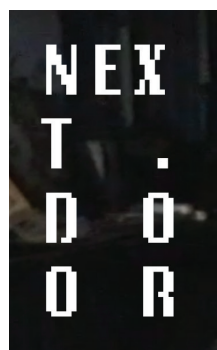


# PERCEIVED AESTHETIC AND MORAL TENSION

By Tristan Eyles



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Nextdoor Artist Run Initiative, Metro Arts and the artist acknowledge the Jagera and Turrbal peoples, as the custodians of this land, recognising their connection to land, waters and community. We honour the story-telling and art-making at the heart of First Nations' cultures, and the enrichment it gives to the lives of all Australians.

# DOCUMENTS OF TENSION

## Exhibition essay by Georgie O'Brien

Ambivalence is an uneasy state of mind. Conflicting ideas and feelings throw their weight against opposite ends of a rope in an emotional and intellectual tug-of-war. Ambivalence denies us both the comfort of certainty and the thrust of conviction. It provides no definitive answer, no satisfying resolution — it allows two or more states to exist at once.

*Perceived Aesthetic and Moral Tension* invites us to sit with ambivalence, to contemplate the tensions and conflicts within our relationship to the landscape and the built environments in which we live. Eyles's work raises questions about land use and development. Systems and practices pertaining to land use in contemporary Australia enable us to sustain the physical, social and cultural structures of our society, but they also perpetuate colonial perspectives towards, and intervention in, the landscape, and they often cause ecological harm. The works invite us to consider that we can hold seemingly incongruous feelings towards these systems and environments — and our own complicity in them — at the same time, and that this ambivalence, rather than creating uncertainty, can enlighten us with a richer and more holistic perspective.

Each of the three works is an individual entity, produced at a different point in time with discrete conceptual, aesthetic and rhetorical objectives. But they are all, in their own way, documents of tension. The raw materials that make up each work may be tangible, such as the clay slabs from building sites in *Ambivalent Scrapings* or samples of minerals, stone and various compounds of domestic, civil or industrial provenance in *Rock Phrenology*. Or they may be intangible: an individual's experience within a historical event, preserved on analogue film, in *Smooth / Striated Space Load Out*. Each of these materials is surrounded by a political, historical, cultural and emotional context from the location in time and space from which they were taken. Myriads of conflicting ideas, issues and perspectives swirl within these contexts, and these are contained in each work — embodied in materiality or aesthetic quality or revealed through narrative. Tensions coexist in a holistic, singular form, bound by the temporal borders of film or the spatial borders of objects.

*Smooth / Striated Space Load Out* documents Eyles's own experience in the February 2022 Brisbane floods. Unedited footage shows the artist sorting through and salvaging flood-damaged possessions and equipment from his makeshift studio, a secure rented cube within a commercial self-storage facility in a flooded industrial area of Brisbane. The film chronicles one iteration of an enduring battle between universal entropy and human preference for order. Through this narrative, it raises questions about what happens when this preference for order manifests in land use that is characterised by the idea of human control over nature.

The self-storage facility embodies Western colonial ideas of space and ownership. It dissects space into clearly delineated plots for exclusive individual use, determining authority over space through capital exchange and rigidly enforcing spatial boundaries by controlling who can enter space, at what time and how. In this way, the facility's physical and operative structures can be seen as an extreme manifestation of the idea of space as a commodity that can be obtained, possessed and controlled by an individual. But this facility also, more broadly, reflects a penchant for order. Systems and hierarchies give us control and certainty in an unpredictable universe. From the dawn of agriculture humans have sought to find patterns within nature's chaos, and then to replicate and control them for their own purposes. Western relationships with the land are often characterised, naively, by this idea of controlling nature. We inflict ourselves on the landscape, shaping it, ordering it into forms that make sense to us — forms that reflect our sensibilities and our needs.

