

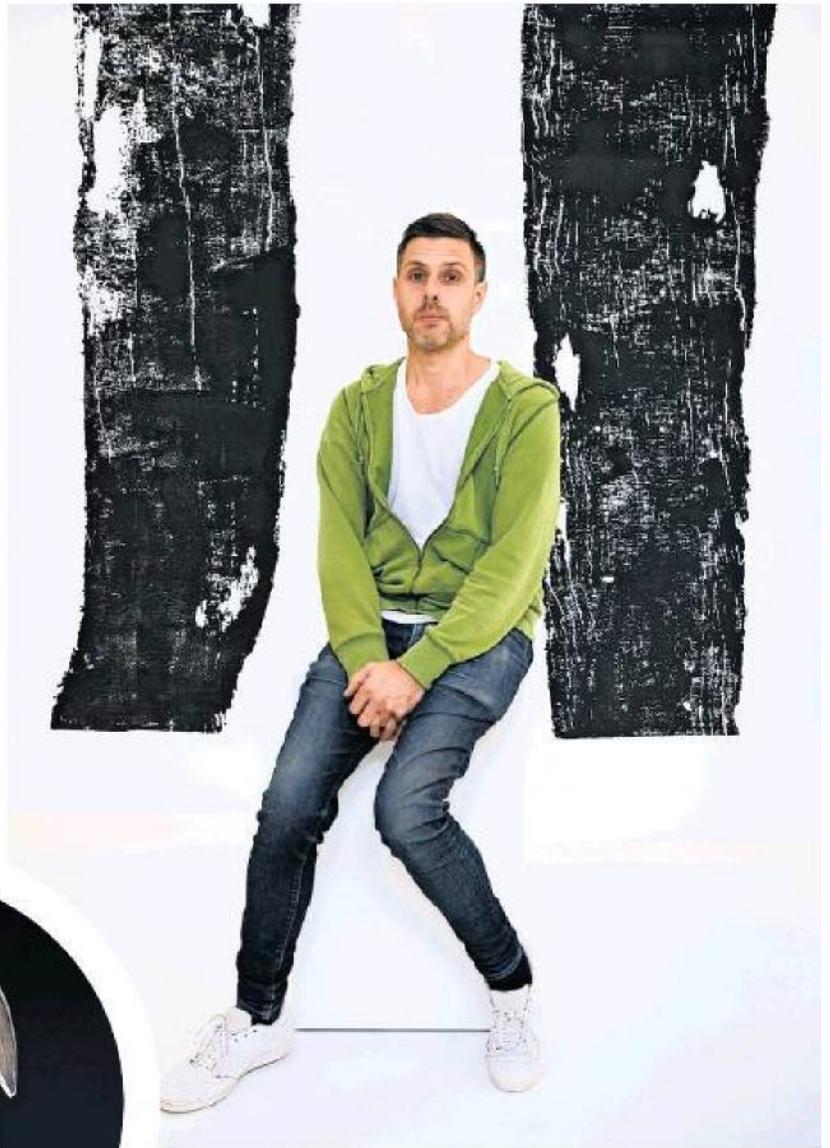
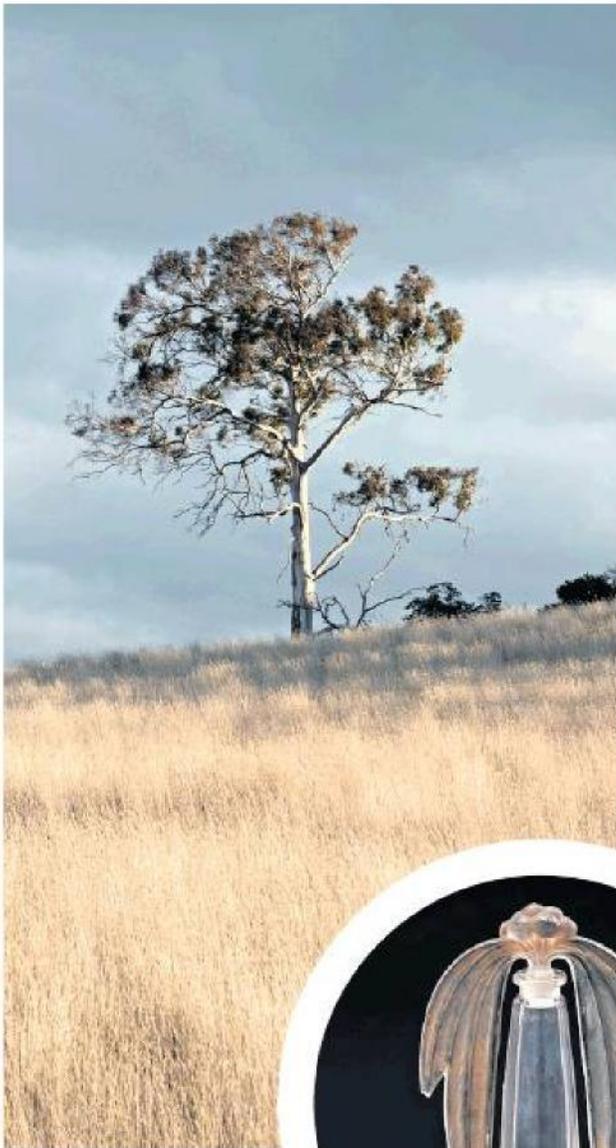
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By Susan Skelly

