

MARY TONKIN

Both Sides Now

Coprosma Madonna, Kalorama

A secular altarpiece is perhaps a nonsense; I hope its form lends an inclination toward reverence, not in a vaulted or other-worldly sense but in wonder and celebration of what is, of what it is to be present to the glory of this pocket of bush. This one draws loosely on Piero della Francesca's *Madonna of the Misericordia* in Borgo Sansepolcro - a Madonna whose mantle (cape) enfolds the donors, here she is a scrubby *Coprosma quadrifida* - Prickly Currant Bush whose space enfolds Bracken. I've always found that mantle space in the Piero particularly moving, like that under the frond-arms of a Tree-fern - the loving embrace or safe space of a parent.

The image is comprised of three disparate points of view, from both sides of a long fallen tree. That great Joni Mitchell song 'Both Sides Now' kept occurring to me as I made this painting and in many ways it seems an appropriate title for this body of work.

The frame is etched with the Woivurrung, scientific and common name (where known) of all of the living organisms I have so far been able to identify in the bit of bush in which I am blessed to work. This project to log the biodiversity is an ongoing one - it strikes me as a vital exercise, to know what is, to note and witness the changes, but it is also one of deep love and connection - for me, with knowledge comes appreciation for the intricacy and miracle that is the interconnectedness of all life. It delights me to know that *Eucalyptus viminalis* - Manna Gums lend their name Wurun in Woivurrung to the Wurundjeri, First Nation peoples of this land.

That a kind of wingless wasp, the gloriously iridescent blue *Diamma bicolor* - Bluebottle feeds on nectar, pollinating native plants and paralyzes spiders which it injects with its larvae. I love that *Petaurus* the name for the Glider genus is from the Latin for 'rope-dancer' - acrobats that have inhabited our land for at least 4.45 million years.

A scream, Kalorama

In the winter of 2021, amid Covid lockdowns our region was hit by storm with winds in the range of a category 3 cyclone. It was devastating for forests which are home to *Eucalyptus regnans* - Mountain Ash, the tallest flowering trees in the world, not adapted to fierce winds, many were uprooted or simply snapped off halfway up their trunks (where they are one metre in diameter). That experience made me feel we are living the tipping point. I ought perhaps to have felt it sooner; melting ice sheets, hottest worldwide temperatures in recorded history, once in one hundred year weather events every week. Stupidly perhaps, it was the visceral reality of a catastrophic event in our neighbourhood that made it real.

A scream, Kalorama 2023, is made at the foot of one of the many root balls left in the storm's wake. It is an existential cry, a scream of anguish at what damage we have wrought, of terror at what is to come.

The bush repairs itself so eagerly, two years on this beautiful mass is already being subsumed by fungi, grasses and herbs, even trees have sprouted in the remaining upended soil. The hollow beneath fills with water in wet weather, pulses with Mosquito larvae and one little Froglet calling for a mate. I want future generations to experience that same pulse and will to life, unimpeded by our anthropocentric idiocy and apathy.

Murmuration, Kalorama

This spot, perched on the side of a gully reminded me of a painting my teacher and dear friend Geoff Dupree had made when I was in the second year of my undergraduate degree: a beautifully realised little study of the space between strongly vertical trees, looking down into a gully. He'd made it some way back from the waterfall we'd been taken there to tackle.

There was so much attention, so much respect for the particularity of that experience, such disregard for the typical heroic approach to a landscape as scene or spectacle. I often thought of it as I stood and felt myself able to soar out over the gully below me.

Senescence, Kalorama

Made in a Tree-fern gully, *Senescence, Kalorama* 2021-22 began in the first glorious trumpet blast of Spring, when the *Polystichum proliferum* - Mother Shield Ferns in this gully were a sea of bright, pert upright spears and unfurling fronds. Then it rained and rained and rained, the creek filled and overflowed, met new streams, and subsided. Wallabies, Yabbies and Echidna wandered, the ferns flourished, as Spring waned they grew and flopped, as Summer marched in they shrivelled and dulled. Tree-fern fronds became dry and flaccid. It felt as though I was painting an allegory of ageing itself, the beautiful shimmering process of it.

Mary Tonkin, 2024