Aqua Poetica

Water is a precious and troubling resource, and the centre of a new exchange, writes **Nick Chilvers**.

Just as advancing technologies in the use of crude-oil products and fuels drove the petroleum age, many believe that the 21st century will be driven by hydro politics and technologies. It is clear that contestations related to control of water resources are set to increasingly frame geo-politics in coming years and decades. Scarcity is already a frequent cause of conflict. Sixty-six million people are currently displaced in the world. Water is a problem for them, both in the homelands they flee and in the places where they seek shelter. The refugee crisis in northern Jordan, for example, is directly linked to water availability. The Al Azraq Refugee Camp currently houses 35,709 Syrian refugees and half of them are children. There is no clean water source. Drinking-water must be delivered by tanker trucks daily, or else pumped from makeshift or illegal desert boreholes that endanger Jordan's largest groundwater basin. Water infrastructure is clearly an essential strategic resource for all life and human development.

To explore hydro-politics from an embodied perspective, investigating the poetics of living with or without water in two countries on opposite sides of the globe is an ambitious idea—especially when those countries are defined by extremes: Italy (in particular Venice) and Australia. This exploratory project has been conducted by a small group of artists from both countries who have exchanged distinct and divergent responses to the poetics of water using the simple economy of small artworks on paper, sent through the mail. *Aqua poetica* maps the outcomes of this international collaboration, simply referred to as *Water,* organised by artists from Artery Cooperative in Victoria, Australia, and Scuola Internazionale di Grafica (International School of Graphics) in Venice, Italy. Curators and contributing artists Helen Kocis Edwards, Alexis Beckett, Andrej Kocis and Déirdre Kelly explore water in all its complexity through fifty-eight works on paper completed by artists with wildly different yet connected perspectives. This collaboration between Australia and Venice opens up important discussions around the significance of water and its relationship to mutually ubiquitous experiences. The *poetics* are located in the different visions of the world that individual interpretations evoke as they interact through a mutual convergence of concepts, life views and attitudes.

Melbourne artist and *Water* curator Kocis Edwards says, 'Concern about water has become part of both our cultures.' Yet, each artwork elaborates a vastly different association; a fear of drowning, a dream about an old boat, or an erotic adventure, for example. At the heart of this collaboration, there is an aleatory exchange between people working with an open idea about water. The poetry emerges out of the laconicism of the water theme and the ways in which each contribution extends meaning to the other. The emerging patterns and interstices expose a deeply entrenched relationship between experiences with water and primary issues to do with identity and collective humanity.

Australian artist Ruth Johnstone lives in a remote part of south-eastern Australia. Like many Australians who live rurally, she relies solely on a small water tank for potable water. Recent drought, causing catastrophic summer bushfires and dust storms, has tainted the water supply. Emptying the water tank to clear acrid particles and clay dust relies on scant, if any, rainfall to replenish the water

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opposite
Déirdre Kelly, *Leave No Trace 1* (detail) 2020, collagraph and collage on nautical map. 30 x 30 cm, edition: unique state. Reproduced with permission of the artist/ National Gallery of Victoria Private Collection.

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above
Helen Kocis Edwards, *Skater Girl, Bilby and the Winged Lion,* 2019, drypoint etching on giclee print, 30 x 30 cm, image 26 x 26 cm, edition 1/20. Reproduced with permission of the artist/ Scuola Internazionale di Grafica Venice.

Photography: Andrej Kocis

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left
Rebecca Young, *Lucky Country North*, 2019, giclee print, 30 x 30 cm, edition: unique state. Reproduced with permission of the artist/ Scuola Internazionale di Grafica Venice.

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above
Lara Vaienti, *Empirical Picture of a Flood in Venice Lagoon Area*, 2020, giclee print and ink drawing, 30 x 30 cm, edition: unique state. Reproduced with permission of the artist/ Private Collection.

Photography: Andrej Kocis

store. Marking the decreasing levels of dam water over summer has become a lugubrious daily routine. Johnstone begins with a delicate, watery woodblock, which is progressively layered with waterborne pigments and contaminants she collects from her dam and tank. Additional watercolour pigments intensify the experience and process of recording climatic shifts. The stained and annotated paper then records, through a visual diary, how water access and quality affects life outside of services provided to the community.

