personal efforts to visualise and evoke a peaceful energy and reset balance in the world.²



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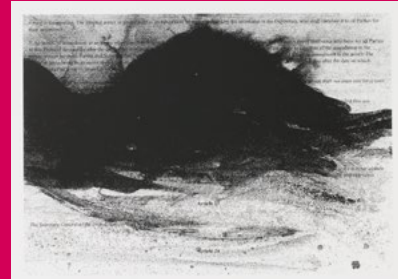
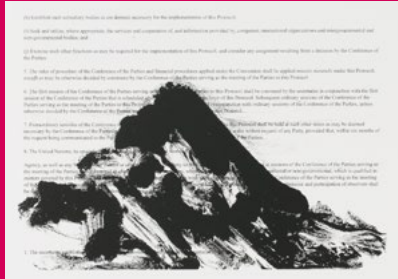
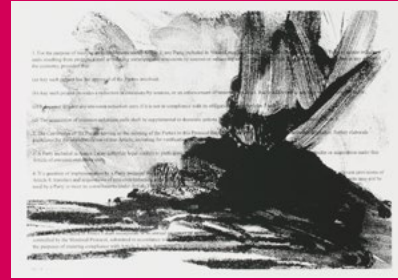
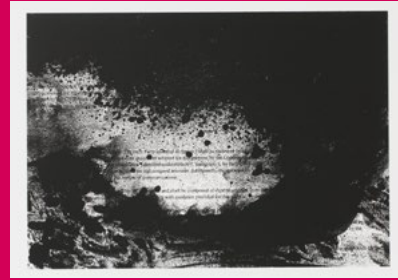
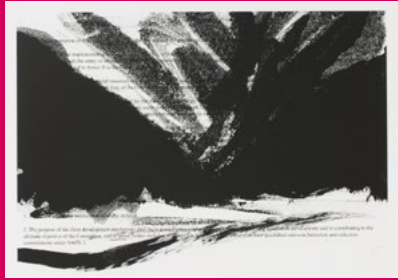
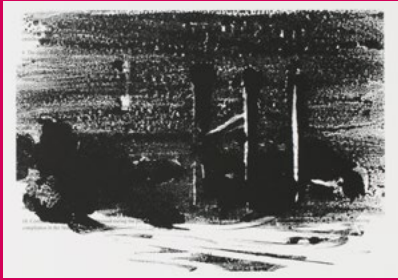
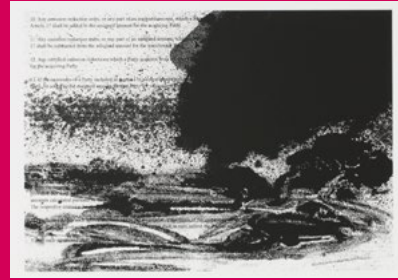
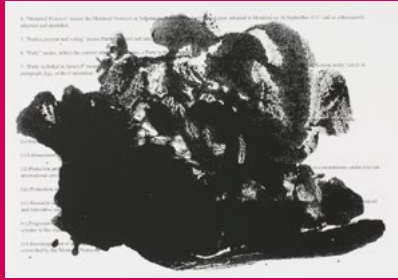
Victoria Lobregat uses Buddhist iconography and symbols from European art history in her work with the skull a recurring motif. As in the tradition of *memento mori*, (a Latin phrase meaning 'remember that you will die'), Lobregat incorporates skulls and flowers in her two paintings, *Deco Skull*, 2008 and *Skull Landscape*, 2008, as reminders of the impermanence of life. Her gentle approach and use of pastel colours and detailed decoration present a beautiful contrast reflecting life's sweetness and its cyclical nature.³ Jason Brooks' sublime large scale watercolour, *Cross*, 1999, is another painting in the *memento mori* tradition. This flower burdened cross reflects the artist's personal fascination with mortality and his photorealism technique references the funereal aspect of photography in capturing a frozen moment. The artist's technical skill and photo-realist style draws the viewer in, while the wreath-like image may prompt the confronting contemplation of our own mortality.⁴



Beautiful yet unsettling is the seductive photograph by Dr Christian Thompson AO, *The Writing on the Wall*, 2019, in which the viewer's gaze is returned by the artist's own from behind the riot of colourful blooms. By placing himself in his work Thompson uses his body as an armature to support his personal reflections on identity, sexuality, gender, race and memory, and his physical presence adds layers of meaning as carried by his own personal experiences and Aboriginal heritage. In this work the figure behind the flowers relays the warning – that humans are behind the destruction of our finely balanced ecosystem – and that the writing is on the wall of the impending crisis for our natural environment.

