



Catherine Truman
Shared Reckonings

Santos Museum of Economic Botany &
The Deadhouse (The Mortuary Building)
Adelaide Botanic Garden
24 February - 2 May 2021



Introduction

Dr Lucy A. Sutherland

Director, Botanic Gardens and State Herbarium
of South Australia

It is with great pleasure that we welcome Catherine Truman to the Santos Museum of Economic Botany for *Shared Reckonings*. Catherine has an intimate relationship and history with Adelaide Botanic Garden and the museum as a former artist-in-residence.

It is entirely appropriate that *Shared Reckonings* finds its first home within the botanic garden and museum walls.

The Museum of Economic Botany is truly one of the wonders of South Australia. Inspired by the Kew Gardens' own 1847 Museum of Economic Botany, our museum is the last remaining one of its kind in the world, and while being a precious and priceless piece of history it has a strong contemporary relevance. A museum space given over to botany, science and art in equal measure, our museum is a tantalising cave of endless curiosities and mysteries for children and adults, and for scientists and botanists and artists alike.

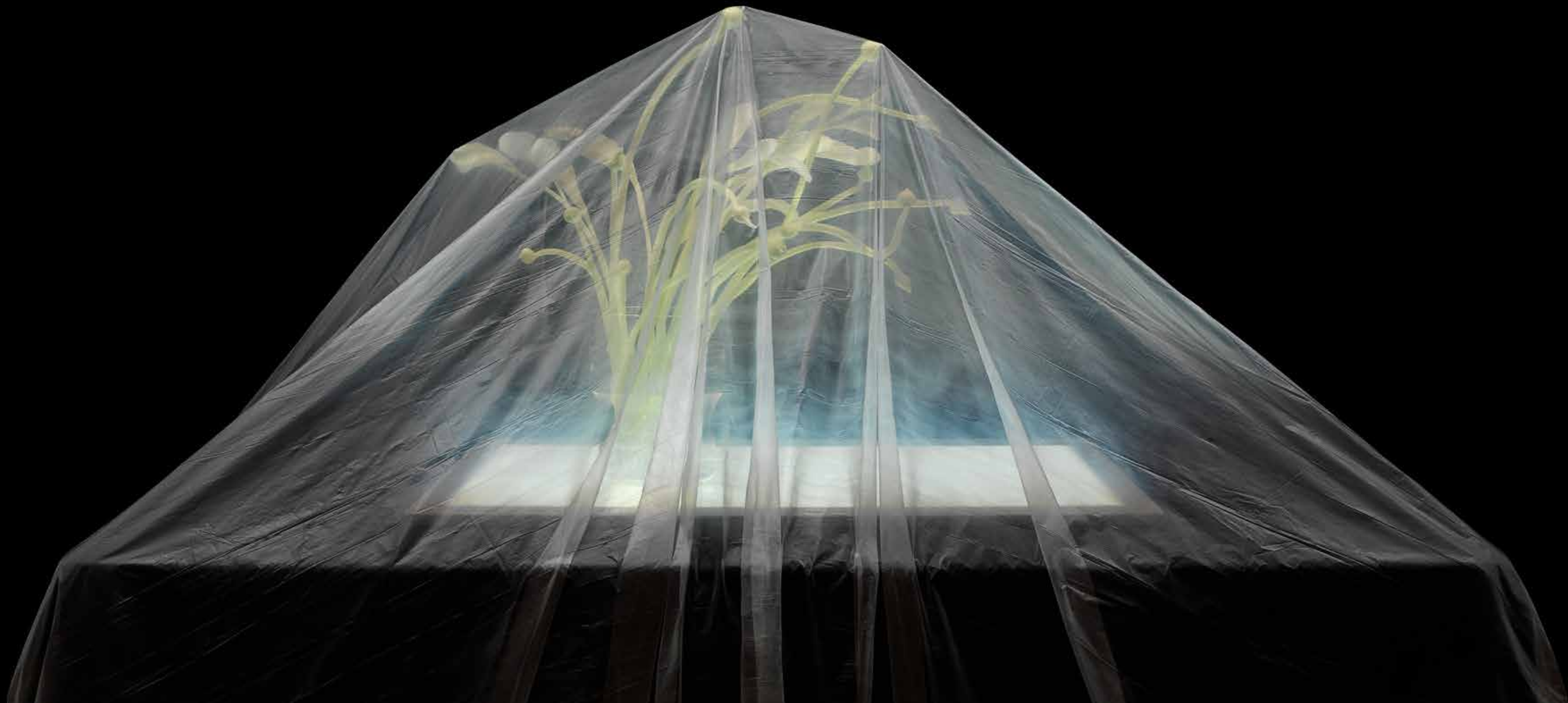
Unsurprisingly, and due to the specific connection of this artist to the space, *Shared Reckonings* shares many symbiotic qualities with the MEB: an ethereal and other-worldly sensibility, a complex intertwining of arts, science and botanical perspectives, three dimensional tangibilities, and concepts crafted into existence that are steeped in history, shared stories, exploration, research, and scientific inquiry.