'Bold gum trees in all their glory'

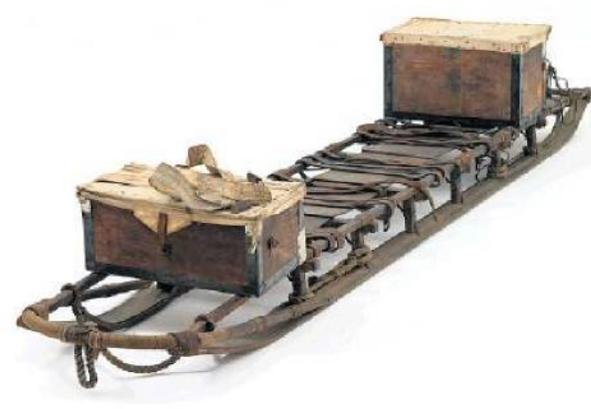
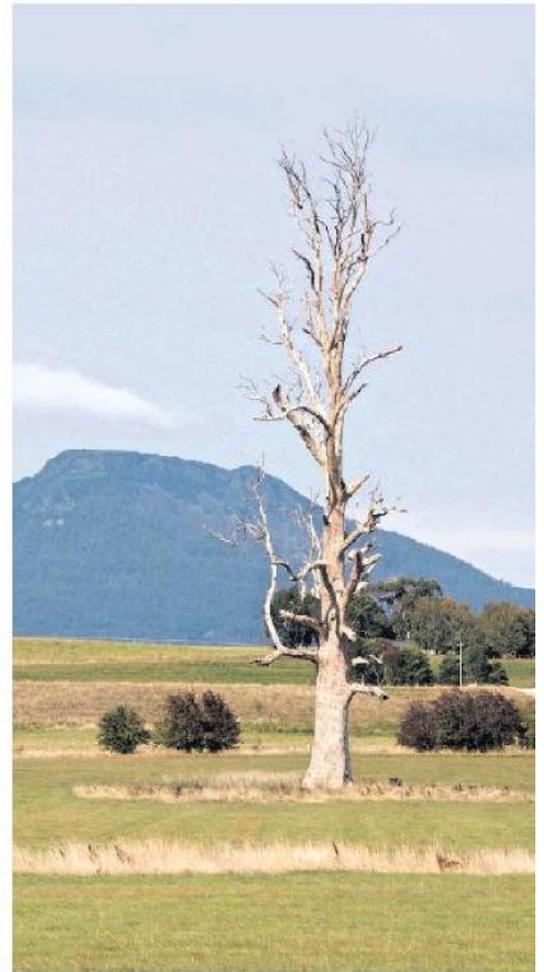
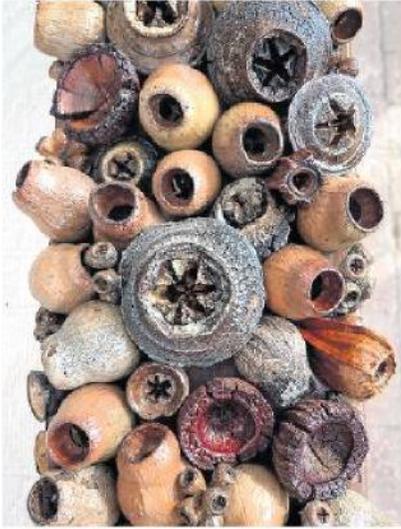
On line as: 'In praise of mighty eucalyptus: from Mawson's sled to a new perfume'



From left: Stills from Julie Gough's *Witness* (also far right); Eucalyptus

From left: Stills from Julie Gough's *Witness* (also far right); Eucalyptus perfume bottle by Lalique; visual artist Jonathan Jones with two of his prints; Below: detail of *Suckers: Coat of (Lopped) Arms*, 2021, by Sera Waters; *Felling a gumtree*, 1884/1917; Mawson's sled; Botanical drawing of a Sydney red gum by Agard Hagman.