Rebecca Young assumes a more sardonic approach, addressing Australian identity and hydro-politics through two topological studies titled *Lucky Country North* (2020) and *Lucky Country South* (2020). Using digital images, ink and fine brushes, Young methodically maps out the rivers and water catchments in the eastern states of Australia. Rendering the topology in this way draws the material qualities of studio work closer to lived experiences and everyday life. Recalling road trips, vacations and experiences in townships on the East Coast of Australia throughout her lifetime, Young overlays each location with satirical names such as 'Mass Fish Kill River', which supplies water to 'The Garden State'[2] in place of Victoria. Young says, 'I named the rivers, lakes and seas for the environmental damage inflicted on them, such as "Algal Bloom River", "Radioactive Lake" and "Petrochemical Ocean". I made the map

to characterise our exploitation of "the lucky country".' Young's map appears straightforward, but as I attempted to locate myself as a Melburnian, I found myself at the mouth of 'Port Faecal Bay' (otherwise known as Port Phillip Bay), which is shaped by the scooping arm of an unmarked yet cynical peninsula, which seems to be gesturing 'Go away!' to anyone approaching by sea. These glib puns speak to the core of the most pressing issues underlying contemporary Australian identity today.

Venetian artist Lara Vaienti explores high waters that endanger her home in her artworks, *Book cover of a non-fictional climate disgrace* (2019), and *Empirical picture of a flood in Venice lagoon area* (2019). A sense of fear and grief underlies the proposition of an epic narrative that entangles the visible certainties of a progressive environmental disaster with the human purposes of fantasy and fable. The lagoon area has been a site of struggle and resilience since the 5th century. During that time, Barbarians descending upon the crumbling Roman Empire chased the Veneti people from the north-east coast of Italy into the sea, where they sought refuge on the marshy islands. The diaspora swelled with further invasions yet, rather than perishing, they transformed their temporary settlements into a series of prosperous fishing communities that eventually interlinked fortified trading ports. Over time, rising from the archipelago, the palazzos

became monuments to the extraordinary aquatic city—la Lagune di Venezia. While parts of Australia are experiencing severe drought, Venice is submerged beneath one of the worst acqua alta events in history. Today, this monument is slowly being subsumed and decayed by its own idyllic (and once protective) environment.

Kocis Edwards says, 'Water creates global, social, political and environmental concerns effecting humans, animals and plants alike. For the *Water* exchange, Australian and Italian artists have created these works on paper to explore the imagery and issues surrounding this essential element.' The brevity of the call-out was a practical strategy to ensure that interactions and meanings between the artworks were unmediated, autonomous and free. All works are on paper and 30cm square, pinned uniformly to the wall, without didactics, exegesis or institutional devices to frame the viewer's perspective. A project space among the studios and workshops at Artery Cooperative was used, where the works were collected and exhibited. *Water*, somewhat ominously, came together at the same time as COVID-19 lockdowns began to increase.[3] For this reason very small numbers, approximately four at a time, could access the project space, giving the experience of viewing artworks an entirely different feeling to any conventional art show or exhibition. *Water* became more of a private collation of individual pictures and concepts that

could be viewed collectively in a quiet and contemplative space.

To flesh out the ideas in sculptural works on paper, Artery Artists were invited to contribute 3D works to the project. Kocis Edwards made 3D circular works on paper, which she displayed in Perspex boxes. The broader *Water* project frames these circular works within a wider conversation that incorporates a polyphony of individual contributions. Kocis Edwards began with research into the architectural history of Venice, Italy's most northern capital of the Veneto region. Her work commenced in preparation for an artist residency at Scuola di Grafica in September 2019. The circular works are reminiscent of the perspectival boxes associated with the Delft school in the late 17th century. During that period, a new pictorial synthesis was sought in Holland, which could depict both activity and environment in realistic representations of people within architecture and nature. The familiar peephole and linear illusions of perspectival boxes are replaced in Kocis Edward's Perspex containers, however, by an open view. *Skater Girl, Bilby and the Winged Lion (2019)* allows the viewer to spy on *Skater Girl's* trip to Venice through the Perspex, investigating her relationships while exploring connections and kinships between humans and animals, as well as natural and built environments. Kocis Edwards' narratives are whimsical and abstract, as they are rolled out on a three-dimensional picture plane.

