



Ray Harris
Ritual
Nature

The Guildhouse Collections Project
Flinders University Museum of Art
22 February – 16 April 2021



Ray Harris

In my practice I use video, performance, sculpture and installation to explore the psychological complexities and struggles of the self. This often involves the dualities of inner thought and outer action or behaviour. I examine compulsive psychological mechanisms and reconstructions of reality, predominantly focusing on everyday fantasy states created to direct the uncontrollable hunger of the void, fill what is missing or repair the un-repairable. Through this framework I explore a range of related conceptual concerns of being human that include memory and nostalgia, love and hate, insignificance and death.

My new body of work for The Guildhouse Collections Project is a series of performative videos that explore ritual in connection to cleansing and death. In the Post-object Collection at Flinders University Museum of Art, I was primarily drawn to Mike Parr's 1971-72 instruction-based works, *Notebooks (volume 1 & 2)* and *150 programmes and investigations*. The works comprise either short or very detailed typed instructions that range from ambiguous, such as 'chain yourself to the destiny of a tree', to violent, such as 'nail your hand to a tree'. These instructions, ideas, provocations and directives for personal performances on and to the self, became cues for initial performative actions coupled with my own lingering ideas on similar actions. David Thorp's human sculptures from his *Works (April-October 1981)* series and Ken Unsworth's *Five secular settings for sculpture as ritual and burial piece* (1975) informed more directly my exploration of ritual using the body within nature and the extension of my practice outdoors.

As my work looks at the traumas and psychological distress and negotiation of selfhood, I was interested in these works made by male artists, which are at times violently physical, from a female/feminist perspective, particularly in terms of the female body-relationship, persisting inequitable societal ideals around gender and fights against oppression and violence. And the opposing notions of women as dirty, impure objects. In this sense, and following a personal narrative effected by the recent death of my mother, I reinterpret the selected rituals, actions, instructions or performances from the Post-object Collection and develop new works that explore cleansing or washing, dirtiness, domesticity and death. I took my practice to the outdoors, in the influence of nature to create these works. The resulting series embraces profoundly held intimate philosophies such as becoming a tree, emotional self-obliteration and impermanence as simple physical performative acts or rituals. The works operate individually and collectively as a space of contemplation, release and surrender.

Biography

South Australian artist Ray Harris holds a Master of Visual Art (2014) and a Bachelor of Visual Art (Honours) (2009) from the University of South Australia. She is founder and director of Holy Rollers Studios and its former Gallery and was co-director of FELTspace (2010-2015), founder of Peer Studios (2010-2013), and has curated numerous exhibitions.

Harris has exhibited and performed in solo and group exhibitions nationally and internationally. Selected solo projects include the Adelaide-based exhibitions *Hold me close and let me go* (2011) at the Australian Experimental Art Foundation (AEAF) and *Hunger of the void* (2019) at Praxis ARTSPACE. Significant group exhibitions include *Video Contemporary* (2018) curated by Kelly Gellatly for *Sydney Contemporary*, *Carriageworks*, Sydney; *PP/VT: performance presence, video time* (2015), curated by Professor Anne Marsh for AEA, Adelaide; *do it (adelaide)* (2015), Samstag, Adelaide; and *Subject to ruin* (2014), Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, Sydney. Her work has been presented in contemporary art fairs and festivals in Sweden, South Korea, Turkey and the United States, and featured in publications such as Artlink, Art Collector, Broadsheet, RealTime, fine print and ETC.

Selected awards include the South Australian Living Artists Festival Moving Image Award (2016, 2019) and the Constance Gordon Johnson Sculpture and Installation Award (2010). Harris was finalist for the Whyalla Art Prize (2019) and The Churchie Emerging Art Prize (2012) and her practice has been supported by grants from Arts South Australia and the Helpmann Academy. Her work is held in the Turkish collections of Proj-4L Elgiz Museum of Contemporary Art and Borusan Contemporary, and private collections nationally.



Cover

Ray Harris
Saltwaters, 2020
HD digital video still
© the artist

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Ray Harris
Pyre, 2020
HD digital video still
© the artist

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Ray Harris
Destiny as a tree, 2020
HD digital video still
© the artist

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David Thorp
born 1947, London, United Kingdom
Untitled from *Works (April - October 1981)*, 1981
gelatin silver print
11.5 x 16.5 cm
Collection of Flinders University Museum of Art 1720
© the artist

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Ken Unsworth
born 1931, Melbourne, Victoria
Untitled from *Five secular settings for sculpture as ritual and burial piece*, 1975
gelatin silver print
edition 2/10
30.5 x 25.5 cm
Gift of the artist
Collection of Flinders University Museum of Art 726
© the artist

Delicate tensions

The performative videos of Ray Harris

Ray Harris' evocative suite of videos in *Ritual Nature* explores the unsettling edges of physical and emotional existence. Swinging between the boundaries of time, place and the body, the artist situates herself in vulnerable and uncomfortable spaces of the mind and the land in works that speak of death and its associations with grief, loss and decay, and the possibilities of cleansing, transformation and rebirth.