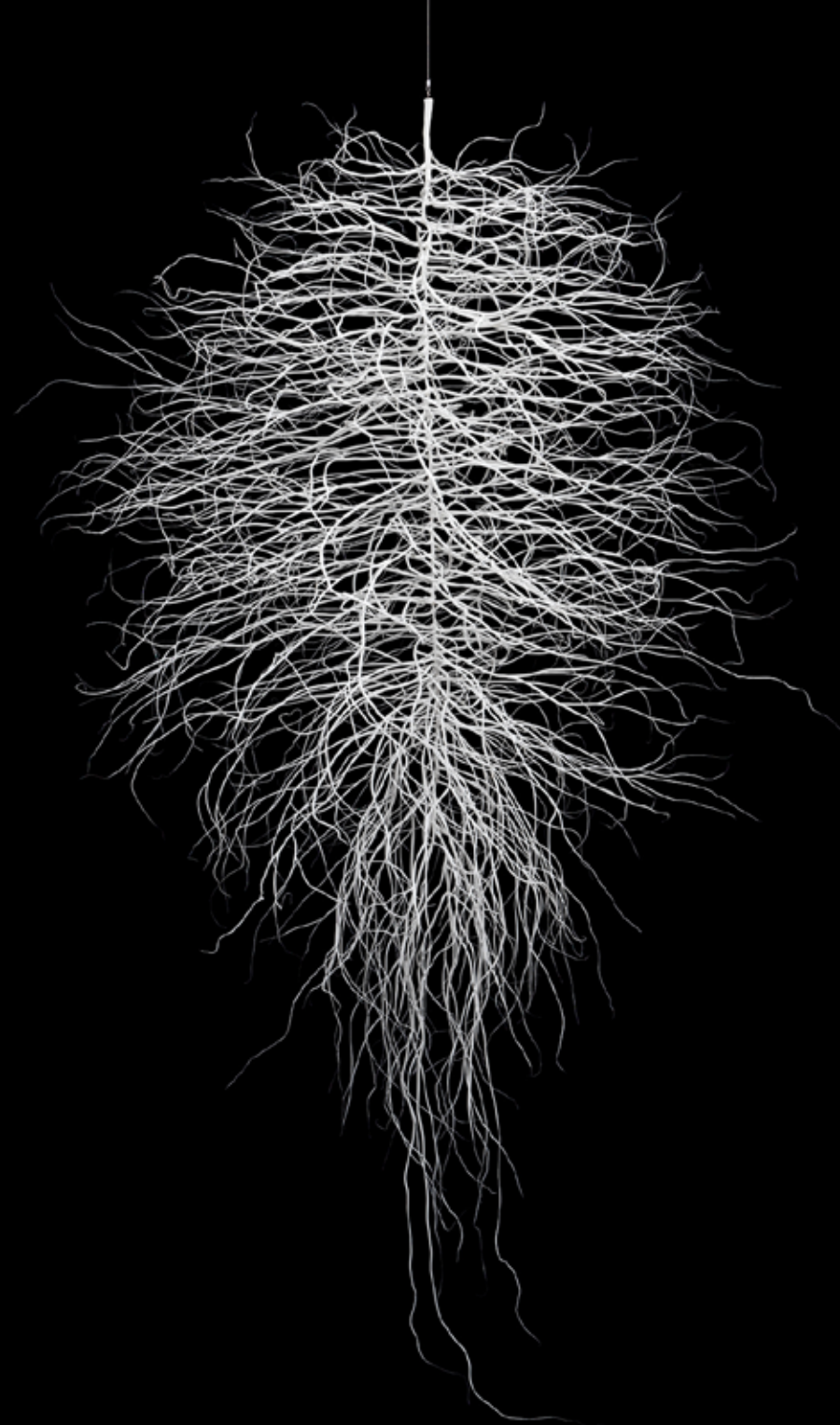
Catherine is an independent South Australian artist of note, with a formidable intellect, enduring career, and practice that easily spans a variety of mediums. With a philosophy of looking forward and incorporating her immediate environments and relationships into each creative process, the art works in *Shared Reckonings* will generate a diverse response and deep conversations. At times the works might seem playful, provocative, earthy, supernatural and create discomfort.

I invite you to immerse yourself in the connected worlds of *Shared Reckonings* and the beloved Museum of Economic Botany.

Image: Catherine Truman, *Shared Reckonings*, 2020.
Thermoplastic, photoluminescent powders, glass balls,
hand-blown glass beaker (made by Liam Flemming, Jamfactory),
light boxes, timer, black cloth.

Image: Catherine Truman, *Ghost*, 2020.
Thermoplastic, photoluminescent powders,
vintage laboratory glass beaker, vintage glass frog,
aquamarine crystal-cut tears, light pad, timer, black cloth,
acrylic sheet, plastic sheet.





Artist Statement

Catherine Truman, 2021

I am an established artist and my practice traverses a wide variety of mediums including contemporary jewellery, object-making, film, photography, installation and performance text.

Over the past twenty years I have undertaken a series of interdisciplinary projects that have purposefully explored the parallels between the ways that the human body is represented through the disciplines of art and medical science. I have investigated how corporeal knowledge is gathered, challenged and advanced.

The important alliances I've forged over this time with neuroscientists, anatomists, microscopists, medical researchers and more recently an ophthalmic photographer, plant scientists and horticulturalists have resulted in rich and rewarding experiences and often unexpected outcomes. All of these relationships remain central to my practice and the daily machinations of our work, our endeavours and our shared curiosity form the foundation of my arts practice.

Shared Reckonings has evolved as a creative response to two concurrent residencies undertaken during 2019 for a project titled *The Visible Light Project: experiments in light and perception* at the Botanic

Image: Catherine Truman, *Restless Calm*, 2020. Thermoplastic, photoluminescent powders, steel cable, mirror-ball motor, cloth curtain, solar panels, battery pack.

