The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture
Volume 9 Number 1
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https://doi.org/10.1386/ajpc_00021_5

EXHIBITION REVIEW

***PROMISED THE MOON*, CURATED BY URSULA K. FREDERICK, ANU SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN GALLERY, CANBERRA, 20 JUNE–26 JULY 2019**

Reviewed by Jen Webb, University of Canberra

> We are so small between the stars/so large against the sky.
>
> (Leonard Cohen)

The fiftieth anniversary of the Apollo 11 mission to the moon was a significant event for anyone interested in space, heritage or the meanings behind public events and personal memories. It was significant for television broadcasting too since estimates show that in 1969, 'some 600 million people around the world watched the event unfold live on television' (Fewer 2007: 3). I was not one of those 600 million; on 21 July 1969, I was at primary school in Johannesburg, in a country with no investment in the mission and no television to broadcast evidence of what was happening 384,400 km away. Fifty years later, and now living thousands of kilometres away, in Canberra, I found it impossible to ignore the preparations for and celebration of the moon landing, in this city where both memories and matériel were still tangible. It seemed that the whole community was contributing to the work of memory-making and storying: curated art and science exhibitions, space exploration site tours and public talks were organized, and even the annual festivals contributed, with Floriade, 'Poetry on the Move' and 'Enlighten' all using the quinquagenary as their theme.

It is not surprising that Canberrans took the event so seriously: three tracking stations that played an essential role in Apollo missions – Tidbinbilla (Deep Space), Orroral Valley (Lunar Laser Ranging) and Honeysuckle Creek (Manned Spaceflight) – are located in the ACT. (Now called the Canberra Deep Space Communication Complex, and part of NASA's global Deep Space

Network, Tidbinbilla is the only station still functioning; the other two have been decommissioned.) Although Australia's key role in the extraordinary occasion has been popularly attributed to Parkes Observatory, Canberra's celebrations focused on Honeysuckle Creek Tracking Station, because without its capacity to receive and relay the data, there would have been no visuals of Neil Armstrong's first steps (Dougherty and Sarkissian 2011: 24).

The exhibition *Promised the Moon*, curated by Dr Ursula K. Frederick, gives plenty of attention to Honeysuckle Creek, with that now-decommissioned tracking station commemorated in several of the works displayed. It is noteworthy that the exhibition does more than exhibit and commemorate; it also addresses the desire 'to activate heritage through creative practice', recognizing that 'the past is actively constituted in the present' (Frederick 2019: 4). It is, then, a show committed to shifting heritage out of the archive, out of the museum and into a space of revision, re-engagement and re-imagination: a space of art; and not for the first time. In a recent interview, Frederick notes that NASA involved artists in the Apollo 11 mission, observing, '[p]eople have imagined the moon in visual form for a long time, and I think it was a kind of culmination of an imagining that had been anticipated' (Byrnand et al. 2019).

An anniversary is always a call to remembrance, and this exhibition answers that call, using images and experiences that recognize the limits of memory; the fragility of both an individual's mind and stored data, as well as the impact of new contexts on old stories. Several of the artists revisit and recast the official archives and/or popular memories of the Apollo mission. Bec Bigg-Wither's triptych *How Do You Read Me through Honeysuckle Now?* combines public photographs and text with her own site photographs, co-locating the trackers, astronauts and authorities with the anxiously smiling wives of the astronauts. The shimmering colour in Susan Chancellor's monotypes recalls the experience of watching the scenes unfold on television, and Julian Laffan's chiaroscuro woodcuts evoke the imprecision and blurring of newspaper photographs of those first steps. Dean Cross's video, 'A Landing/A Duet', presents him dancing with/against film of the launch and of the rocket moving through space, in a sequence of gestural moves, between earth and sky. Ellis Hutch's 'The So-called Kangaroo-Hop' also uses archival data – a soundtrack of Buzz Aldrin explaining how he moves under the moon's gravity is played over Hutch's hand-drawn stop-motion animation, a roll of paper 'film' spilling across the floor. Rose Montebello draws from a pop-culture archive of magazines and children's encyclopaedias in order to produce a narrative collage that visually traces the lunar voyage in large, geometric images that render uncertain the space between earth and moon, space and time.

Other works draw attention to gestures of the artist's hand or the intervention of the environment. It was the physical environment of Honeysuckle Creek, for example, that marked the plates Heather Burness used in her elegantly muted series of intaglio prints, *Honeysuckle Interference* – images that resemble photographs of the moon. U. K. Frederick and MacDonald Nichols also collaborated with the environment for the 'flatbedding' (handheld scanning) of land and buildings at both Honeysuckle and Orroral stations, producing big, exquisite compilations of the space with all its human, insect and environmental detritus. In *Moonstruck: The Trackers of Honeysuckle Creek and Tidbinbilla*, Lee Grant engages the people who worked those environments in her black-and-white portraits of original space trackers who, they insist,

Figure 1: Promised the Moon *installation, 2019, (l–r) Heather Burness; U. K. Frederick and MacDonald Nichols. Photograph courtesy of Brenton McGeachie*.

were 'just doing their jobs', honouring the legacy of 'everyday' tasks and their contribution to the extraordinary.

Other works draw on the moon landing itself, rather than the tracking stations or the archives, which highlight how little we know about space. Erica Seccombe recalls that the moon was once part of the earth, and for 'Celestial Body: So near yet so far', she animates a tiny piece of basalt, producing a 3D moving image in which that fragment appears to be the moon. Deirdre Feeney makes use of what, in my ignorance, looks like a beautiful Heath Robinson contraption but is, in fact, a sophisticated optical image system for her '[dis] appearance', where her projections through water produce what appears to be film of the moon's cycles – a reminder of the difficulty we have in distinguishing between the thing itself and images of the thing. In 'Honeybilla Moon Quartet', Jacqui Malins evokes astral bodies that bear the traces of human intervention, of fragile human efforts and their mark on the universe, using screen-printed discs of fired ceramic to present her poems, maps and other marks.

'Fragile' is the word that kept coming to mind as I viewed the exhibition, and now, in the middle of environmental disaster, the word returns to me as a profound statement of human frailty in the face of the vast universe. However, there is hope, and it is Tom Buckland's Apollo Lunar Module that suggests a way through. This hand-made cardboard craft, a model of what he calls '[o]ne of the weirdest and most improbable flying machines ever conceived' (Buckland 2019: 18), reminds us how unlikely the great lunar experiment was and how in many ways it is surprising that it worked. Perhaps then, however uncertain our place in the universe, however naïve our fumbling may be towards dreams of change, perhaps it is in play, experimentation and art that we humans will find a way through. Like Buckland's lunar module,

Figure 2: Promised the Moon *installation, 2019, (l–r) U. K. Frederick and MacDonald Nichols; Erica Seccombe; Jacqui Malins; Julian Laffan. Photograph courtesy of Brenton McGeachie*.

Figure 3: Promised the Moon *installation, 2019, (l–r) Ellis Hutch; Rose Montebello; Lee Grant; Tom Buckland; Bec Bigg-Wither. Photograph courtesy of Brenton McGeachie*.

stuck together with screws, glue and imagination, we may seem to be going nowhere, and yet – fingers crossed – perhaps a new collaborative effort will lead to the remarkable event of our getting somewhere new: the realization that we are part of the universe and that our future is entirely bound up with the future of our planet.

Let me give the last word to space archaeologist Alice Gorman, who writes 'perhaps the most valuable commodity the Moon can bestow is meaning. This, after all, is the role it has always played in human culture' (2019: 7).

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