

# Jan Paethorpe

## Vanishing Point



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tacit art

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When Jan Palethorpe takes up an idea, her commitment to it is profound. In *Vanishing Point*, she has taken up nothing less than the state of the world – or more precisely, the Earth – in our time. It's a theme that unites her genuine love of nature, her awareness of the challenges that face humanity, her deep knowledge of art history and the magic of her own art practice which brings together these concerns in a kind of apotheosis that has been decades in the making.

Palethorpe's interest in the natural world has always been evident in her work. A decade before she won the 2005 Waterhouse Natural History Art Prize (Works on Paper), she was exploring her relationship to the land through artist's residencies in the Kimberley, where she lived for three years and witnessed the deep connection to Country of the local Indigenous peoples. There she saw the devastating impact of colonisation on the land and her credentials as an artistic eco-warrior have been developing ever since. Notable examples of her commitment to this cause are her 2008-9 *Imago* exhibitions depicting fragile phasmids, case moths and cocoons, and her 2015 works *Rising Tide* and *Hollow Angel on the Rock* which symbolically depicted disappearing angels, the remaining parts of their ethereal forms rendered in exquisitely detailed pen-and-ink illustrations of landscapes under threat from climate change.

This juxtaposition of angelic beauty and devastating loss is a constant presence in the works of *Vanishing Point*, where transcendently beautiful Medieval and Renaissance Madonnas serve as reminders of a past when daily life was

hard but believers held hope of finding a better world in a promised afterlife. Today, in our largely secular western world, the only life most of us believe in is an earthly one, but those who have done their due diligence in modern times are rapidly losing faith even in that. In Palethorpe's works, the madonnas of Crivelli, Perugino and other artists are surrounded and partly obscured by etchings of threatened species and maps of vanishing habitats, producing uncomfortable montages that combine lost spiritual hope with images of vulnerability in a natural world for which humanity has proved to be a woefully inadequate saviour.

Humanity's potential for self-destruction is strongly suggested by *Figurehead* (2023) where an angel partly obscured by a moth irradiates light that fails to reach a vessel that is missing pieces of its hull. The figurehead of the boat – a woman with a fish strapped behind her head – is drawn from a sculpture found on Easter Island, a place with particular significance for ecologists. By the time Europeans first visited the island, it was denuded of vegetation and its shrinking population was struggling to survive. Its inhabitants had cut down all its trees, leaving its once-flourishing forests no way to recover. The resulting erosion had washed away topsoil, leading to low crop yields and battles over scarce resources had led to civil war. Particularly disturbing for artists is the idea that the islanders' relentless production and erection of its famous stone statues – undertakings that required many logs and ropes made from tree bark – were partly responsible for this catastrophe. Jared Diamond and others have popularised the view

front cover image

*Chiara's Lament*, 2023  
etching, chine-collé & collage  
79 x 118 cm

\$3,500

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that it was partly competition to produce ever larger and more impressive statues that drove the islanders to sacrifice the last of their trees. One of Palethorpe's messages is that, in our own time, art should be part of the solution, not the problem.

The threatened species that appear in *Vanishing Point's* montages also provide the main subject matter for the exhibition's centrepiece, *Legacy* (2020) – an outsized house of cards, with each card depicting a different endangered Australian plant or animal and the whole assemblage representing the fragility of their habitat and the uncertainty of their survival. A miniature pack of replica cards lies nearby on a table accompanied by two chairs, inviting us to sit and engage with these images of vanishing species that should not be ignored or forgotten. Above, an etching of a tree stump surrounded by an elaborate gold frame suggests wasteful extravagance at nature's expense. Palethorpe seems to be suggesting that if the images on these cards inspired the right kind of devotion, there would be more hope for the future. Certainly, if they were collected with the kind of enthusiasm that is lavished on cards of sports personalities and other heroes of popular culture, our planet would soon be in safer hands.

For Palethorpe, a catchphrase like *reuse, repair, recycle* is not just a slogan but an ethos lived through her art practice, where nothing is wasted and old ideas resurface in new configurations, producing an endless cycle of creative possibilities. The works in *Vanishing Point* repurpose both the materials and images from the artist's previous work, synthesising decades of practice as a physical embodiment of her values. In *Old Growth Forest* (2021), the most icon-like of these works, the familiar face of the madonna or angel reappears on the severed head of a tree trunk in a simple visual parable with an arresting and undeniable message. Despite its simplicity, this melancholy work, like the others in the exhibition, is the result of years of study by Palethorpe, who lists among her required reading

the works of Stanford University's *Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere*, where the many forces that threaten our survival are detailed.

Palethorpe's synthesis of these themes leads us to ask: at what point will these disturbing developments in the recent history of our planet converge, and what will be the outcome? In perspectival art, the vanishing point where lines converge is imaginary, but the one we now face as a planet is an imminent reality. Palethorpe's art eschews traditional perspective, representing the past and the present on one plane, emphasising the lingering presence of past hopes but also reminding us that, as a species, we have faced destruction before. Her work asks us: will we heed the lessons of the past? Will we devote ourselves to our fellow creatures and our planet? Or will we continue on our current trajectory towards a very real and rapidly approaching vanishing point?