On Kaurna land in the varied environments of Tarndanyangga (Adelaide) – the parkland, national park and beach – Harris enacts quiet and private, live rituals in public spaces, captured only by the video camera. She shares the role of protagonist with the natural world, its animals and natural phenomena (wind, rain, tidal flow) and physical phenomena (gravity, steam) that perform movement and sound. These macro phenomena play out micro happenings on Harris' body within nature's timeframe: slowing the image and the racing digital pulse of screen-time and slowing the viewer to the tune of the land. In this intimate relationship rests a delicate tension between the body and the environment, where Harris' seemingly passive acts of surrender to her surroundings can also be considered acts of resistance. In this sense, her performative videos pose questions around human action and inaction towards global climate change.

A certain tension also exists between Harris' videos and early works by Mike Parr and Ken Unsworth from Flinders University Museum of Art's Post-object and Documentation Collection. These works, among others, were selected by Harris during her research for The Guildhouse Collections Project and inform her new direction of landscape-based real-time meditations on dying and renewal in connection to the ritual. Created during the height of the conceptual art movement in Australia, these works reflect the anti-aesthetic, anti-subjective,¹ anti-object and anti-establishment dictum of the international movement while also signifying the transition of conceptual art into early performance art.²

Notebooks (1971-72), is one of pioneering performance artist Mike Parr's earliest written conceptual works. The double-volume compilation of methodical instructions for poetic, ambiguous and violent actions on the body and psyche is punctured concrete-poetry style with the artist's critical reflections on the changing nature of art. Parr's direction, 'chain yourself to the destiny of a tree', inspired Harris to take her video camera into the great outdoors and seek a tree's providence.

The passing of a family member can turn one's life and sense of self upside down and this new work is deeply connected to Harris' recent experience of losing her mother. *Tree destiny* (2020), pictures Harris inverted within a tree canopy, suspended between earth and sky, resisting the forces of gravity (and grief) while persistently swaying in time with the wind. Donned in grass-green attire, the artist's body hangs as an appendage, like a native Australian mistletoe, inextricably connected to its host tree for survival, and speaks of humankind's dependence on nature. For Harris, this video is in dialogue with Unsworth's seminal sculptural performances, *Five secular settings for sculpture as ritual and burial piece* (1975), presented at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Sydney, which situate the body in multiple endurance positions concerning burial and suspension. *Tree destiny* also calls to mind feminist performance artist Jill Orr's epic work, *Bleeding trees* (1979), where the artist is supported in a diversity of postures by trees and buried in the land amongst rocks and sand.

In *Pyre* (2020), Harris contemplates the anti-burial. Clad in a pale-pink mourning uniform comprised of a shapeless jumper and skirt, the artist is supine and still like a corpse atop a mountain of unidentified shredded trees. Mulch chips: the destiny of many council and residential trees deemed a nuisance. While there is a sadness to this environmental loss, the work also speaks of cycles of life. The culled trees, transformed, become new matter, deteriorating and decaying to support the life of other vegetation, a blanket of protection and microbial nourishment for the earth's surface. For the artist, the mulch is like a traditional Hindu funeral pyre,³ where the body is cremated for the soul to be reborn. Cleansing steam billows like smoke around the figure's head – the home of the spirit in Hindu culture.