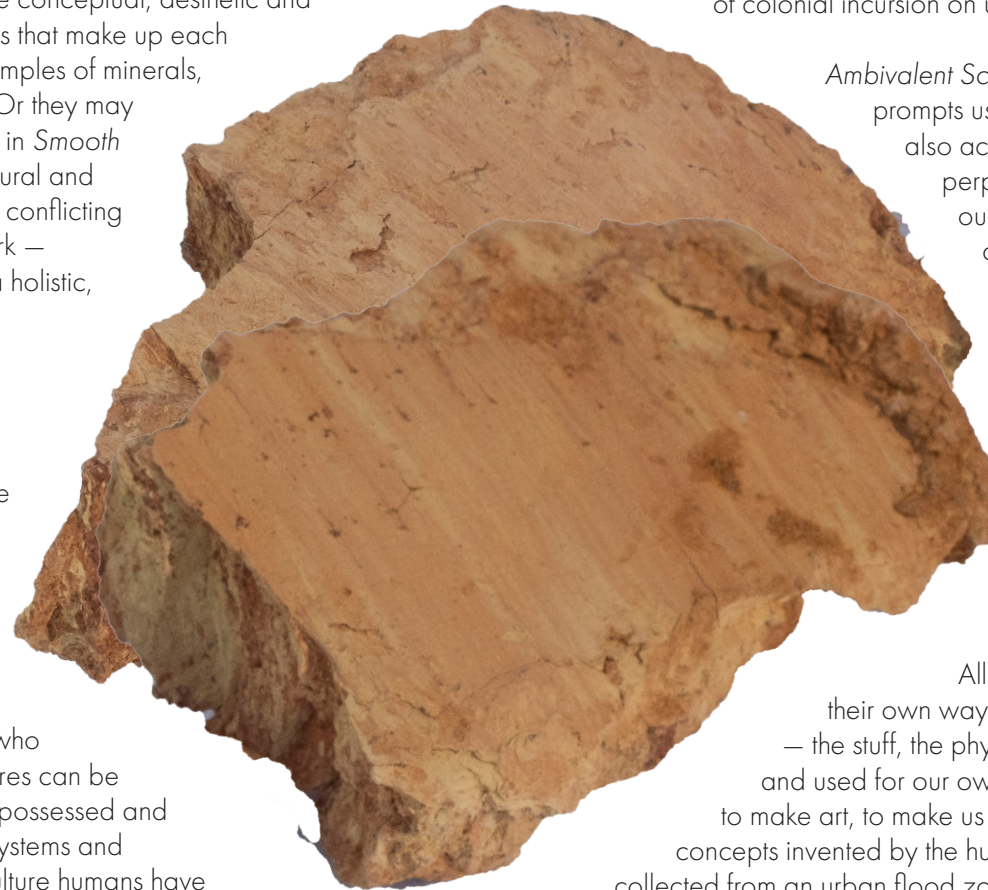
Tangible and intangible structures maintain our tenuous grasp on order, an illusion of control over the land: planning laws, building codes, zoning, the physical buildings and infrastructure of our cities and towns. But they are fragile, held together with a delicate film of cultural and political glue and a knowledge of physics and materials that are no match for a natural disaster. All we can do, in the face of chaos, is to begin again: rebuild, repair, reorder.

This plays out in *Smooth / Striated Space Load Out*. Floodwater intrudes on the ordered human spaces of the storage facility, transgressing physical and imagined borders, ignoring rules of access. This footage documents efforts to reconcile this intrusion as the artist and his family sort through the contents of the studio. They document what has been lost, take photographic records, choose what to take and what to keep, distinguish between what is damaged and what can be saved. They direct and execute the slow, methodical process of reorganising disrupted space.