Gardens and State Herbarium and the Flinders Centre for Ophthalmology, Eye and Vision Research, School of Medicine, Flinders University.

Over this time, I gained a more thorough understanding of how both plants and eyes use light and how light determines their structure; both have photoreceptors. Remarkably, light crosses boundaries; from the internal to the external structures through the vascular and neural networks found in both the leaf and the human retina. These were powerful and meaningful metaphors to examine through a creative response.

The entire body of work for this exhibition was made during extraordinary times. I had planned to spend 2020 in my studio making an exhibition in creative response to this rare research. In a sense the conversations of the past year were fodder enough, but I hadn't reckoned on unprecedented, catastrophic bushfires sweeping across the nation, nor a global pandemic.

The solitude of my making under these bizarre circumstances of course had a major impact on all aspects of this exhibition. Profound internal and external forces were at play, every moment of every day as each work took on its own life, my heart and hands as mediators.

Shared Reckonings is a testament to both the pivotal dialogue shared with others across a rare mix of disciplines blended with some profoundly deep and private deliberations on what it is to be human right here, right now.

Sharing Catherine Truman
Ian Gibbins

“What do you reckon?” she asks, quietly, insistent, the air around us ever so slightly aglow.

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We need time to consider our answer, this time, these strange times: a leap-year (a day too long, a jump too far), an un-year (unprecedented, unpredictable, untouchable), a re-year (reflective, resourceful, regenerative). We have been immersed in difference and distance. We have been assailed in body and mind. We have sought new connections, strengthened existing linkages, headed out together in defiant collaboration.

But what can we do when surrounded by fire, when the atmosphere on which we depend is choked with smoke and replicating particles, not quite dead, not quite alive, that will destroy our ability to take another breath?

Maybe there is an option not to remain housebound. Conceivably, there is opportunity to explore anew, to follow dimly-lit paths through unrecognisable terrain. Perhaps, we will find a world of ghosts, somehow restless, somehow calm, within shards of dark matter, bending with the winds of change, balanced around the rim of another future, reminding us of where we have been and where we might next proceed.

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We should not be afraid of the dark, a transient absence of light. After sundown, there is so much to see. We may be fortunate to glimpse the eerie bioluminescence of forest fungi or phosphorescent intertidal plankton, that use complex biochemistry and quantum physics to generate their cool colours. Or on a clear night, we can gaze on distant stars and galaxies, our eyes capturing photons, those strange wave-particles of light, that have travelled through space for thousands of years before our births.

We should not be afraid of the dark, yet light is vital for so many forms of life. Over three billion years ago, tiny single-celled organisms, the ancient precursors of today’s plants, evolved the biochemical wherewithal to convert the energy of photons to the chemical energy required for growth. Along the way, they produced enough oxygen to change the biosphere for ever, establishing the basic conditions for the evolution of large animals. Indeed, we, like all living creatures, depend on plants for our survival.

We should not be afraid of the dark as, together, we recalculate our uncertainties. Beyond the physics and biochemistry, we have our networks. We are enmeshed by interconnections. These are our rootstocks and tendrils; our capillaries and veins; our nerve fibres and synapses. We can be moulded by the heat of association, coloured by the prism of experience, tempered by the gentle hand of affection.

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She says, “This is an arrangement of sorrow and solace.”

She says, “Nature cannot bend towards human needs anymore.”

She says, “I rely upon the movement and the memory in my hands.”

She says, “There is making after the making... the object has gained an after-life.”

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Definition (1): *a plastic polymer material that becomes pliable or mouldable at a certain elevated temperature and solidifies upon cooling.*

Definition (2): *a lightweight black carbon residue produced by strongly heating wood in very little oxygen so as to drive off all water and other volatile constituents.*

Definition (3): *a form of cold-body radiation, the result of triplet-singlet electron relaxation, with a typical lifetime of milliseconds to hours.*

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This is time spent at the bench, in laboratories, amongst materials and machines and the people who understand them. This is slow time, unhurried and patient, a diffusible fluid upon which we can float, following tides of inspiration and insight, borne by the ebb and flow of discovery.

And now there is light in our eyes and we wonder what it means, we try to determine its source. In defiance of gravity, as if seedlings, we grow towards the sun, as if moths, we fly towards the moon.

Back on earth, surrounded by earth, we can feel dust in our bones, ash on our skin. Hoping to avoid creeping desiccation, to evade approaching conflagration, we wilt. We await the return of rain.

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Should we lose our bearings, misplace our sense of direction, we still have options, we can still search a list of possible locations:

- subterranean (once tunnelled, occasionally entwined);
- dorsal root, dorsal horn, dorsal funiculus (incoming, sensual, gated);
- Factory, Workshop, Lounge (furnaced, wrought, moulded afresh);
- New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia (Cobargo, Mallacoota, Kangaroo Island);
- isolation, isomerisation (regroup, reform);
- Parliament (a void), Parliament (a vacuum);
- Botanic, Memorial, vegetable (as in gardens, greened, blooded);
- home, exile, home (enforced, incendiary, malleable).

There may be more, maybe fewer. Regardless, we take comfort in the guidance of dialogue.

