

TWENTY

Two decades of Queensland photography

EXHIBITION ESSAY

Wild weather: what next for Queensland's climate and photography?

By Tim Riley Walsh

Queensland is synonymous with [wild weather](#). The online exhibition [TWENTY](#) richly documents the last two decades of our climate and its unenviable record of floods, tropical cyclones, droughts, and even [inland tsunamis](#). Unsurprisingly, in 2019 the QLD Government described our region as “the most natural disaster prone state in Australia”.¹ And our next twenty years will experience even higher temperatures, less rainfall, and more dramatic climate events – due predominantly to global warming.²

A type of disaster not documented in TWENTY's survey of the state's last twenty years are bushfires, a focus of my research, and a climate event whose likelihood will only grow under the influence of increased heat and reduced rainfall.³ Australia's 2019-20 'Black Summer' of bushfires—felt most immediately in New South Wales and Victoria—were grim precursors of this future. Though historically a state of cyclones, floods, and droughts, recent unprecedented fires within QLD's [Lamington](#) and [Japoon](#) National Parks, reflect our likely participation in what fire historian Stephen Pyne has labelled the Pyrocene – the fire equivalent of an ice age.⁴

This new era brings with it exceptional challenges. Photography, and visual culture more broadly, are crucial tools that help us to understand these threats, but as I will illustrate here, are threatened themselves in significant ways.



QLD's self-image is caught between two poles: our climate's extremes and a calmer, 'paradise' status. When we lurch too far to the extreme, it is unsurprising that our desire is to return rapidly to the opposite. We repair, rebuild, repress – and identify with our ability to bounce back and move on. Rather than dwell, we look to our photographers to record these happenings, our state repositories to store them, our artists to memorialise them in our public spaces.

In Troy Hansen's 2011 [image](#) all three of these expectations converge in one picture documenting Australian artist Richard Tipping's familiar public work *Watermark* (2000). Tipping's work consists of the word 'flood' fabricated at an imposing scale in red plate steel letters and 'sunk' into New Farm Park's river walkway. Originally commissioned to acknowledge the city's historic flood levels of 1893 and 1974, Tipping's work suddenly became a more active watermark in 2011 when the Brisbane

river broke its banks during the city's historic inundation, recorded for posterity in Hansen's picture. Reflecting on this event, Tipping recalls that at the time of *Watermark*'s conception, he was told that there would never be another flood in Brisbane due to the Wivenhoe Dam.⁵ The overflowing dam, a so called impossible event, was captured in this [image](#) by Dean Saffron during the 2011 floods. Images like Hansen and Saffron's (and sculptures like Tipping's) help us to recall these events, remind us of the damage and the legacy of their lesson: to resist complacency. It remains curious how quickly public memory disperses like receding waters and we soon grow idle.



Time heals all wounds, or so the cliché goes. But what does time claim in return? Our ability to recall these events in detail hampers both our preparedness for the future and learning from the past. Though we may rely on images such as these, they also often disrupt our own recollections. The ambiguous function of memory and trauma seems echoed in the competing viewpoints that documentary photographers present as part of TWENTY. Saffron's dramatic [picture](#) of the flood's impact outside of Brisbane in Grantham, Lockyer Valley, shows shredded bridges with teetering car bodies. In Brian Cassey's arresting 2006 [image](#) in the aftermath of Cyclone Larry, Innisfail resident Kate Charleston stands in front of her destroyed home, its shattered form echoed in the repeated cuts and abrasions across Charleston's upper body.

Contrastingly, Hansen's image of a flooded *Watermark*, as well as Leif Ekstrom's [view](#) of Brisbane CBD across the swollen river from the Kangaroo Point Cliffs, communicate an odd sense of calm: a quality accentuated especially in Ekstrom's due to the vast separation between the photographer and their subject. Similarly, as such events become distant within our memories it is easy to remember them more benignly. Overwhelmed by a rapid information cycle, we grow desensitised, give in to denial, and retreat.



With less time and even slimmer attention spans, we crave one image to summarise our complex world. Raised on the spectacle of Hollywood disaster films, our appetite has grown to expect consistent drama, emotion, and impact. Though the increasing scale of natural disasters seems to be answering these problematic expectations, there is a separate issue that climate events are less visible due to their isolation from civilization or too big, too slow, or too fast to capture with a typical camera. It is unsurprising then that one of the dominant formats for how we visualise our present age is from an aerial view.