The footage is also a record of individual and collective loss, and a window into the emotional implications of natural disaster. It is possible to feel a sense of loss for the manufactured spaces that constitute our built environment and for the objects within them, even as we consider the fraught relationship with the landscape and natural environment that these spaces have. While acknowledging these feelings of grief and loss, the work prompts questions about zoning, responsible land use and future planning choices. Industrial areas are often built on floodplains under the belief that the human impact of flooding in these areas is low. But the work questions that narrative. And, as society grapples with the environmental effects of climate change, we may need to reconsider how we use land. Do we work in opposition, maintaining an antagonistic or arrogant attitude towards the features of a landscape, or do we work with respect for them? By examining these tensions *Smooth / Striated Space Load Out* encourages us to evaluate, as a society and as individuals, the conflicts at the heart of this issue.

The clay forms of *Ambivalent Scrapings* also examine ambivalence within our relationship with the landscape, embodying tension in their material, aesthetic and affective qualities. These chunks of wild clay were collected from suburban development sites in outer Brisbane and Ipswich and then fired. The objects' smooth surfaces, in contrast with the textured, granulated quality of raw clay on their alternate sides, record the action of machinery — a visceral echo of metal slicing through soft earth.

The sculptures ruminates on the tension between ecological and social concerns pertaining to large-scale earthworks and suburban housing developments. As physical evidence of earthworks, they are material signifiers for the conflict between worries about environmental degradation and a need to provide adequate shelter for a growing population. The forms also testify to continued colonial action in the landscape. Firing the clay transforms this action into a concrete and enduring record of colonial incursion on unceded land.



*Ambivalent Scrapings* encapsulates these tensions as an aesthetic feature. In this way, the work prompts us to grapple with our ability to enjoy the sculptures for their aesthetic qualities while also acknowledging how the production of these forms benefits our way of life, how it perpetuates colonisation of the land, and how it impacts the environment — and how we ourselves are complicit in this process, as participants in the society and systems of capital that carve up the landscape.

*Rock Phrenology* also plays into the idea of documenting and reflecting on the material evidence of our relationships and interactions with the landscape. Eyles takes samples of familiar earth-based materials from a variety of civil, domestic, commercial, recreational and industrial spaces and displays them in a way that equalises the materials, diminishing the socially constructed perceptions and hierarchies of value that often inform how we see them. It is a visual strategy that prompts the viewer to consider and appreciate each of these materials in a new way, to examine their aesthetic and material qualities over perceived cultural or utilitarian values or socially inscribed meanings.

All of these materials came, at some point, from the earth; they are evidence, each in their own way, of a human relationship to land. Many materials testify to how we often think of land — the stuff, the physical matter — as a utilitarian resource. Earth is something to be dug up, processed and used for our own purposes: to build houses, shopping centres and roads, to shore up railway tracks, to make art, to make us rich. Transformed into physical signifiers or talismans, earth can reify abstract concepts invented by the human mind, such as spiritual energy or capital. For other materials, like the silt collected from an urban flood zone, our relationship with them is more complex — antagonistic, emotionally charged.

When they appear in situ in our built environments, we rarely think about these materials in any way other than the identities ascribed to them within such spaces (if we think about them at all). By stripping them of the locations, roles, and forms in which we usually encounter them, the work liberates these materials from an anthropocentric grasp. It asks, 'What are these materials on their own terms? What identities do they have, beyond human-centred definitions?'

In this way Eyles draws on aspects of object-oriented ontology, the idea that objects have existences and identities outside their relationship to human beings. But although the work enables us to contemplate these samples of matter in new ways, it is impossible to escape our own subjectivity. Viewing each mineral, rock or compound, therefore, entails a tension between their socially and culturally inscribed meanings and the possibility of an alternate material identity. Through this tension *Rock Phrenology* challenges dominant anthropocentric perspectives of viewing and relating to land.

Throughout the history of ecological art, particularly within Euro-American modernist traditions, various artists and their practices have, paradoxically, damaged the environment and caused ecological harm — either by directly intervening in the landscape in



ways that had unintended or unconsidered environmental consequences, or by participating in harmful material supply chains. Eyles's practice foregrounds a reparative approach to making art. This approach includes ethically obtaining materials and using methodologies and practices that consciously minimise environmental impact. Eyles has noted the potential of documenting as a reparative action: documenting and recording enable us to acknowledge and communicate harms, an important step in moving forward and making amends.