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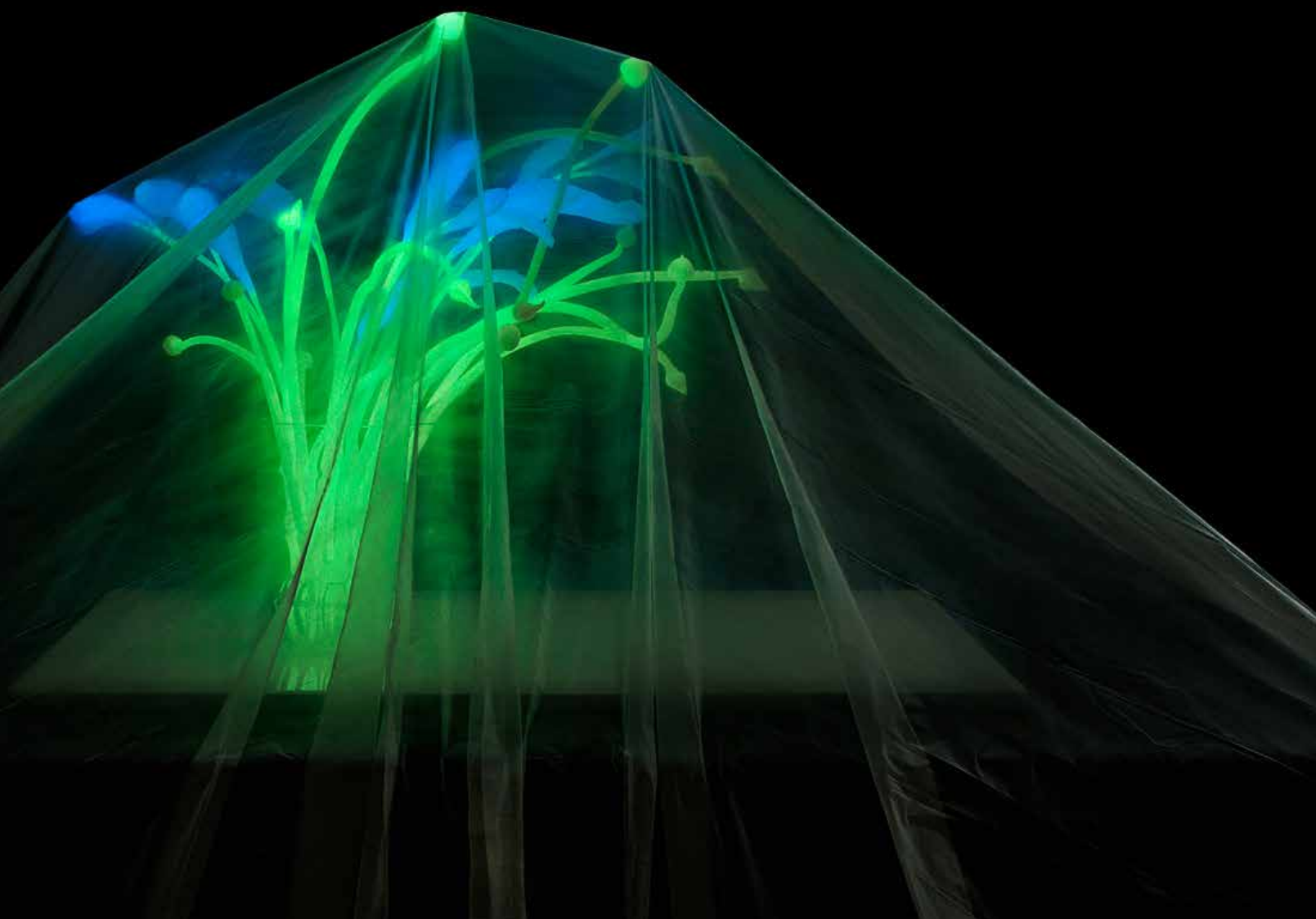
Synthesis, construction, assembly, installation: our thesaurus of alliance and witness amongst the visibility of light.

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“So...” she asks again, “what do you reckon?”

“Well, yes,” we say. “Of course. Let’s go.”

This is hers and ours to share and we are grateful.



Ghost

During 2019 I was asked to create a work in response to the loss of our biodiversity due to climate change for an exhibition called *Elegy*, curated by Katie Scott of Gallery Funaki, Melbourne. Ironically, early 2020, I found myself in my studio making this work as the catastrophic bushfires raged across massive tracts of Australia.

The exhibition opened in March 2020 and closed early due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The plants are made of thermoplastic and embedded with two different kinds of photoluminescent powders, so that in low or no light the stems and buds will glow green, whilst the leaves glow a soft electric blue.

The forms are cast from silicon impressions of young bok choy leaves and onion buds grown in my home garden; the structure of lens in the human eye is much like the layers of an onion. There are three Aquamarine stone crystal-cut tears that are dripping from three of the plants, a reference to mourning. The arrangement is held in vintage scientific glass flask from the Microscopy Department, Flinders University and a glass frog of the depression era.

The plastic shroud is an addition for *Shared Reckonings*.

If plants were to breathe in light and exhale perhaps they would look like this. *Ghost* is an apparition, a reality and a memory; an arrangement of sorrow and solace.

Image: Catherine Truman, *Ghost*, 2020.
Thermoplastic, photoluminescent powders,
vintage laboratory glass beaker, vintage glass frog,
aquamarine crystal-cut tears, light pad, timer, black cloth,
acrylic sheet, plastic sheet.



Dark Matter

Dark Matter was made in the aftermath of the catastrophic Australian bushfires at the beginning of 2020.

There is a darkness that counters the light, redolent with loss and uncertainty; of something that once was, that may never return.

