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ANNE ZAHALKA
FUTURE PAST PRESENT TENSE
1 March - 6 April 2024

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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, 19th 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.

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 c. 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 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 21st 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.



Anne Zahalka, *Reef Theatre with Ethel King*, 2024, solvent ink on rag paper, 55cm x 70cm.
Original sources: Australian Museum Archives and the artist.

NATURE REIMAGINED BRENDAN ATKINS

Dioramas – those groups of stuffed animals in museum window displays – faithfully reproduce real scenes from nature, bringing remote exotic locations to city audiences. These ‘windows on nature’ first appeared in natural history museums in Europe and the US in the late 1800s. Australian museums followed in the 1920s but few examples of those innovative displays remain.

Yet one hundred years ago, museum scientists and taxidermists would mount special expeditions to collect specimens in order to recreate scenes few people could visit for themselves. The resulting dioramas seem static and unchanging but make powerful statements about the relationship between animals and their environment – and the way that humans view them.

Dioramas bring an unwavering focus to a single moment in time and space. Enter that moment and you can be transported to an African valley, a remote island or a coral lagoon. But to the casual viewer they appear, well, fake – a perfect illusion of reality, a *trompe l'œil*. The rocks are papier-mâché; the animal specimens are dried skins stitched to a dummy or stuffed; and the backdrop is a painted cloth or wall. In photographs, these painterly, sculptural, and photographic elements meld to produce a landscape that appears strangely real.

In this spirit, Anne Zahalka takes dioramic scenes from archival images and fast-forwards to a dystopian near-future. Her montages transport museum scientists and their helpers across time into modernised versions of the landscapes they once explored so enthusiastically.

Cast Adrift (2023) takes us behind the scenes to see the Australian Museum’s prep staff at work, posing for the camera as they construct the rocky ledge and paint the background of the *Admiralty Islets Diorama* (1923).



Anne Zahalka, *Cast Adrift*, 2024, solvent ink on rag paper, 80cm x 120cm.
Original sources: Australian Museum Archives and Lord Howe Island Museum.

Measuring five by two metres, it is the oldest extant diorama in Australia, reproducing a view of Lord Howe Island from a nearby group of small islets. Zahalka adds coloured balloons which drift across a painted sky by artist Herbert Gallop before finding their way into the food chain to be choked upon by fledgling seabirds and turtles.

Cast Adrift (2024) is set against museum artist Anne Soady’s cheery 1939 reworking of Gallop’s backdrop. How unsettling and strange it is to witness the ghostly figures of these early conservationists, no longer monochrome, examining plastic pollution while planes fly overhead and contrails replace clouds.

The Admiralty Islets diorama, conceived by curator Allan Riverstone McCulloch (1895–1925) for the Australian Museum, ‘celebrated’ its centenary in 2023, and it stands as both a heritage example of museum technology and a reminder of the island’s once-pristine environment.

From 1906, McCulloch had charge of most of the museum’s natural history collections while practising

art at Julian Ashton’s Sydney Art School. McCulloch’s scientific work – cataloguing every species of fish known from Australian waters – would have been legacy enough, but his creative passions also found expression in illustration, painting, photography, cinematography and exhibition design.



Coral Lagoon, Lord Howe Island, c.1924. Oil painting by Allan McCulloch.
Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW.

In his painting *Coral Lagoon, Lord Howe Island* (c. 1924), held in Sydney’s Mitchell Library, the island’s two distinctive mountains appear as a miniature coral reef in a hazy underwater scene. In *Adventures in Coral Lagoon* (2024), McCulloch’s illustrations and photographs of fishes sky-swim above this surreal landscape, teeming with scientists and their assistants. McCulloch himself appears on a cliff edge, bottom left, shooting movies for his museum lectures.

Zahalka’s works recall those tumultuous times and expeditions. Just as Frank Hurley’s montages from the First World War created dramatic illusions of battlefield reality, Zahalka’s interventions reimagine nature, playing with our perceptions and highlighting our burgeoning environmental impacts. McCulloch (who died tragically in 1925) would have approved, I feel certain.



Admiralty Islet diorama today, Australian Museum, Sydney.
Photographers: Carl Bento & Abram Powell.

Further reading

Stephen Christopher Quinn, 2006, *Windows on Nature* (Abrams and the American Museum of Natural History, New York).

Brendan Atkins, 2022, *The Naturalist, the Remarkable Life of Allan Riverstone McCulloch* (NewSouth Publishing, Sydney, in association with the Lord Howe Island Museum).

About the author

Brendan Atkins lives in Katoomba, NSW, on Dharug–Gundungurra Country. Brendan worked as an environmental scientist in the management of rivers and wetlands before moving into writing, editing and publishing. He edited the Australian Museum’s magazine from 2006, leaving in 2015 to complete a biography of Allan McCulloch, published by NewSouth Publishing in 2022.

