

Environmental Art and Falling from the Sky

A conversation between [Emma Rehn](#) and [Robyn Glade-Wright](#) | Section: [Interviews](#) | Series: Ecology-Related Art

Abstract: Robyn Glade-Wright is an established environmental artist and practice-led researcher and has presented over 40 solo exhibitions. In this conversation, artist-scientist Emma Rehn speaks with Robyn about her 2023 curated exhibition Falling from the Sky, centred on the impacts of climate change on non-human forms of life, and a one-day symposium on arts approaches to environmental communication associated with the exhibition's launch.

Thanks for joining me, Robyn, to talk about your environmental art practice and last year's exhibition *Falling from the Sky*. We'll also touch on the interdisciplinary symposium associated with the exhibition launch, *Environmental Communication: Science Inspired and Arts Delivered*. As you know, I was an exhibiting artist and an attendee of the symposium, but my research background is in archaeology and the science of past environments. It'll be great to speak with you about your approach to environmental messages from an arts background, and each of our experiences of the exhibition. To start off, how did the connection between science and visual arts develop for you, and what artistic goals do you pursue?

I enjoyed bush walking and on one occasion, following a week in the bush, I was struck, and perturbed, by the appearance of a long hedge. The hedge was composed of multiple plants of the same species. I started to think about the difference between environments that are largely natural and built environments. I also thought about how our living spaces are diminished when built environments are not constructed with care and/or do not reflect the aesthetics of nature. Roads, cities, urban centres, industry, mining, forestry and farming collectively reduce habitats for plant and animal species. The lack of beauty in some built environments and the demise of habitats for other species lead to a consideration of the loss of beauty and potential relationships with other forms of life. Science can teach us about the natural world, and art can project new ways of thinking and feeling. The unification of knowledge, established by scientific investigation and the creative, imaginative, original and at times fictive nature of art, can coalesce to disseminate ecological information to a range of community members. This union can educate by provoking thought and demonstrating a willingness to address environmental issues. A key developmental phase was my doctoral research which culminated in an exhibition titled *Making Nature: Extinct Tasmanian Plants*. This exhibition tested the capacity of art to communicate environmental concerns. This plight has become my aim and passion for over a decade. I have never tired of attempting to create impactful environmental works of art or being an active researcher in the arts communication space.

Last year you curated an exhibition titled *Falling from the Sky*, displayed at James Cook University Cairns. The inspiration for the exhibition - and the title - came from a very localised event that showed the effects of climate change in a very visceral and tangible way.

In a short but record-breaking November heatwave in 2018, when temperatures reached above 40°C for two consecutive days, resident bats in Cairns started to expire and fall from their tree roosts. Baby bats

were the first to die, followed by mature bats. The bats that once lived in the trees in the city laid dead on the pathways. People attending exhibitions, performances or going shopping had to walk along these paths that were laden with dead bats. I found this event to be almost incomprehensible. It was difficult to comprehend the mass death of local animals due to human generated global warming. At the same time, warming oceans, predators, shipping and cyclones had contributed to the demise and coral bleaching of one third of the Great Barrier Reef, a natural wonder of the world. The death of bats was seemingly more shocking, as it was sudden, unexpected and in our backyard. Furthermore, it was a concrete example of what environmental scientists had predicted and it occurred on our watch, and in our city.

When I thought of the title *Falling from the Sky* for an exhibition of student and professional artists' work, it was clear that the death of the bats was the impetus for the show. The title *Falling from the Sky* evidently resonated with many people who, like myself, struggled to understand the bat deaths as the exhibition attracted strong participation. Local artists spread the invitation to interstate artists, and participation by school students doubled from the teacher's original expectations. Fortunately, colleagues, school teachers and administrative staff pitched in to help hang and produce the show as over 60 participants took part in the exhibition.



Exhibition launch for *Falling from the Sky* (2023). Photos: Emma Rehn.

So, you ended up getting a much bigger response than you originally planned and on a bigger scale than anticipated.