Formed in thermoplastic, malleable in the heat, the charred branches are an anomaly; an aberration. The branches are branches no more; they are collapsed and impossibly molten; they are stretched and exhausted.

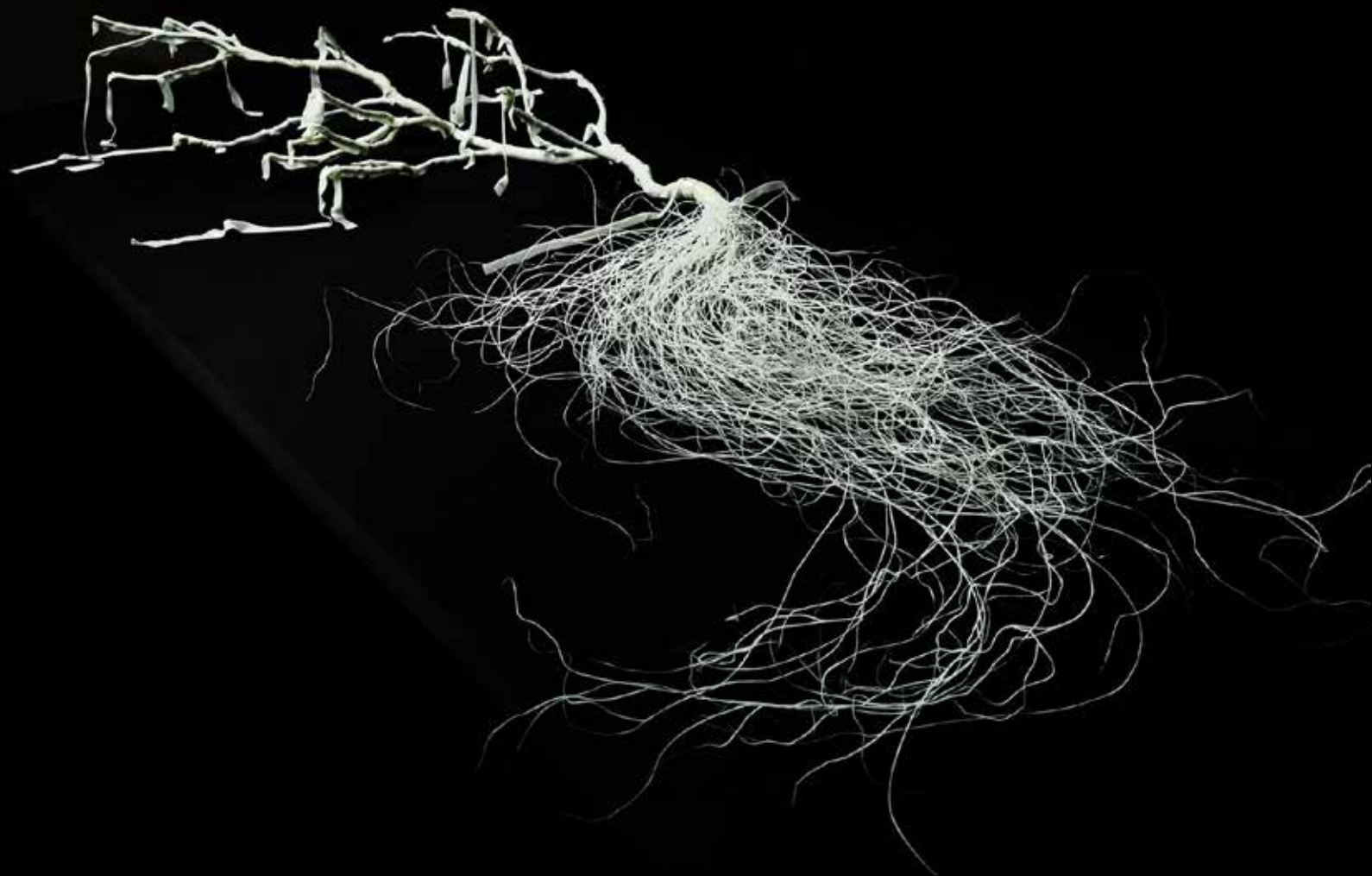
As we wake to the realities of climate change, there is an overwhelming sense that nature cannot bend towards human needs anymore.

Things lose their shape in the dark
as well as the light.

There are gains
as well as losses.

Dark matters.

Image: Catherine Truman, *Dark Matter*, 2020.
Thermoplastic, paint, glass vessel (made by Jamfactory, Adelaide),
gloss black acrylic sheet, black cloth.