In late 2018, the blaze in far north QLD's Japoon National Park saw a large section of world heritage tropical rainforest burn for an extended, ten-day period – mostly unseen by locals, authorities, and media. An environment that normally suppresses fires, the extent of the unprecedented burning was only revealed after a satellite recorded a dark scar cut through the land.⁶ Higher up than Saffron's [bird's eye view of flooded Ipswich](#), art historian T.J. Demos suggests that satellite imagery and visualisations of data (which appear to be taken from space, but are illustrations) are now the dominant mode of how we represent this rapidly changing planet.⁷ These dominated recent ABC analysis of 'Black Summer', with the article separately noting that footage captured from specialised fire monitoring aircraft was largely obscured by the vast plumes of smoke.⁸ As our climate grows more extreme, our conventional means of visual engagement appear increasingly challenged: by the scale of these disasters, our overfamiliarity with traditional media, and how new media can also distance us further from these events.

If we are to act, then we must confront the sites of our complacency: including the language we use to describe these threats. This includes the concept that the rapidly warming planet is somehow natural. For disaster risk management scholars Lee Boshier and Ksenia Chmutina, it is crucial to acknowledge that so called 'natural disasters', born from existing and poorly managed 'hazards', are rarely 'natural'. This is because there 'tends to be many important human induced factors that have converted the natural hazard into a disaster.'⁹

As Queensland University of Technology's Liz Brogden described at a recent public lecture, the reason why such language should be challenged is that it removes our sense of involvement from these climactic events.¹⁰ As Brogden argued, disaster emerges as a threat from a state of vulnerability and this can be factored into how we design our cities and urban spaces: an argument that holds even more water in this era of social distancing and recent scholarship from the World Health Organisation and the United Nations which describes COVID-19 as a by-product of environmental destruction.¹¹

Where the 'Queenslander' houses of the past have responded to our state's humid environs and kept us cool—and been easily [swept away by waters](#) and [cyclonic wind](#)—the architecture and design of the future must rapidly factor in this dense knot of threats that face us as we look to the next twenty years.

Disasters are stark warnings from a planet under heavy duress – as many of the 'Wild weather' images of TWENTY attest. Beyond designing more resilient communities and resisting the fiction that these events are somehow normal, the state's future must focus on championing and prioritising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledge, in particular relating to proper land management. This is especially important in the light of existing policy's arguable failure and historic mistreatment of the land by colonists.¹²

Suppressed during and long after colonisation, Indigenous land practices are presently receiving overdue attention and recognition from [academic communities](#) — which have historically disregarded First Nations' expertise. Many Australians already value this deep well of ancestral knowledge, as seen in the popularity of the writings of Yuin, Bunurong and Tasmanian writer Bruce Pascoe and more recently by QLD's own Victor Steffensen, a descendent of the Tagalaka peoples of Cape York and an Indigenous fire practitioner.¹³

Focusing this collective energy could help power an urgent reframing of our state's collective image: one that actions reparations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as well as situates their experience and knowledge at the heart of a shared project to guide Queensland's precarious environmental future.¹⁴





Tim Riley Walsh is a Brisbane-based writer and curator. Tim is the Australia Desk Editor for ArtAsiaPacific, as well as previously contributing to Art Monthly Australasia, Frieze, OSMOS, Eyeline, Apollo, Runway, and Artlink. He has a Master of Philosophy (Art History) from The University of Queensland, Brisbane. Tim is the curator of On fire, an exhibition of contemporary Queensland art focused on environmental crisis and an accompanying publication, both launching in early 2021 at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane.