CRITICAL MOMENTS: ANNE ZAHALKA IN CONVERSATION WITH VICTORIA PERIN

VICTORIA PERIN: You have always constructed stages for your sitters to perform within. Your new series presents very special artificial spaces. In your own words, can you describe what you see when you look at the historic 'The Admiralty Islet Seabirds,' the iconic Lord Howe Island diorama at the Australian Museum in Sydney?

ANNE ZAHALKA: 'The Admiralty Islet Seabirds' diorama is still in existence; it's the only surviving diorama in the Australian Museum. I came across archival images of the diorama-makers preparing it some time ago and was intrigued. What I initially loved was the photographic record — the idea of a three-dimensional space being built as an environment that had been created to look like a landscape, including painting, crafted objects based on natural forms, taxidermy animals, and so on. I loved that melding of all of this in the one space and being able to see it as an illusion. It links to my interest in trompe-l'œil, and that ability to deceive the eye through these cleverly created tropes of physical things. They're so brilliant and yet so fake!



Anne Zahalka, *Return of the Thylacine*, 2024, solvent ink on rag paper, 80cm x 103cm.
Original sources: Tasmanian Art Gallery and Museum and David Fleay Trustees.

Right, you were interested in the art form of the diorama itself?

Yes, I started to think about the craft that goes into their making. Many of the painted backdrops were based on field-trip photographs, so that gives it another dimension. They are such an odd combination of painted, sculptural, and photographic elements, which are all so highly contrived. Yet they represent real, living habitats recreated as three-dimensional life-size sculptures in this set-like space.

When did you encounter your first diorama? Do you have any nostalgic memories of them from childhood?

My only real experience of dioramas was a nativity scene at school or at church. I'd never visited a museum until after I left high school, which is embarrassing to admit. After finishing art school, I travelled overseas with a friend and went to the Natural History Museum in New York. I'd read *Catcher in the Rye* and, learning of Holden Caulfield's obsession with them, I wanted to see them for myself. He found comfort in the fact that nothing ever changed — they were frozen in time. Like giant portals into other worlds. You could suspend reality and travel through timeless, unchanging scenes where nature was preserved in a completely pristine and absurd way.

Your series captures the labour of the Lord Howe Island diorama-painters like Phyllis Clarke, Ethel King, and the design-maker naturalist Allan McCulloch. Occasionally, you include them in your work. Who are these collaborators to you? Fellow artists? Time-travelling sitters?

In a way, it is a collaboration and a recognition of their labour. I'm working with their legacies and honouring their work. Dioramas were seen to be these old, dusty things with dead birds and animals. But putting aside the colonial conquest of the specimen hunt, where you see scientists



Anne Zahalka, *Cast adrift*, 2023, solvent ink on rag paper, 100cm x 142cm.
Original sources: Australian Museum Archives and Lord Howe Island Museum.



Anne Zahalka, *Rising tide at Loch Ard Gorge*, 2024, solvent ink on rag paper, 100cm x 135cm.
Original source: Museums Victoria.

collecting and taking all these things from the real world – they did forge a whole way of seeing the environment, recreating it, but also preserving the specimens. I have worked with environmentalists, scientist, conservationists who are also photographers and have documented the loss of habitat. I am reliant on the work they've done. Humans are the main cause for the decline. But it is the work and advocacy of these scientists that also shines a light on these environments, the species who are threatened, and raises awareness about the need to protect them.

They have the skills that you need.

Yes, I'm quite dependent on their records and documentation of wildlife habitats to use, rework, and reimagine. You mention Ethel King, who is pictured in the work *Reef Theatre with Ethel King*. When that original photograph was taken of her, she just had an operation and was off work, convalescing out in the country. But they needed to have a large fish coloured and prepared for an exhibition in New Zealand. They couldn't get anyone else to complete the work, so she was brought back to finish the big groper. She was the only other person with that skill available. I want to really acknowledge that work and those people. Just that dedication. I have some of their skills and probably would have enjoyed the work they did.

***Future Past Present Tense* makes an allegory of environmental interference and the role of the human animal in the wider world. What are the threats you explore in this series?**

Humans are the greatest threat to the planet, and yet we don't see it this way. I wanted to open a space that allows us to consider the fragile world we live in. While these early artists and scientists could never have imagined the current climate crisis, they were collecting data and specimens that now connect us with this history.

I see. Their documentation, their data, frames our present. But the series has a sort of futurity to it as well?

The idea is to present critical moments of the Anthropocene and the impacts of climate change. If we can just understand these habitats, attend to them, care for them, and bring knowledge, we can make sure that they're not endangered, and we might all survive. So, there are works in this series that present something more hopeful for the future based on projects being done in the field to protect, encourage research, change behaviour, and introducing ways to regenerate habitats and reduce our carbon footprint.

Can you speak more about how time works in this series?

Time is embedded in these images as both historic documentation of place and the time of their making. The original recording of these landscapes through photography and my reimagining through digital interventions allows various periods to be represented in the one image. It's what makes the images slightly strange and surreal - both past and present (and sometimes the future) are brought together. There is also something nostalgic and comforting in seeing these 'lost' places restored, recreated, and reimaged.