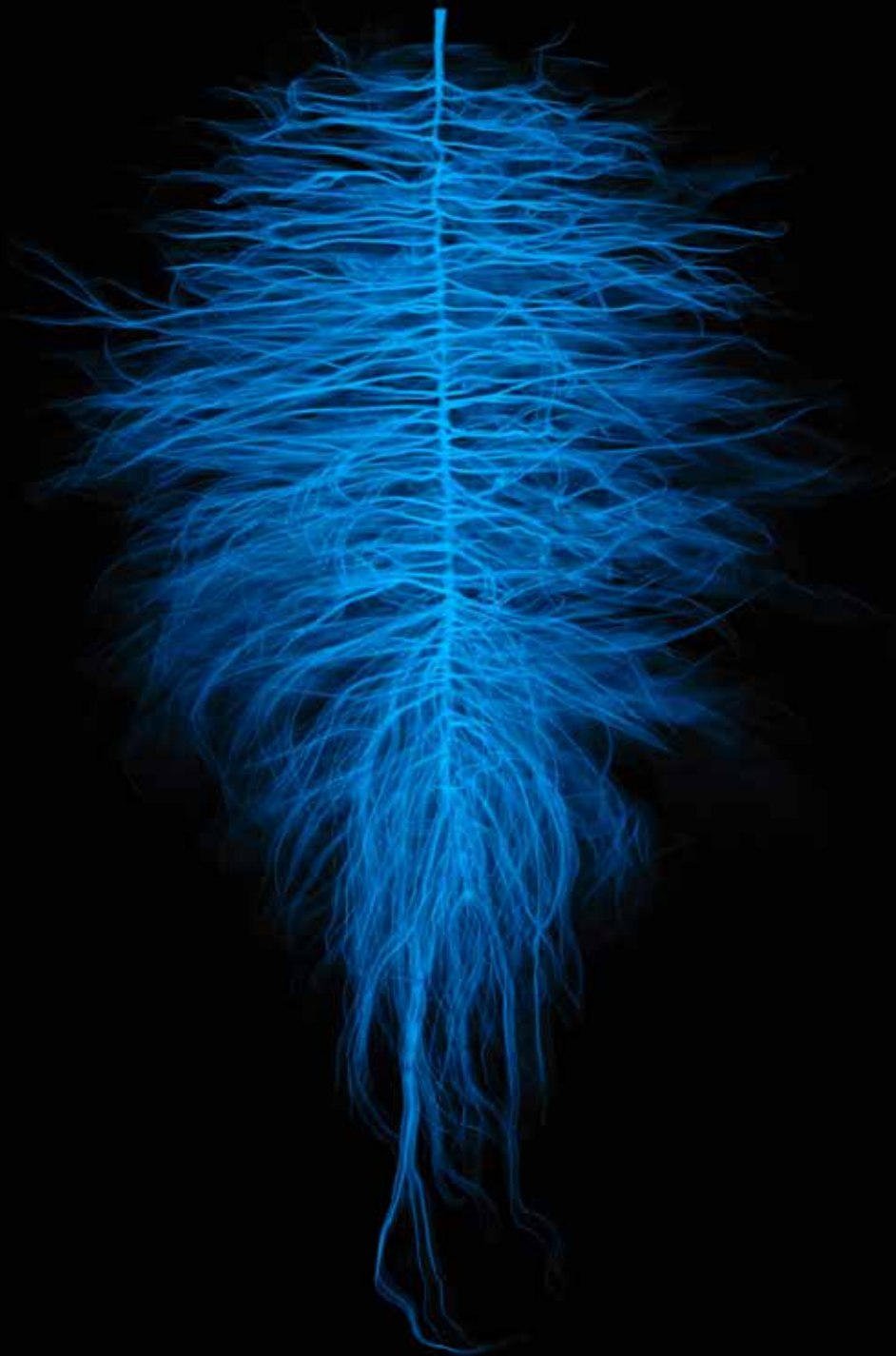
Graft

Graft, mend, restore.

The foundation for this work is a fallen branch from a charred eucalyptus tree collected after the Adelaide Hills bushfires of 2020. Covered in molten strips of thermoplastic embedded with vivid green photoluminescent powder, formed to resemble the tape commonly used for tree-grafting.

I bound a mass of fine roots to its splintered stub and all the while I wondered whether the roots were a kind of subterranean record of the tree's past or a hopeless bid to revive it back to life.

Image: Catherine Truman, *Graft*, 2020.
Thermoplastic, photoluminescent powder,
charred eucalyptus branch from the Adelaide
Hills' fires of 2020.



Restless Calm

This installation is displayed in the Deadhouse (the Mortuary Building) in the heart of Adelaide Botanic Garden.

A large mass of fine white tendrils slides between the root system of a plant and a human nervous system.

A suspended root system, the work is entirely hand-made from thermoplastic embedded with photoluminescent powder so it glows ice blue in the dark.

I began with the intention of making a single tap-root, however, every day it asserted more space and eventually gained a whole body presence; sliding between root system and my own nervous system moment by moment.

As this complex, anchored network of fine tendrils grew, the pandemic was unfolding...

After a while, the uncertainty and fear of the pandemic played out like the ebb and flow of a restless sea.

Moments of unease, moments of calm.

Gradually it feels like a trustworthy pattern, so I'll begin...

Breathe in and make... push off from the shore, better equipped.

I can rely upon movement and the memory in my hands; all the raw materials I need.

I have to shift inside to know where to grow it, this network, this retina, this neurovascular radicle, these new and old distances.

There is making after the making.

It's as if the object has gained an after-life; deep and physical, examined and re-examined.

Image: Catherine Truman, *Restless Calm*, 2020.
Thermoplastic, photoluminescent powders, steel cable,
mirror-ball motor, cloth curtain,
solar panels, battery pack.

Shared Reckonings

The thermoplastic plants in this installation are embedded with blue and green photoluminescent powders and respond to the changing light conditions. After they have been charged with light they will re-emit it in the darkness and glow vivid green and blue.

Tipping the balance, this is an installation of hybrid plants in various states of life and death, chaotically arranged in a collapsing hand-blown glass beaker.

I was given permission to collect various leaves from the plants in Adelaide Botanic Garden. I chose a number of plant species from around the world that had pronounced vascular networks, including the leaves of *Tetradenia fruticosa* from Madagascar which are rugose; wrinkled and corrugated and lanceolate; as well as selecting nasturtium and bok choy leaves common to Australian urban gardens.