Indeed. When I initially contacted teachers, they said they would tie the exhibition in with an existing Excellence program and expected 10 students. All of the schools came in with 20 students. I sent invitations to local artists, and they sent the information onto other, and well known, artists. We had exhibitors from Queensland, the Northern Territory, Victoria and New South Wales (states in Australia). The symposium that accompanied the exhibition also attracted broad interest. We had participation from most states and the collective drive to tackle climate change in a transdisciplinary manner was amazing.

The symposium was a great snapshot of so many different types of projects using arts approaches to communicate environmental science. There were some types of media I hadn't really considered before in communicating science, like soundscapes, and questions raised about media we don't often question, like how photography might be used or misused in marine conservation. One takeaway for me was the diversity of work, and

approaches, happening out there. My own work combining art with my science has only scratched the surface so far, and the possibilities are almost endless; I'd like to encourage more of my scientist colleagues to engage with arts approaches as part of their projects. Back to you: It sounds like there was a lot of interest in these topics, particularly climate change impacts on environments, given there were so many more participants in the exhibition than originally anticipated. So, you must have been tapping into an interest that's already there; people were already interested and were just looking for opportunities to be involved.

Falling from the Sky united a broad cross-section of environmentally concerned people. All of the schools expressed interest in future environmental exhibitions, as did many of the professional artists. I observed the school students being very attentive to other students' work. Academics attending the symposium agreed that another event next year would be good. My aim was to engage many people. There was a range from beginner to professional artists in the symposium, including scientists, gallery directors and creative academics. How did you feel being a participant in the exhibition? Had you been invited to exhibit before I invited you?

I'd only exhibited my work once before, as part of *Receive > Respond* at Crate59 back in 2016 where I was paired with a high school student, and we each produced an artwork in response to art by each other. My painting created for that exhibition also featured environmental science! But *Falling from the Sky* was my first time doing a crochet piece for exhibition. Something I found interesting, looking at the other artworks, was the focus on animals - possibly because of the title's connection to the death of bats. There were only a few of us who focused solely on plants or landscapes, it was a less common theme, although there was also a strong presence of marine-focused works. For me, and probably for the high school students as well, getting to see my work exhibited across from amazing work by established professional artists, to feel included in that, was a great experience. It felt like my work was being heard just as much as theirs, which is rare.



Emma Rehn: *Between Fire and Sky* (2023). Photo: Emma Rehn.

I took an egalitarian, or broad-based, approach, so your work was shown very close or opposite some high-ranking artists, and it held its ground. Most of those high school students would never have exhibited before, and it was good to be inclusive. Climate change impacts us all.

How can the arts, like *Falling from the Sky*, amplify environmental messages through the lens of local and evocative events like this?

When we view a work of art, we are conscious that it has been created by a person and we often marvel at the skill and creativity of the artist. Art theorist Arthur Danto wrote that “art is a *wakeful dream* in which an artist’s ideas, rendered in a sensuous form, are made incarnate”, and therefore capable of bringing new perspectives to light (Danto 2013, p. 124). I think the power of art to amplify environmental messages resides in the excitement and relevance of seeing original, human-inspired concepts. I was so inspired that I purchased a student work from the exhibition, depicting a bird flying while carrying a large and apparently full, black plastic garbage bag. I thought the piece was slightly humorous and yet very disturbing. Would the birds drop the debris we have created on top of us?

When artists focus on local negative impacts of the Anthropocene, it situates both the problem, and the need for change, closer to home. What we do at home often contributes to global problems. For example, plastic discarded a long way from the sea, that is blown into rivers, is carried to the sea. Rivers deliver 70% of plastic waste currently circulating in the world’s oceans.

Local events involving schools, universities and artists bring teachers, school principals, parents and grandparents to the event. This helps to disseminate environmental messages and normalise the

process of exercising environmental concern. If we only see global warming as a global problem, it can be imagined to be beyond us, not our problem, or perhaps a problem for governments, scientists or technologists to solve. When we refer to a local issue symbolically as in an exhibition called *Falling from the Sky*, the problem is situated in our backyard, so to speak. This may provoke us to do something, to make sustainable choices, and to consider the stewardship of our fragile planet.