The original diorama, 'The Admiralty Islet, Lord Howe Island,' just celebrated its centenary. My reimagining of this in 2019 showed the impact of plastics on the seabird life, one of the devastating consequences of ocean pollution. In my reworking, I included scattered plastics collected from bird regurgitations from the island and laid a specimen with its stomach opened to reveal its ingested contents. In one image, the original creators of the diorama [c. 1922] are shown preparing the sea shelf in the Australian Museum, or in another, the two men are collecting specimens [c. 1921]. This places them in a timeline, from the past to the present moment.*

Stillness is a characteristic aspect of your practice. Your subjects are always depicted as very posed, frozen in space, before the camera fixes them permanently. Why were you compelled to make your first animation for this exhibition?

My portrait and tableau work does have these qualities, and I'm interested in what the 'camera fixes,' but I've always struggled with how much rests on the singular moment. Whether it is figures staged in the landscape or in a domestic setting - what are they doing, how do they appear, what are their gestures, their expressions? I sometimes look back over a photoshoot and say, "oh, why did I choose that image? I actually really like this one." You have to live with those decisions. But there is also a desire to see the narrative unfold, to see what happens...

In returning to the Admiralty Islet diorama and thinking about the men building the sea shelf and the woman painting the birds on the backdrop, I thought about how beautiful and melancholy it would be to see the balloons drift across this landscape in real time and how menacing. There are also the movements of the birds, the men breathing/sighing, and the ocean threatening to wash in. To see this slowly revealed in a linear way has immense pathos.

In a picture, the balloons look quite delightful! As balloons always do. But when you see them drifting in the animation, they get a sense of threat, a little bit more like an incoming storm or something. You are also reproducing your studio pinboard in this exhibition, in wallpaper form. Can you tell me why you wanted to bring a little piece of your studio into this display?

I thought it would be interesting to see some of the archival images and research material that underpins the work - to show where the material comes from and who these original artist/makers are. I decided to create a pinboard, a kind of storyboard, that included

all this information to give the viewer some insight into the riches of these archives. Having recently created a photographic rendering of my studio as a trompe-l'œil for my survey show at the MAPH [*Zahalkaworld: an artist's archive*, Museum of Australian Photography, 10 June–10 September 2023], it was such an effective way to recreate my working habitat. My studio was turned into a representation - a photographic illusion! It now brings together all of these modes of practice that I have been interested in: the dioramas with their painterly backdrops, painting traditions from the seventeenth century, three-dimensional constructions, and photographic illusions— all melded together.

It reveals how original source materials have been taken into your world.

There are fourteen archival images that have been superimposed into the coral lagoon work [*Adventures in the coral lagoon* (2024)], which were taken on the island by one of the museum staff, Anthony Musgrave. These images allow me to reflect on these pristine places of the past and show how they continue to be preserved.



Anne Zahalka, *Adventures in coral lagoon*, 2024, solvent ink on rag paper, 55cm x 69cm. Original sources: Mitchel Library, State Library of NSW, Australian Museum Archives and Lord Howe Island Museum.

Lord Howe Island has been recognised as a World Heritage Area for its extraordinary terrestrial and marine ecosystems. Allan Riverstone McCulloch (1885-1925), Ichthyologist and head of Vertebrates at the Australian Museum, was the first to film, photograph and illustrate the island's exquisite sea creatures and avian life. I wanted to create a work that celebrated the beauty of the fish he identified, illustrated, and brought to life in a visionary and magical way. Bringing these archival images into my world connects me with their work and those who forge pathways in protecting the natural world for the future.

It pays homage to their practices and the places, but is also a lament for the lost landscapes, both real and recreated, that they recorded.

*Zahalka approached the Australian Museum about modernising their hundred-year-old diorama of Admiralty Islet by including newly collected specimens such as plastics and revealing the contents of a bird killed by pollution. While the Museum was enthusiastic about this plan to 'update' the display, the proposal did not eventuate.



Anne Zahalka, *A floating world*, 2024, solvent ink on rag paper, 55cm x 71.5cm. Original sources: Australian Museum Archives and Lord Howe Island Museum.

ANNE ZAHALKA BIOGRAPHY



Portrait of Anne Zahalka. Photo: Tawfik Elgazzar.

With a career spanning 40 years, Anne Zahalka is one of Australia's most highly regarded photo-media artists. Her work explores cultural and environmental points of tension, interrogating them with humour and a critical perspective. Her practice deconstructs familiar scenes, re-presenting them to allow for alternative narratives that reflect on cultural diversity within Australian society and the ecological impact of the global climate crisis. A landmark artist in Australian contemporary art, the searching quality of her direct images deal with the history and culture of this country. Appreciated by audiences and curators alike, her work starts conversations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This exhibition pays tribute to the naturalists, scientists, artists and photographers who have worked in the fields of conservation, documentation and preservation of the natural world. I am indebted to the institutions, organisations, authors and estates who provided access to archival and research material for the development of this body of work.

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