Instagram: @tim.riley.walsh

Images

1. Bruce Grady, Woman being winched to safety by Emergency Management Queensland rescue helicopter crew, Grantham, Lockyer Valley, 2011. John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland. 28510-0115-0008
2. Troy Hansen, Flood sign at the Brisbane Powerhouse being inundated by flood waters at New Farm, 2011. John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland. 27804-0001-0022
3. Dean Saffron, Land beneath the dam spillway inundated with floodwaters, Wivenhoe Dam, Queensland, 2011. John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland. 28001-0001-0048
4. Dean Saffron, Upturned car amongst the flood debris caught between railway bridges, Grantham, Queensland, 2011. John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland. 28001-0001-0052
5. Brian Cassey, Kate Charleston outside her destroyed Innisfail home after being injured by Cyclone Larry, March 2006, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, 18378452100-0001-0016
6. Leif Ekstrom, Brisbane CBD from Kangaroo Point Cliffs, January 2011. John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland. 27803-0001-0153
7. Dean Saffron, Aerial photograph of houses flooded to their roofs, Ipswich Region, Queensland, 2011. John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland. 28001-0001-0044
8. Renee Eloise Raymond, Dislodged house washed onto Queen Street by floodwaters in Bundaberg, Queensland, 2013. John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland. 29036-0002-0089

9. Brian Cassey, Man standing in a doorway as he surveys his destroyed home in Innisfail after it was struck by Cyclone Larry, 2006. John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland. 18379452100-0001-0026

Notes

1. "Resilient Queensland: Delivering the Queensland Strategy for Disaster Resilience," *Queensland Reconstruction Authority*, <https://www.qra.qld.gov.au/resilient-queensland>, accessed July 24, 2020; Shane Wright and Felicity Caldwell, "Millions face high risk of natural disaster," *Brisbane Times*, January 1, 2019, <https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/national/queensland/millions-face-high-risk-of-natural-disaster-20190101-p50p4z.html>, accessed July 24, 2020.
2. "Climate change in Queensland," *Queensland Government*, https://www.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0023/68126/queensland-climate-change-impact-summary.pdf, accessed June 23, 2020.
3. "Climate change in Queensland," *Queensland Government*.
4. Stephen Pyne, *The Still-Burning Bush* (Brunswick, VIC: Scribe Publications, 2020), 5.
5. Richard Tipping, "Watermark, Brisbane," <http://www.richardtipping.com/artworks/public-art/watermark-brisbane.html>, accessed July 22, 2020.
6. Ben Smee, "World heritage Queensland rainforest burned for 10 days – and almost no one noticed," *The Guardian*, November 25, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/nov/24/world-heritage-queensland-rainforest-burned-for-10-days-and-almost-no-one-noticed>, accessed July 15, 2020.
7. T.J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), 13.
8. Kevin Nguyen, Philippa McDonald, and Maryanne Taouk, "Anatomy of a 'mega-blaze'," *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, July 27, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-27/gospers-mountain-mega-blaze-investigation/12472044?nw=0>, accessed July 27, 2020.
9. Lee Bosher and Ksenia Chmutina, "Introduction," in *Disaster Risk Reduction for the Built Environment* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 5.
10. Liz Brogden, "Resilient Communities," *Reimagine Brisbane: Ideas Fiesta and Policy Conference 2020*, February 1, 2020.
11. Damian Carrington, "Pandemics result from destruction of nature, say UN and WHO," *The Guardian*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/17/pandemics-destruction-nature-un-who-legislation-trade-green-recovery>, accessed July 24, 2020.
12. Marian Faa, "Indigenous leaders say Australia's bushfire crisis shows approach to land management failing," *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, November 14, 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-11-14/traditional-owners-predicted-bushfire-disaster/11700320>, accessed July 26, 2020.
13. See Bruce Pascoe, *Dark Emu: Aboriginal Australia and the birth of agriculture* (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2018); Victor Steffensen, *Fire Country: How Indigenous Fire Management Could Help Save Australia* (Melbourne: Hardie Grant Travel, 2020); earlier texts include Marcia Langton, *Burning Questions: Emerging Environmental Issues for Indigenous Peoples in Northern Australia* (Darwin, NT: Northern Territory University, 1991). For additional, non-Indigenous perspectives, see Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2011).
14. Such a suggestion is made with full acknowledgement of myself as a direct beneficiary of colonisation, a point informed by Ngarabul and Wirrayaay Murri writer Philip Marrii Winzer when he recently described that the existing case for a Green New Deal in Australia is not based in proper consultation with First Nations peoples, rightfully asking: "What gives colonisers the moral authority to mandate the solutions, when the colonisation they benefit from is a root cause of the issue?"; Philip Marrii Winzer, "We Need a Blak New Deal to fight the climate crisis," *Overland* 238 (Autumn 2020), <https://overland.org.au/2019/09/we-need-a-blak-new-deal-to-fight-the-climate-crisis/>, accessed July 24, 2020.