Each of the three works in *Perceived Aesthetic and Moral Tension* reflects this approach, engaging in a process of documenting, recording and acknowledging as a means of learning. But 'documenting' does not fully articulate the methodological strategy at play here. Eyles actively exploits the language of the museum to frame these documents in a way that enables the viewer to more easily grapple with the tensions they embody and the conflicting feelings and ideas they invoke. The artist describes his works as 'lightly mediated', but this is a misnomer. They are, in a sense, highly mediated.

Eyles takes various documents — materials which embody or signify ideas from the real world — and extricates them from their original context to enable us to see them, and the ideas they contain, in isolation. They are then inscribed with visual and systematic hallmarks of museum culture and its approaches to framing knowledge.

In *Ambivalent Scrapings*, the clay documents of earthwork activity are preserved by firing. In *Rock Phrenology* materials are catalogued according to type, organised and presented using a system that privileges empirical, scientific and seemingly 'objective' definitions of material difference, while ignoring subjective cultural and social definitions. The way these materials are displayed, in plastic book sleeves, borrows from the physical infrastructure of libraries. In museums and libraries we approach objects with a sense of contemplation and enquiry. Eyles uses this visual invocation of the library to guide how we interact with the materials in the work. The materials are decontextualised, but they are also recontextualised within the cultural understandings and expectations of such places.

*Smooth / Striated Space Load Out* presents unedited footage, framed as an objective testament of an event. The footage was originally created as a utilitarian document, a record — insurance claims, not art, were at the front of Eyles's mind. Apart from decisions about when to start filming and stop filming and where to place the camera, the footage itself lacks any deliberate and curated construction of meaning. The content, therefore, is the moment: the experience of an individual at a point in time. By placing it in the gallery context, this lived experience becomes an artefact for consideration, and the inherent tensions that it evokes — the conflicts within that experience in time, the questions the moment raises — are all contained and embodied within the document. They are laid out on a wall for us to observe, so that we have the time and the silence to consider them.

Preserving, cataloguing, ordering, documenting, displaying — all these approaches to treating materials play into nineteenth-century notions of the museum as an arbiter and preserver of knowledge. Even the premise of 'lightly mediating' material privileges the idea of objectivity, the primacy of a truth contained within evidence untouched by self-conscious hands. They reflect a sensibility towards preserving, creating and disseminating knowledge according to scientific ideas of objectivity and empirical classification. This approach seems strangely antithetical to exploring ambivalence. It involves selection, which involves decision, which requires some degree of conviction.

But the processes and visual language of the museum are also useful culturally embedded tools of sense-making. It is easier to make sense of the world when it is arranged into patterns and concrete forms.

Eyles uses this approach not to determine a singular meaning or identity for his materials, but to create wholes in which tension is contained at human size — whole entities, whether a physical object, structure or film, that encapsulate the conflicts, moral tensions, ambivalent feelings and affective qualities invoked in specific encounters and wider relationships with the landscape, but that are small and discrete enough for us to consider their contents. At this scale, we can see the tensions, feel them, weigh them up and examine them, within a contextual frame that encourages contemplation and reflection.

Surrounded by white walls, separated from their original context by time and distance, and presented in the language of the museum, the tensions within these documents can be examined from the cool, detached perspective of the museum viewer.

In this way, *Perceived Aesthetic and Moral Tension* offers a reparative, contemplative encounter with ambivalence in our relationships to the landscape and the built environment. It encourages us to consider the opportunities within balance, nuance and the ephemerality of unresolved tensions, to make peace with cognitive dissonance, and to engage in dialogue and thought free from the uncompromising, unwavering pull of polarity.

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