PHOTOS: JULIE GOUGH, RHETT WYMAN, POWERHOUSE COLLECTION, MUSEUM OF APPLIED ARTS AND SCIENCES, SOTHA BOURN



From Mawson's sled to a futuristic fragrance, the Powerhouse's new exhibit hails the mighty eucalypt.

It's late autumn and the stand of *Eucalyptus deanei* at the concurrence of the Grose River and Govetts Creek in the Blue Mountains is glowing, unexpectedly, pink.

The senior among these mountain blue gums are estimated to be 1200 years old and as tall as 70 metres. They're model slender, with trunks in various stages of undress, some stripped to pale grey and chalky white, others in dishevelled brown bark skirts.

The Blue Gum Forest was the heart of the conservation movement in NSW, saved from becoming a plantation of walnut trees by a group of bushwalking enthusiasts in 1932. But how did it fare in the blistering 2019-20 fires that consumed 8.3 million hectares of native forests along Australia's east coast?

Vera Hong, a Blue Mountains filmmaker and a keen bushwalker, wanted to know.

“When I got down into the valley with cinematographer Craig Bender, I was shocked,” Hong says. “Looking up at some of those trees, there was no canopy because the last fire crowned. Where you once would have seen leaves, you saw burnt stumps and sky. “Blue gums like a full canopy to reproduce. There’s epicormic growth, when trees sprout if distressed, but we don’t know what the reproductive capacity of the forest now is.”

Her forest close-up, *Let Me Pass onto You*, an audiovisual sensory study, is one of 17 works commissioned for the Powerhouse Museum’s exhibition *Eucalyptusdom*. Poets, writers, scientists, artists, film directors, sculptors and musicians have contributed.

Sydney artist Anna May Kirk also probes the eucalypts’ ability to survive extreme conditions. “Fire – this sublime force of catastrophe and rebirth – has mutated into something that not even the eucalypt can survive,” she fears. In a scent and glass sculpture, *Pyriscence – After Fire*, large hand-blown glass lungs and smaller glass bronchioles represent a futuristic breathing structure where tree and mammalian lungs converge to take hybrid breaths. Coursing through the “veins” of this speculative anatomy is the oil of the blue gum (*E. globulus*).

What will the air we breathe smell like in the future? A bespoke scent, a collaboration with Sydney perfumer Ainslie Walker, is diffused around the respiratory tableau, its notes of smoky bushfire, petrichor (the smell of thirsty soil dampened by rain), various eucalyptus oils and futuristic scents of technology – for example, the fragrance that Artificial Intelligence might exude.

Eucalyptusdom is a kind of parallel universe. On the one hand it is a curation of objects built on the colonial economics of botany – timber, oils, bark, kino. On the other hand are things not so easily framed and captioned: interconnections, culture, myths, ancestral stories, the country that grew the trees.

Yasmin Smith is an archaeological ceramicist. She investigates the environmental and human history of a place through trees, by turning their ashes into ceramic glazes that reflect the chemistry of the soils they are planted in. The colour of a glaze comes from the chemicals in the ash. For *Stars*, her new work, Smith has made a grid of organic matter from hundreds of plaster moulds that imprint the floor of a spotted gum plantation north-west of Sydney. They will evolve into a floor of tiles glazed in leaf-ash (the leaves raked from the forest) on which will be displayed ceramic sections of a tree she will fell from the plantation. Emily McDaniel, director First Nations of the Powerhouse (and joint curator of *Eucalyptusdom* with Sarah Rees and Nina Earl), says perhaps the commission that best exemplifies the eucalypt as an expression of self as much as a collected object is Wukun Wanambi’s *Mittji*, 12 Iarrakitj – memorial poles or log coffins hollowed out by termites – made from the stringybark tree and painted with creation and ancestral stories. A Yolngu artist from East Arnhem Land, Wanambi celebrates the cycle of the stringybark he is named for – the honey, the buds, the blossom and its eventual falling, as well body and bones’ return to the land.

Body and bones feature too in *Untitled (Dharramalin)*, a collaboration between Sydney-based Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi artist Jonathan Jones and Wiradjuri elder Dr Uncle Stan Grant snr, AM. It weaves together printmaking, ancestral stories and figures, Indigenous language and ceremonies rich with wood (*mandang*) and transformation.

Eight large prints of river red gum timber slabs a couple of hundred years old, sourced from a third generation sawmiller near the Murray River, combine with 200 white ochrepainted objects – clubs, shields, woomeras – that Jones has carved from the wood he has printed from. They represent Uncle Stan Grant's initiation story of Dharramalin.

It was the research of the Powerhouse's embedded artist Agatha Gothe-Snape that planted the exhibition seed. She was fascinated by such books as *A Research on the Eucalypts and Their Essential Oils* by Richard T. Baker and Henry G. Smith (1920); *The Hardwoods of Australia and Their Economics* by Richard T. Baker (1919); and *A Gallery of Gum Trees* by A.W. D'Ombra (1938).