Artistic and scientific approaches are quite different, as you know. In what ways can artistic approaches deliver environmental messages in ways that complement or contrast with scientific approaches? How do your own scientific and artistic activities connect and interact?

Works of art complement propositions and data made available by scientists by taking these ideas on an imaginative journey. The imaginative journey involves finding symbolic forms to create meaning and/or to elicit emotion. Works of art can be inspired by scientific data and predictions. For example, scientists have found microplastics in our food, water, sea, sky and land. If I make a work called *Microplastics Found in Human Embryo*, as I did from 1000 recycled plastic bottles, I am telling a lie. The work is a fictitious or fictive piece. I created a lie to frighten people and to alert them to the perils of plastic. This may influence people to stop buying polyester clothing which sheds microplastics when it is washed and to dispense with our wide-ranging dependence on plastic. By telling a lie in *Microplastics Found in Human Embryo*, I increased the emotive power of the message. What could be more disturbing than our actions harming our progeny and future generations?

When I made the work, I believed the piece was a fabrication. After I had completed the work, I found to my horror that microplastics can cross the blood brain barrier and the placenta. Science is the inspiration for my art. I take science on a creative and often fictive journey to amplify the importance of science. The title of the symposium was *Science Inspired and Arts Delivered*.

Coming from a science background, most of my own art-science connections have been more grounded in fact than fiction, although I do enjoy playing with visual metaphors which stretch the boundary a bit. Has your artistic activity supported the production of a scientific theory, or vice versa?

For me, it's a clear no. I see science and art as having creative and imaginative elements; however, I see both as having distinct aims, practices and theoretical underpinnings. In terms of environmental communication, science can inspire art and art can broadcast the importance of science. Art can be emotive, symbolic and inspiring and this can stimulate environmental concern and behavioural change. The arts can empower environmental messaging. My specific field of environmental art aims to make people change their behaviour, while other categories where art and science meet, like botanical illustration, can be quite different with different aims.

We have both lived and worked in the tropics of far north Queensland, home of great biodiversity and World Heritage rainforest. How did this affect your perspective on environmental issues and arts practice?

While I was living in Cairns, my works of art focused on local issues, including the plight of local flora and fauna. The Paradise Parrot was the focus of one exhibition. Coral bleaching has been a regular focus. During my 13 years in Cairns, my works became larger in scale. Exhibiting in public, indoor and outdoor spaces has become a preferred way of working.

Recently I created a work called *Mercury Rising* which laments the bioaccumulation of heavy metals in wetland birds. *Mercury Rising* was hung on the outside of the Cairns Institute Building, James Cook University, Smithfield and launched at the *Falling from the Sky* exhibition. *Mercury Rising* is 5.5 metres long and 4.5 metres high. It is constructed from bamboo, cable ties, papier-mâché, paint and silver mirrored paper. *Mercury Rising* was hung heading downwards to indicate the peril inflicted by human activities on wetland birds. Wetland birds are negatively impacted by a range of Anthropogenic pressures. For instance,

“mercury (Hg) is a globally distributed heavy metal of particular concern for aquatic biota, because of the harmful effects of its organic form (methyl-Hg) on embryo development, neurology, immune system, physiology and behaviour”

that can cause population decline (Goutte et al. 2014, p. 1).



Robyn Glade-Wright: *Mercury Rising* (2023). Photo: Michael Mrazik.

***Mercury Rising* is my favourite of your artworks too! Looking back, what were some of the recurring themes and main takeaways from the symposium and exhibition for you?**

The main takeaway from the symposium is that people participated from most states in Australia, indicating the high level of interest in environmental communication. There was also interest in the *Science Inspired and Arts Delivered* approach. This approach recognises the virtues of each field and points to the potential and value of both disciplines in fostering impactful environmental

communication. The recurring themes included how messaging can be constructed and how we can ascertain the impact of environmental messaging.

Thank you, Robyn, for this discussion on *Falling from the Sky* and environmental art!

References

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Details of the cover photo: Robyn Glade-Wright: *Mercury Rising* (2023). Photo: Emma Rehn.

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