Whilst ensconced in the workroom of the Museum of Economic Botany I made detailed silicon moulds of the leaves and cast thermoplastic forms, juxtaposing different species and customising leaf margins to form a large, somewhat chaotic arrangement of faux hybrid plants. With the light behind the transparent leaves, the shared, overlaid vascular networks are revealed; networks endemic to different parts of the globe sharing and sustaining life.

After the many conversations with the horticulturalists and botanists I realise that being alone with the despair of climate change is a choice. These plant scientists who are immersed at the coalface of the dilemmas humanity faces are deeply informed and sow seeds of hope. It is vital we begin to listen and learn across all fields of knowledge, share our questions, share our reckonings.

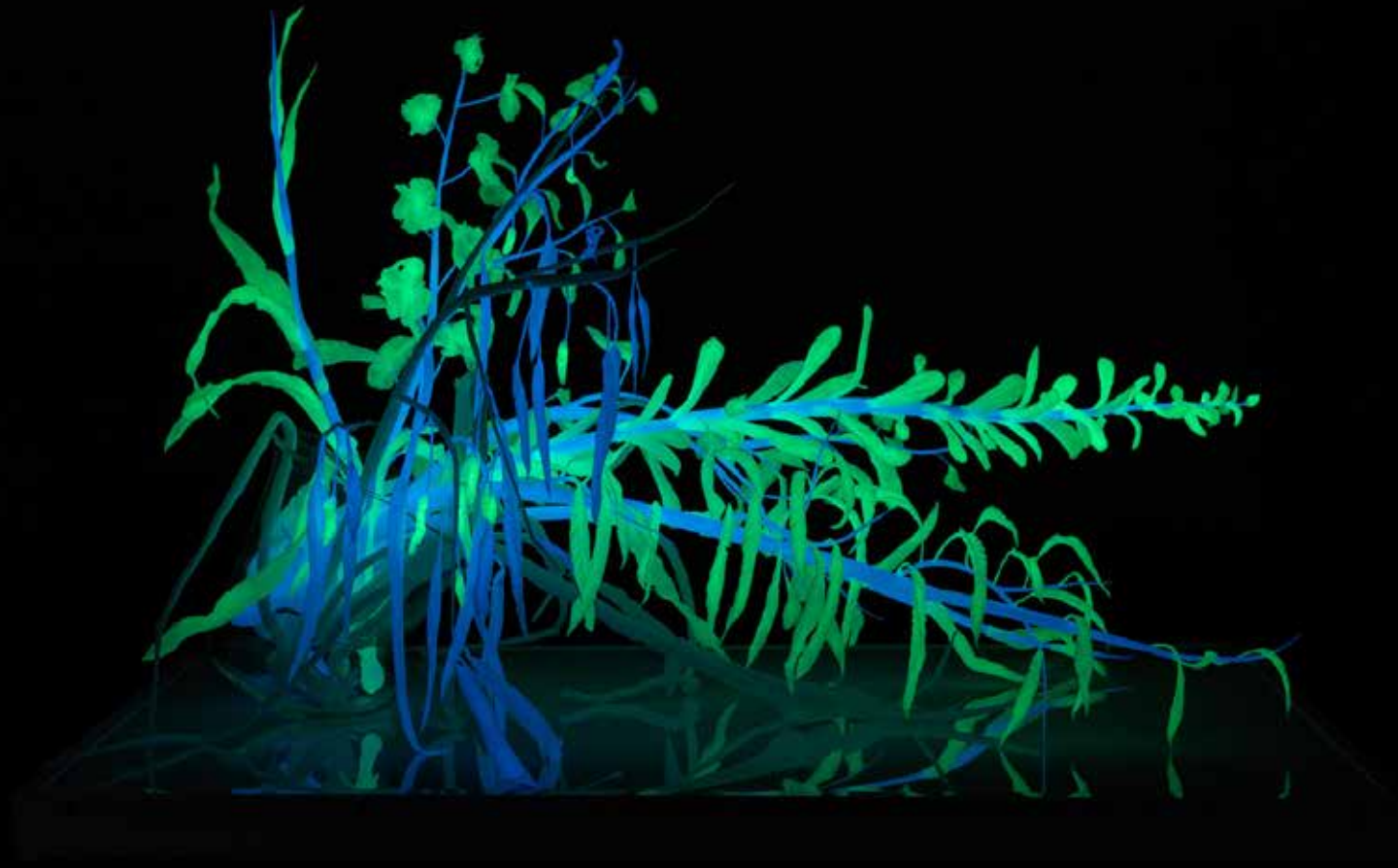


Image: Catherine Truman, *Shared Reckonings*, 2020.
Thermoplastic, photoluminescent powders, glass balls, blown glass beaker
(made by Liam Flemming, Jamfactory), light boxes, black cloth.

LIST OF WORKS

Santos Museum of Economic Botany

Ghost, 2020.

Thermoplastic, photoluminescent powders, vintage laboratory glass beaker, vintage glass frog, aquamarine crystal-cut tears, acrylic sheet, light pad, timer, black cloth, plastic sheet.
h 500 x w 700 x d 550mm.

Dark Matter, 2020

Thermoplastic, paint, glass vessel (made by Jamfactory, Adelaide), gloss black acrylic sheet, black cloth.
h 1200 x w 1400 x d 800mm.