As seen in this exhibition artists can use beauty as a tool to engage viewers with difficult subject matter. In the presence of beauty we can be compelled to want to protect or to seek justice for perceived injustices.⁵ By communicating ideas of social, political, and environmental threats with artworks that are aesthetically pleasing rather than aggressively confrontational, artists are seeking to move individuals to action. In contrast other artists within the exhibition are more explicit in their delivery.

We live in a time when the effects of global warming and climate change are directly impacting on our lives and our environment. The recent catastrophic bushfires across Australia have caused worldwide dismay and triggered volatile debate on the subject of climate change. Shonah Trescott has created artworks that directly relate to climate change and humanity's relationship with the environment. In her series of silkscreen prints, *Kyoto Protocol*, 2015, Trescott laments the failure of the Kyoto treaty which was established to reduce the world's greenhouse emissions and mitigate further climate change. By obscuring text taken from the Kyoto Protocol document with sooty marks resembling industrial landscapes, chimney stacks and billowing smoke, Trescott is making visible the actual disintegration of the treaty. While encompassing a crisis of international scale the works are also linked to a more personal narrative of Trescott's own experience coming from Maitland, a town with a history steeped in coal mining.⁶



While Trescott laments, Locust Jones vents. His ten metre long paper scroll *Brainfog*, 2015, presents a multitude of world crises fractured through the lens of the artist's experience as delivered via the daily media of radio, television and newspapers. To walk alongside the expansive blue and black painting is to follow the artist's raw and expressive responses to the daily news from April 2014. Along this path we are confronted with images and text that describe tumult and tragedy including the disappearance of Malaysian airlines flight MH370, a fatal shark attack, the divisive topic of fracking, and the Russian incursion into Crimea. There is an immediacy to the execution and the frenetic energy of its creation is barely harnessed by the constraints of conventional composition but allowed range in the long scroll format. In this form the immense scale of the work physically reflects the magnitude of crises that occur around the world on a daily basis.

Small in scale, yet savagely beautiful are two etchings by Francisco de Goya from the *Los Desastres de la Guerra* (Disasters of War) series. These delicately crafted etchings report the artist's direct experience of the brutalities of war as witnessed during the Napoleonic invasions of Spain in 1808.



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The scenes of skeletal corpses and jumbles of dead bodies are powerful in their realism and the documentary nature of the entire series reads as an anti-war manifesto from the artist.⁷ Robert Hughes wrote of Goya, "He wanted to make images that compel a moral understanding of ordinary and terrible things"⁸ and these etchings are another example of how artists over time have been compelled to create artworks that not only express their own concerns but urge for understanding and action from their audience.

Almost all the artworks in *Guns to Roses* are from the Maitland Regional Art Gallery Collection, representing some of the art gallery's most recent acquisitions. Enhancing this exhibition are works by Baden Pailthorpe and Penny Byrne on loan from the Newcastle Art Gallery Collection. Baden Pailthorpe has

used modern technology in his exploration of the mechanisms of war in two video pieces *Cadence II* and *Cadence III*, 2013. Like Li Hongbo, Pailthorpe has created expanded duplicated patterns from a singular image to deconstruct and disempower the inherent violence of the original. In stark contrast to Goya's macabre scenes, Pailthorpe's animations of dancing, armed soldiers, subvert the violent machines of war and military movements of soldiers into an almost joyous dance, using humour to express the artist's view of the absurdity of war.⁹ Penny Byrne also uses humour and unconventional materials as tools to engage the viewer. In her work, *War on Terror Waltz*, 2009, Byrne has destroyed delicate porcelain figurines then reconstructed them with action figure accessories to portray her view of the 'War on Terror' as a never-ending dance between the opposing parties.¹⁰

Artists care. When the Australian bushfire catastrophe shocked the world it was artists who were amongst the first to rally unprecedented worldwide support to assist those in need. Within this exhibition we can see how artists use their creativity to expose critical issues of our times and by exposing history and current events in this way their artworks have the capacity to yield positive understanding.¹¹ From artworks that are beautiful and subtle in their message to those that are more explicit and direct we are presented with an alternate way to consider these complex topics and our own responses. By delivering an elegance in their emblemism artists hope to induce a sense of wanting to protect what is important to us and prompt us to action.

