

# ANNE ZAHALKA FUTURE PAST PRESENT TENSE 1 MARCH - 6 APRIL

ARC  
ONE  
GALLERY



ANNE ZAHALKA, *Cast Aways*, 2024, solvent ink on rag paper, 80 x 120 cm.

**ARC ONE Gallery is delighted to present *Future Past Present Tense*, a major solo exhibition by leading photo-media artist Anne Zahalka as part of PHOTO 2024 International Festival of Photography.**

Artificial truths are Anne Zahalka's preoccupation. Drawn to the constructed aspect of dioramas, she has spent many years working with the airless logic of museum displays. In her exhibition *Future Past Present Tense*, Zahalka inserts the original diorama-makers—scientists, assistants, and illustrators—into the scenes themselves. This metanarrative gives the dioramas a recursive effect, akin to 'embalming the embalmer', like a waxwork of Madame Tussauds.

Like many, Zahalka's first encounter with a diorama was at Christmas, looking at the Christian nativity scene. This memory is a far cry from her current exploration of scientific dioramas, first inspired by the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Nonetheless, the traditional Christmas diorama speaks to the enduring power of this strange sculptural form. While the figures of Mary and Joseph may be mannequins, we arrange them annually to remind us that the story is real. This transition underscores the diorama's uncanny capacity to render truth by stepping into the world. The veracity of the diorama-form has been embraced by scientific-artists, who meticulously render the world to scale, determined to reveal the truth within the narratives they have constructed.

Zahalka has been working with photographic records of historical museum dioramas for two decades. Intended to educate museum visitors, nineteenth century 'habitat displays' presented pristine environments, frozen in time, communicating apparent 'truths' about the natural world and humanity. Zahalka subverts the idea of fixed information to reimagine the changing relationship that exists between people and the natural world.

In *Reef Theatre with Ethel King* (2024), we see the scientific illustrator Ethel King sitting, attentively painting a giant taxidermy Queensland groper. Zahalka has submerged them both at the bottom of an aquarium, with a school of living fish darting above their heads. King is painting a fiction—giving lustre and sheen to the dull scales of a dead fish. It is a skill that Zahalka clearly empathises with. In a touching gesture, Zahalka imagines the Queensland groper once again swimming alongside the artist who sought to reanimate it.



ANNE ZAHALKA, *Reef Theatre with Ethel King*, 2024, solvent ink on rag paper, 55 x 70 cm.

In a work based on the century-old Lord Howe Island diorama housed in the Australian Museum, Zahalka introduces documentary evidence to disrupt the “idealised space” of the scientific display. Two young men from around 1921 have been transported back to the scene of their original specimen hunt. In 1918, a plague of rats swarmed Lord Howe Island, fleeing from a nearby shipwreck. Amongst other things, these men were studying the native sea life, flora and fauna in the aftermath of this crisis. Zahalka reimagines this scene by layering historical and modern disasters, illustrating the impact of the plastic pollution on seabird populations. The taxidermy gannets, boobies, black noddys, and mutton birds on display might be the ancestors of the birds that stalk the cliffs today, only nowadays their stomachs are found bursting with balloons, as they die where they land.

Zahalka’s career has featured an unwavering analysis of the human animal. Her work with dioramas (beginning with *Wild Life*, 2006) is connected back to her earlier series *Leisureland* (1999), which scrutinised man-made environments that are devoted to pleasure and entertainment, such as our cinemas, stadiums and theme parks. Now that the artist is older, this “coolly ironic ethnography of the stuff we do” has turned hot. The “stuff we do” is no longer merely just fun and games. Humanity has left its mark on the entire world. We have some cleaning up to do.

Zahalka is sometimes frustrated by photography’s limitation, such as the reliance on the singular frame, and the notion that everything in the image must come together in one moment. A photographer can only include so much information in one image. “I’ve always wanted to show the whole photo shoot and its many moments,” she laments. In this exhibition, Zahalka combines archival images sourced from museums and her own personal archive. After selecting each image, the artist hand-paints and digitally alters every part of the scene in order to coax out more information, to convey more of the story, to transcend the boundaries of past, present, and future.

Through her art, Ethel King achieved a kind of Lazarus resurrection by bringing fish back from the dead. As her twenty-first century peer, Zahalka recognises the need for many more miracles in the future. Zahalka’s brilliant images are deliberately artificial and disquieting but they are also truthful.

**This exhibition is presented in partnership with PHOTO2024 for more information on the program visit [www.photo.org.au](http://www.photo.org.au).**

## **PHOTO 2024** **Official Exhibition**