Graft, 2020

Thermoplastic, photoluminescent powder, charred Eucalyptus branch from the Adelaide Hills' fires of 2020.
h 170 x w 1700 x d 750mm

Shared Reckonings, 2020

Thermoplastic, photoluminescent powders, glass balls, hand-blown glass beaker (made by Liam Flemming, Jamfactory), light boxes, black cloth.
h 650 x w 1300 x d 700mm

The Deadhouse (The Mortury Building)

Restless Calm, 2020

Thermoplastic, photoluminescent powders, steel cable, mirror-ball motor, cloth curtain, solar panels, battery pack.
h 1950mm x diameter 1000mm.

Shared Reckonings: Experimental Short Films 2019 – 2021

A series films by Catherine Truman in collaboration with Angela Chappell, ophthalmic photographer and Ian Gibbins, video poet and former neuroscientist.

1. *Fluid Eye*, 2019

Catherine Truman: images and audio
Ian Gibbins: video and audio editing
2:48 minutes

2. *Nasturtium Angiogram*, 2020

Catherine Truman: images
Ian Gibbins: editing
2:14 minutes

3. *Nasturtium Water Lens*, 2019

Catherine Truman: images and audio
Ian Gibbins: video and audio editing
3:02 minutes

4. *Fluttering Bok Choy*, 2019

Catherine Truman: images and audio
Ian Gibbins: video and audio editing
0:57 minutes

5. *Bud*, 2019

Catherine Truman & Angela Chappell: images and audio
Ian Gibbins: video and audio editing
1:24 minutes

6. *Epithelium*, 2021

Catherine Truman & Angela Chappell: images and audio
Ian Gibbins: video and audio editing
4:08 minutes

7. *Eclipse*, 2021

Catherine Truman, Angela Chappell & Ian Gibbins: images
Ian Gibbins: audio & editing
3:14 minutes

8. *Restless Calm: Afterlife*, 2021

Catherine Truman: object
Grant Hancock: images
Ian Gibbins: editing
4:51 minutes

Biography

Catherine Truman is an established artist working across the disciplines of art and science. She is a co-founder and current partner of Gray Street Workshop, an internationally renowned artist-run workshop established in 1985 in Adelaide, South Australia.

Truman's practice is renowned for its diversity and depth and incorporates, objects, contemporary jewellery, digital imagery, film and installation works with a focus upon the parallels between artistic process and scientific method. Between 2009 and 2013 she was artist in residence in the Autonomic Neurotransmission Laboratory, the Anatomy and Histology departments and the Microscopy Suite at Flinders University, Adelaide.

Truman was awarded an Arts South Australia Fellowship in 2016 and her work was featured in a significant survey exhibition at the Art Gallery of South Australia. She was the subject of the 2016 South Australian Living Artist (SALA) monograph, *Catherine Truman: touching distance*, written by Melinda Rackham, published by Wakefield Press. Truman was selected as the 2017 Jamfactory Icon and a solo exhibition, highlighting her art/science practice titled *no surface holds* toured nationally 2018-2020.

During 2019 Truman was artist in residence at the Botanic Gardens and State Herbarium and the Flinders Centre for Ophthalmology, Eye and Vision Research, School of Medicine, Flinders University undertaking *The Visible Light Project: experiments in light and perception*. Working alongside botanists, horticulturalists and an ophthalmologic photographer Truman researched the parallels between the ways in which the human eye and plants process light.

Truman is represented in major state, national and international collections.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the land I live and work on is the traditional land of Kurna people and respect their people and culture.

I am greatly indebted to those who generously shared their time, knowledge, curiosity and conversation with me during this project.

This exhibition is all the richer for your contributions: Emeritus Professor Kerryn Williams, Associate Professor Richard Mills, Carolyn Ricci, Chelsea Novice, Robert (Bob) Baldock, Dr Hellmut Tolken, Dr Peter J Lang, Robyn M Barker, Dr WR (Bill) Barker, Helen Vonow, Paul Winter and John Sandham.

Thanks also to Kelly Bramhill, Christine Schloithe and the volunteers at the Museum of Economic Botany for your on-ground support and to my studio community at Gray Street Workshop: Jess Dare, Lisa Furno and Woori Han.

I would like to give special thanks to Tony Kanellos for his great encouragement, support and enthusiasm for this project; Angela Chappell, an extraordinary ophthalmic photographer, for always being open to my presence in her clinic, to my endless questions, and to some intrepid art-making; Ian Gibbins, my long-time collaborator and dear friend for endless hours of creative film development and skilled editing; Grant Hancock for some mighty fine images; Liam Flemming and Kristal Britcher at the Jamfactory for their glass expertise; Michelle Delaney (Maddog) for her miraculous multi-tasking and consummate construction and Sue Lorraine for her enduring love.

I am grateful for the invaluable professional support and assistance from Arts South Australia; Adelaide Festival; Flinders Centre for Ophthalmology, Eye and Vision Research, Flinders Medical Centre, Flinders University; State Herbarium & Botanic Gardens of South Australia, enabling me to grow and share this unique project.

Catherine Truman: Shared Reckonings

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Adelaide Botanic Garden

24 February – 2 May 2021

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Printer Print Matters

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Cover image: Still from *Restless Calm: Afterlife*, 2021

Catherine Truman: object
Grant Hancock: images
Ian Gibbins: editing
4:51 minutes

Back cover image:
Santos Museum of Economic Botany
Photo: Grant Hancock





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