Bruce Beswick  
February 2022



*Old Growth Forest*, 2021  
watercolour & gouache,  
98 x 75 cm

\$1,200

*Legacy*, 2020  
assemblage of cards, etching,  
200 x 300 cm

POA





*Chiara's Lament*, 2023  
etching, chine-collé & collage,  
79 x 118 cm

\$3,500



*Go Forth & Breed*, 2023  
etching, chine-collé & collage,  
80 x 118 cm

\$3,500





*Figurehead*, 2023  
mixed media,  
75 x 108 cm  
\$3,500



*Adam's Emerald Dragon Flies Over Gibson Desert*, 2023  
mixed media  
146 x 200 cm  
\$4,500





*South Gippsland Earthworm Egg*, 2009  
etching,  
97 x 62 cm, ed. of 18  
\$950



*Alpine Stone Fly*, 2020  
etching  
51 x 41 cm, ed. of 30  
\$550





*Frances' Australian Leaf Insect*, 2009  
pen & ink,  
154 x 77 cm

\$1,450



*Brown Treecreeper (Silverbells Scottische)*, 2020  
etching,  
51 x 41 cm, unique state

\$650





Synemon Theresa *Cryptic Sun Moth*, 2020  
 etching & chine-collé,  
 74 x 87 cm, unique state

\$3,500



Cairns Birdwing Butterfly, 1995  
 watercolour & gouache,  
 32 x 40 cm

\$800





*Barking Owl*, 2020  
etching,  
51 x 41 cm, ed. of 30  
\$550



*Limestone Blue Wattle*, 2020  
etching,  
51 x 41 cm, unique state  
\$650





*Lord Howe Island Stick Insect*, 2012  
 etching,  
 78 x 130 cm, ed. of 30

\$2,500

#### Selected Exhibitions

#### Solo

- 2023 *Vanishing Point*, Tacit Art, Melbourne
- 2020 *Inside Me, Inside You*, Taproom, Castlemaine
- 2019 *Hollow Angels in Glass*, Cascade Gallery, Maldon
- 2018 *33 Ways to Wrap Christo*, Robert Blackburn Print Gallery, New York
- 2015 *33 Ways to Wrap Christo*, Woodbine Gallery, Malmsbury
- 33 Ways to Wrap Christo*, Lessedera Gallery, Sofia, Bulgaria
- 2014 *Paintings of the Song*, Wall Gallery, Castlemaine
- 2010 *Moth*, Shelf Life Gallery, Tarradale
- The Landscape in the Figure*, Primrose Press, Chewton
- 2009 *Imago Phasmids, Case Moths & Cocoons*, Qdos Gallery, Lorne
- 2008 *Imago - The Collection*, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne
- 2007 *Coracle*, Stephen McLoughlin Gallery, Melbourne
- Coracle*, Pocket Gallery, Newstead
- 2001 *In Heaven Everything is Fine*, Convent Gallery, Daylesford

#### Group

- 2023 *Istoria*, Burra Regional Gallery
- 2022 *Loss*, Lot 19, Castlemaine
- Editions Print Prize*, Tacit Art, Melbourne
- 2021 *Geelong Print Print*, Geelong Art Gallery
- Cut'n'Paste*, Newstead Arts Hub
- Solidarity in Print*, Lot 19, Castlemaine
- 2020 *Ravenswood Australian Women's Art Prize*, Gordon, NSW
- 2019 *Guanlan International Print Prize*, Shenzhen Museum, China
- Drawing on the Line*, Cascade Gallery, Maldon

- 2018 *Rivers of Gold*, Australian Print Triennial, Mildura
- 2017 *Guanlan International Print Prize*, Shenzhen Museum, China (Winner)
- 4th International Silk Road Exhibition*, Shaanxi Museum, Xi'an, China
- My Big Backyard*, Arc Yinnar
- 2016 *Chroma*, Queenscliff Gallery
- Elemental*, LaTrobe VAC, Bendigo
- Thinking of Place*, Post Office Gallery, Ballarat
- 2015 *Impact*, China Academy of Art, Hangzhou, China
- Miniprint International*, Lessedera Gallery, Sofia, Bulgaria
- 2014 *Impact*, Jordanstone College of Art & Design, University of Dundee, UK
- International Miniature Print Biennale*, Ottawa School of Art, Canada
- Illuminations*, CASPA, Castlemaine
- 2013 *Interwoven*, Stephen McLoughlin Gallery, Melbourne (w/ Lillian Townsend)
- Guanlan International Print Prize*, Shenzhen Museum, China
- A Collective Vision*, Castlemaine Art Museum
- 2012 *International Miniature Print Biennale*, Ottawa School of Art, Canada
- Art Concerning Environment*, Scope Galleries, Warrnambool
- Compact Prints*, Umbrella Studios, Townsville
- 2011 *Burnie Print Prize*, Tasmania
- The Biennial - Pressing Issues*, Castlemaine State Fair
- Footprints*, Counihan Gallery, Melbourne
- 2010 *Swan Hill Print & Drawing Acquisitive Art Prize (Winner - Drawing Prize)*
- Mini Print International*, Cadaques, Spain
- Impressions*, Australian Print Workshop, Melbourne



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