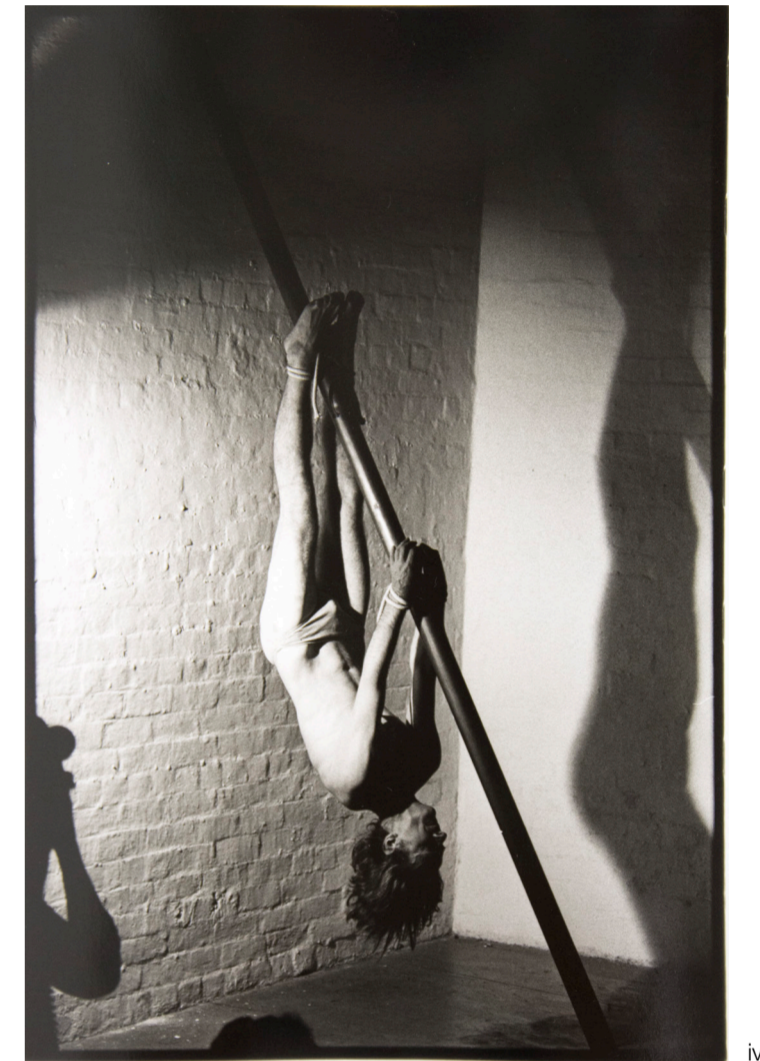
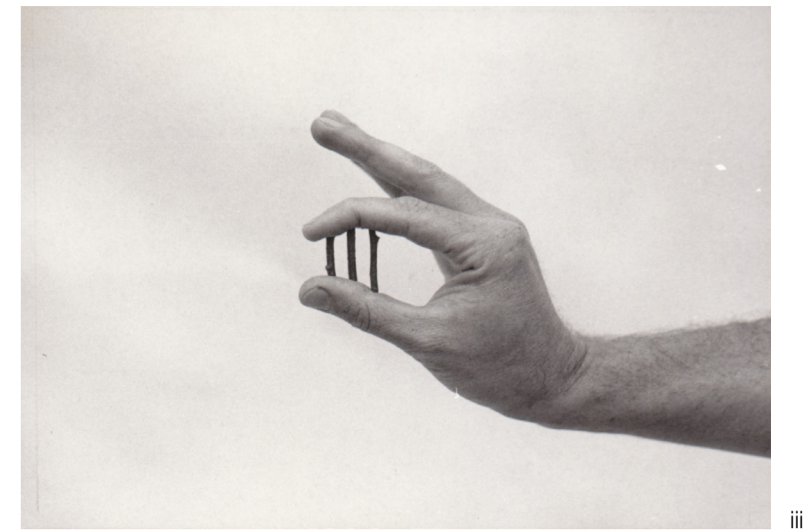
Harris' cropped upper body lies on the border of land and sea in *Saltwaters* (2020), where the figure is seemingly washed ashore, drowned in the chilly waters of the southern Indian Ocean. The body both resists and surrenders to the ebb and flow of the intertidal zone, while the impurities of dying are cleansed by the healing properties of salt water. While the work might allude to ritualistic ship burials or boat graves by early medieval Scandinavians,⁴ it also speaks of global sea level rise and locally, the erosion and loss of sand, seagrass meadows and ecologies along Adelaide's coastline.

Harris' videos in *Ritual Nature* reveal ritual-like communion with human mortality and the environment. In her work the natural world is both a force of death as well as a vulnerable living mass susceptible to prolonged human exploitation. By incorporating the body into its ecosystems and slowing down time, Harris' work asks how we operate physically and psychically in the space of trauma as human beings, and much like rapid climate change, whether we will surrender to it or resist against it.

Nic Brown

Collections Curator, Flinders University Museum of Art

1 S Best, *Visualizing feeling: affect and the feminine avant-garde*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2011, p1.
2 A Marsh, 'Video/Performance/Document', in M Perkins (ed), *Video void: Australian video art*, Australian Scholarly, Melbourne, 2014, pp114-15.
3 Ft Harris, personal communication, 19 October 2020.
4 Ibid.



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The Guildhouse Collections Project delivered in partnership with the Flinders University Museum of Art (FUMA) provides extraordinary opportunities for artists to delve into one of the largest and most idiosyncratic university art collections in the nation. Through inviting artists to research, study and collaborate with FUMA to create new work, The Collections Project demonstrates the value of creating new and ambitious environments for artists, collections and audiences to coalesce.

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