

NEST

Alastair Mooney



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The artist contemplates the inevitable marriage of human industry and native birdlife.

Presenting nine new sculptures, Alastair Mooney has used a range of materials to reflect the rich patina of Tasmania's contemporary landscape. Using Huon pine, mother-of-pearl, leather and even the rusted remnants of a car, the artist contemplates the inevitable marriage of human industry and native birdlife. While it may be tempting to view *Nest* as a moralistic statement on the degradation of the environment and the disruption this causes to the natural order of things, the composition of the sculptures elicit a more nuanced reading.

Growing up in George Town, Mooney developed a strong attraction to the birdlife of the region. This motivated him to spend much of his youth exploring the coastline of Northern Tasmania. While the inspiration for this exhibition springs from

personal experience, Mooney's artistic instincts have tapped into a popular subject for contemporary artists; the age of the Anthropocene. The term Anthropocene emerged from ecological debates in the 1980s and refers to the layer of the earth's crust that has irreversibly absorbed the impact of human activity. The concept of the Anthropocene is an evocative one. It allows us to understand both the permanence of our impact on the earth and the transience of our era of supremacy over it in geological and chronological terms. Just as the earth's layers hold echoes of long forgotten species and tectonic events in past geological periods, so too will the layer dubbed Anthropocene reveal the scars left by humans once our era of dominance over the earth has ended.

We are from and of nature and leave our traces everywhere we go.

In scale, *Megahaliaeetus Dead Car* (2020) is the artist's most ambitious work to date and holds the centre of the exhibition, offering a premonition into a future where the Anthropocene has ended. To create this piece, Mooney revisited an old stomping ground – a quarry filled with discarded cars, whitegoods and assorted hard rubbish – a perfect place for a young artist to camp,

practice graffiti and become immersed in nature. To his delight, he found a car that a friend had used for just such graffiti practice a decade earlier. This rusting hulk, still bearing his friend's spray paint, remained in place, preserved amongst the encroaching bush and wildlife. Just as Tasmania's famous and pristine national parks are representative of our regard for the environment, so too, in their own way, are the barren old quarries filled with abandoned cars.

While all of the other sculpted birds in this exhibition are life-size, the white-bellied sea eagle perched atop the rusted carcass of a small van has been rendered in colossal proportions.





This switch in perspective invites multiple interpretations from the viewer. We could see this work as an indictment of the practice of dumping cars and the ongoing degradation of our landscape. However, another reading could contend that humans have been living in Tasmania for around 40,000 years – we are from and of nature and leave our traces everywhere we go. Just like the spectacular eagle’s evolutionary journey, this crumpled car skeleton resulted from millennia of human evolution, only to land in a quarry in the Central Highlands of Tasmania.

The birds, carved with painstaking care and intimacy, are neither victims nor passive observers of the human detritus amongst which they are depicted. They command, play and nest within them. Proudly perched

upon a dumped tyre, a cormorant is posed, mid-cry, with its wings splayed (*Phalacrocorax Dumped Tyre*). In *Ninox Pinot* an owl grips a wine bottle, greeting the viewer with an enquiring stare. Both birds seem possessive of their objects, using them to get our attention. If we avoid a simplistic reading of the birds and their objects being solely about environmental conservation, a more interesting and haunting idea emerges. When we absorb the power and subtle humour contained in the birds’ poses, and reflect upon the avian ability to adapt, our own adaptability comes into sharp focus. In contrast with humans, who have been unable to adapt in response to the mounting climate crisis, these birds show a resilience and dynamism humans could aspire to.





Without cars and oil or the food and wine industry, Tasmania would not function in the modern world. It is likely that the birds who have inhabited and watched over this land for thousands of years will continue to serve as sentinels as the echoes of human industry wither and rust beneath them.

The materials used in these works reflect the artist's understanding of the disparity between the evidence of deep time found in the landscape versus our egocentric understanding of the present moment. Huon pine is endemic to Tasmania, only growing in the southern and western rainforest regions of the state, and can live up to 2,500 years.

These enormous trees grow slowly – only a millimetre in girth a year – and do not reproduce until they are between 600 and 800 years old. Huon wood has a very high oil content that acts as a natural pesticide, making it a popular material for colonial boat builders. In the 1970s, legislation was introduced to protect these significant trees from further harvesting. Enough Huon timber was stockpiled from trees cleared for hydroelectric dams that it is anticipated this supply will last for another two human generations.

Mooney uses this ancient and resilient material to carve beer cans.



Nest is an exhibition that is playful and endearing but also inspires us to consider our complex relationships with the land and the species we share it with.

Easily crushed and ubiquitously discarded at campsites around the world, aluminium cans, of which 180 billion are produced globally every year, are a stark contrast to the rare and measured growth of Huon pine. *Malurus Boonies* features the adorably busy fairy wren, a native species found across Tasmania, as it hops upon and inspects a carved crushed can. In sculpting the cans from Huon pine, Mooney transforms an easily forgotten piece of rubbish into a thoughtful ode to camping trips long past. Paired with the beloved fairy wren, this work creates a sense of warmth and affection to counter the carelessness of a discarded can.

Alastair Mooney's first solo exhibition in a public institution reflects upon the myths and realities that we use to form our modern

Tasmanian identity. Whether hiking through a national park or practicing his graffiti style on a rusted car bonnet, Mooney has always had the company of birds. The awe-inspiring span of a raptor's wings as it swirls above or a shockingly perfect owl corpse on the side of the road have provided a consistent thread through the artist's interactions in the landscape. As the birds depicted in Mooney's sculptures, *Nest* is an exhibition that is playful and endearing but also inspires us to consider our complex relationships with the land and the species we share it with.

Ashleigh Watling
Senior Curator, Visual Art and Design

Featured works

Page 3 and 4	Alastair Mooney <i>Megahaliaeetus Dead Car</i> 2020 Huon pine, slaved car wreck, resin, leather and enamel
Page 5 left	Alastair Mooney <i>Pelecanus Empties</i> 2020 Huon pine, steel and enamel
Page 5 middle	Alastair Mooney <i>Zosterops Reo</i> 2020 Huon pine, Tasmanian blackwood, mother-of-pearl, steel and enamel
Page 5 right	Alastair Mooney <i>Phalacrocorax Dumped Tyre</i> 2020 Huon pine, steel and enamel
Page 6 right	Alastair Mooney <i>Calyptorhynchus Wizard Staff</i> 2020 Huon pine, steel and enamel
Page 7 left	Alastair Mooney <i>Falco Chicko</i> 2020 Huon pine, steel and enamel
Page 7 right and cover	Alastair Mooney <i>Ninox Pinot</i> 2020 Huon pine, steel and enamel

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