The foreword to the latter, written by E.H.F. Swain, NSW commissioner for forests 1935-48 and an early conservationist, gave the exhibition its name. Swain wrote: "We have subconscious glimpses of inner qualities in these trees, and they lay a momentary spell upon us, but there remains yet to come an acceptance of the full glory of the Eucalyptusdom which is the especial heritage of this stranger land."

Says Gothe-Snape: "In the forewords to these books you sense authors falling in love with a place they don't understand. It's hard for them to use their Western scientific models to understand the complexity of this genus they've never encountered. How do you fall in love with something when you can't name it, when it keeps escaping your methods of categorisation, of knowledge? For me, this exhibition is about that love."

The term "eucalypt" embraces some 900 species (expect debate on the accounting) in the genera *Angophora*, *Corymbia* and *Eucalyptus*. In Australia today they occupy 101 million hectares, or 77 per cent of the country's native forest area. Joseph Banks coined the name gum tree, intrigued by the sap he noticed oozing from a Sydney red gum (*Angophora costata*). The common names of eucalypts reflect Aussie cheek: woolly butt, scribbly gum, narrow leaved messmate, spotted gum, spinning gum, fuzzy box, ribbon box, half mahogany, and that recidivist on calendars and tea-towels, the ghost gum.

Gothe-Snape searched the Powerhouse collection of more than 500,000 objects for everything eucalypt. A rigorous pruning by the curatorial team settled on a crosssection from 1882 to 1921 for this exhibition. It was in 1882 that the Garden Palace burnt down, wiping out the 10,000 objects in what had morphed into the Technological, Industrial and Sanitary Museum. The key players in shaping and replenishing the next incarnation, the Sydney Technological Museum, were Joseph Henry Maiden (director 1880-96, who dubbed the trees "the monarchs of the forest"); Richard Thomas Baker (director 1896-1922); and Charles Francis Laserson (collector and curator, 1906-29).

They went on a collecting spree. In came crates and crates of timber samples, eucalyptus oils and examples of the way the gum leaf inspired the applied arts. Later, items of phytochemical research,

fashion and fabulous photography. "I felt every object was about a person trying to connect to place through the eucalypt," says Gothe-Snape.

There was a whittling down to 600 objects, which include countless timber specimens, botanical illustrations, a Beale piano with a eucalyptus lid and the spottedgum sledge Douglas Mawson took to Antarctica in 1911. Sledges made from mountain ash, reported Mawson, were extremely light, but the runners wore out quickly. Sledges of powellised spotted gum were strong and stood plenty of rough usage but were heavier than those from Norway.

Among objects that relate to felling is a tree stump whose story is told in a 16-minute video by artist Dean Cross, from Ngunnawal/ Ngambri Country north-east of Canberra. *Without You I Am Nothing* (Curtis Bennett/ White Ash) captures a moment at the Goulburn Show when, with victory in sight, woodchopper Curtis Burnett walks away.

Says Cross: "He explained that right at the centre of the heartwood was a small knot. When the tree was around 10 years old there would have been a heavy snowfall that broke a branch. The tree would have grown around that break, forming a knot strong enough to blunt an axe. Because each axehead is worth more than the prize money, the competitor often makes a decision that it's not worth trying to bust through. "The more I watched [the video], the more I saw that the real competition was between the wood and the woodsmen ... Every now and again the piece of timber gets one ^{back}."

Gothe-Snape's favourite exhibit is a cube of blue gum you can hold. "I look at it and wonder, 'Where was it taken from, why was it taken, what stories can it tell us?'" "Witnessing" is a thread several artists have picked up on. Like Julie Gough with her video portraits of lonely trees growing in sites of conflict between Indigenous Tasmanians and colonists.

Vera Hong sees her eucalypts in more collegiate terms of intergenerational relationships and the protection that has been based on custodianship and conservation. For her short film, she sought out local legends who engage with the Blue Gum Forest in different capacities: ecologist Wyn Jones, instrumental in identifying the Wollemi pine; Andy Macqueen, whose *Back from the Brink* is a history of the blue gum; historian Ruth Longdin; Darug artist and educator Chris Tobin and ranger Grant Purcell. "Connecting the present with the past and acknowledging all that amazing, passionate work that people did decades ago is one of the reasons I am lucky enough to live there."

The eucalypt, muses Gothe-Snape, personifies adaptability, resilience, resistance, persistence, vitality, endurance, connection to place and movement across it. "The eucalypt can teach us, if we learn to listen."

Eucalyptusdom opens at the Powerhouse Museum on July 1 until May 7, 2022.