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IMAGES

I: LI HONGBO
GUN NO.1
 (details), 2016, paper
 dimensions variable, purchased by
 Maitland Regional Art Gallery, 2016

II: LOCUST JONES
BRAINFOG
 (details), 2015, ink and watercolour
 on Korean made paper, 110 x 1093cm
 purchased by Maitland Regional
 Art Gallery, 2017

III: DR SIMONE PATERSON
MAGNUM MANDALA
 2014, digital print on satin
 86cm diameter, purchased by
 Maitland Regional Art Gallery, 2019

IV: DR SIMONE PATERSON
XP100 MANDALA
 2014, digital print on satin
 86cm diameter, purchased by
 Maitland Regional Art Gallery, 2019

V: VICTORIA LOBREGAT
DECO SKULL
 2008, ink and gouache on paper
 48.9 x 60cm, purchased by
 Maitland Regional Art Gallery 2008

VI: DR CHRISTIAN THOMPSON AO
WRITING ON THE WALL
 2019, C-type print on Fuji
 Pearl metallic paper ed. 5/6
 120 x 120cm, purchased by
 Maitland Regional Art Gallery, 2019

VII: SHONAH TRECOTT
KYOTO PROTOCOL
 (Series of 24), 2015, silk screen
 on paper, 3/3, 36 x 48cm each
 purchased by Maitland Regional
 Art Gallery, 2017

VIII: FRANCISCO GOYA
NADA. ELLO DIRÀ
 (from the Los Desastres de la Guerra
 series), 1863, etching, engraving, lavis,
 drypoint, aquatint on paper
 plate 69, edition of 500, 15.4 x 20cm
 donated to Maitland Regional Art Gallery
 through the Australian Government's
 Cultural Gifts Program, 2012

IX: FRANCISCO GOYA
ESTRAGOS DE LA GUERRA
 (from the Los Desastres de la Guerra
 series), 1863, etching, engraving, lavis,
 drypoint, aquatint on paper
 plate 30, edition of 500, 14.1 x 16.8cm
 donated to Maitland Regional Art Gallery
 through the Australian Government's
 Cultural Gifts Program, 2012

X: PENNY BYRNE
WAR ON TERROR WALTZ
 2009, vintage porcelain figures, vintage
 porcelain action man accessories,
 miniature 'War on Terror' service medal,
 retouching medium and powder pigments,
 33.0 x 25.5 x 19.0 cm. Gift of the Newcastle
 Region Art Gallery Foundation 2009
 Newcastle Art Gallery collection

XI: BADEN PAILTHORPE
CADENCE II
 2013, HD video, colour, stereo sound,
 6 min, donated through the Australian
 Government's Cultural Gifts Program
 by Baden Pailthorpe 2017
 Newcastle Art Gallery collection

XII: BADEN PAILTHORPE
CADENCE III
 2013, HD video, colour, stereo sound,
 4 min, purchased with the assistance
 of Newcastle Art Gallery Society and
 Newcastle Art Gallery Guides 2015
 Newcastle Art Gallery collection



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ENDNOTES

- 1 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: the making and unmaking of the world*, Oxford University Press, 1985, p.16
- 2 Simone Paterson, email 21/11/2019
- 3 Victoria Lobregat, email 15/1/2020
- 4 Michael Bracewell, *Jason Brooks, Perpetual Orgy*, Black Dog Publishing Ltd, London, 2015, p.57
- 5 Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, Princeton University Press, 1999, p.22
- 6 Dominique Nahas, "Notes on Drawn into the light", *Drawn into the light*, exhibition by Osvaldo Budet and Shonah Trescott, Museum of Contemporary Art of Puerto Rico, 2015, Shonah Trescott email 9/1/2020
- 7 Robert Hughes, *Goya*, Harvill Press, London, 2003, p.304
- 8 Robert Hughes, *The unflinching eye*, The Guardian, 4/10/2003, available online 16/1/2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2003/oct/04/art.biography>
- 9 Baden Pailthorpe, *First Person Shooter*, Artand, available online 16/1/2020: <https://www.sullivanstrumpf.com/assets/Uploads/BadenPailthorpe-ARTAND.pdf>
- 10 Penny Byrne, *Art Forum: Penny Byrne*, ANU TV, 14/11/2012, available online 9/1/2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zf1NLGfrsx8&t=1701s>
- 11 Ernst van Alphen, *Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought*, University of Chicago Press, 2005, p.xv

First published in 2020
by Maitland Regional Art Gallery (MRAG)
PO Box 220, Maitland NSW, 2320
mrag.org.au
to accompany the exhibition

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Exhibition dates
29 FEBRUARY – 2 AUGUST 2020

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Catalogue proudly printed in Australia

Maitland Regional Art Gallery warmly
thanks Newcastle Art Gallery for the
loan of artworks from their collection.

Maitland Regional Art Gallery
is a proud service of Maitland City
Council and is supported by the NSW
Government through Create NSW.



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Editing
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Design
CLARE HODGINS
Catalogue printing
WHO PRINTING

ISBN
978-0-6487348-1-9