There are relationships which can be observed between tactile, microscopic environments and expanded landscapes through the *Water* project. For example, Italian artist and curator at Scuola di Graphica, Déirdre Kelly reflects on the imaginative idea of floating over 'individual territories' in relation to her artwork. Kelly says that she is fascinated by maps and the intercontinental languages

Australian/Chinese artist and printmaker Jessi Wong made her artwork *Waterworld* (2019) out of a previous work, also based on the theme of water. Recycling the excess materials of her broader practice was an ethical response to ideas of surplus and over-flow—metaphors that linked the theme to the studio work in the artist's mind. Like Kocis Edwards, Wong works three dimensionally in her broader practice, using rolls and folds of paper to demonstrate the substance of the material and its printed surface. In her previous work *The end of the world II* (2019), Wong prints over the entire surface of a ten-metre-long roll of rice paper, which she mounts so that it cascades down the wall like an unravelling scroll, folding against the floor like ripples of water. Wong developed *Waterworld* by collaging together tiny shreds taken from offcuts and trimmings from the making of *The end of the world II*. Adding shreds of yellow ochre rice paper to represent the sun rippling upon the surface of the ocean, Wong creates a sense of expanse rendered with tiny bits of coloured paper.

they speak. She says from time to time we choose to draw maps as if it is still necessary to reference the physical world in material ways. We do this in spite of the proliferation of data and new interaction technologies that make maps all the richer, more dynamic and immersive. In contrast to Kelly's macroscopic views, Melbourne-based printmaker Alexis Beckett uses a more close-up, sensory approach, investigating microbes and eukaryotic organisms living within water. Beckett created her artworks, *Lagoon Life #1* (2019) and *Lagoon Life #2* (2019), by wetting the paper and embossing it with tiny pieces of string and rope— fragments of fishing line and nets she found in the lagoon in Venice during a recent trip. She then patterned the rippled surface with intricate designs resembling phytoplankton diatoms and other algal blooms. Beckett's interest stems from her thoughts about the manner in which such tiny organisms are vital to life. Being responsible for half of the photosynthetic activity on Earth, phytoplankton forms the foundation for the entire marine life food web and, by extension, contributes to all greater global ecosystems.
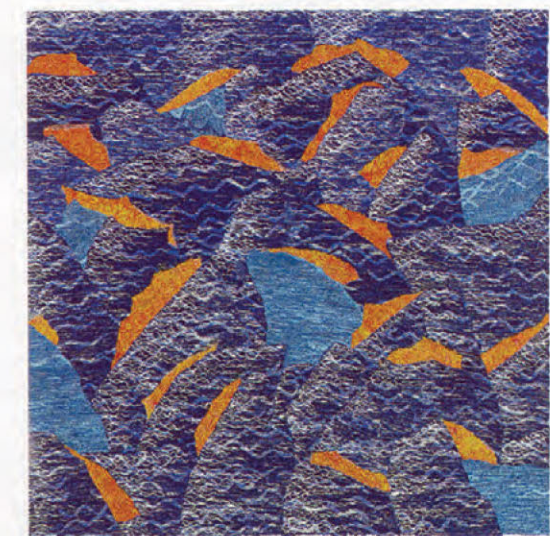
Reflecting ideas similar to Kelly's, about immersive maps and new interaction technologies, Melbourne photographer Andrej Kocis utilises digital modes to transform relational tensions between communication media networks and individual experiences of identity and place. He approaches his subject with

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Ruth Johnstone, *Water Tank Diary*, 2019-20, watercolour on woodblock print, paper when folded and image 30 x 30 cm, edition: unique state. Reproduced with permission of the artist and Scuola Internazionale di Grafica Venice.

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Jessi Wong, *Water World I/2*, 2020, woodblock print and collage, 30 x 30 cm, edition: unique state. Reproduced with permission of the artist/ National Gallery of Victoria.
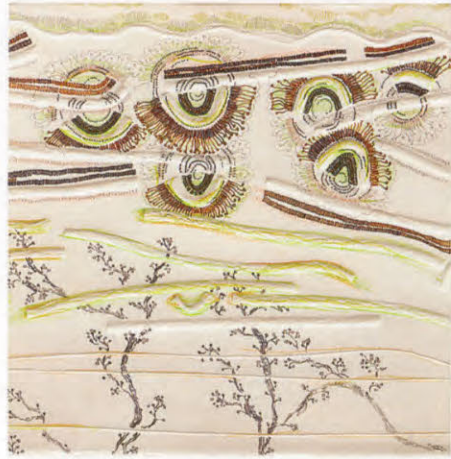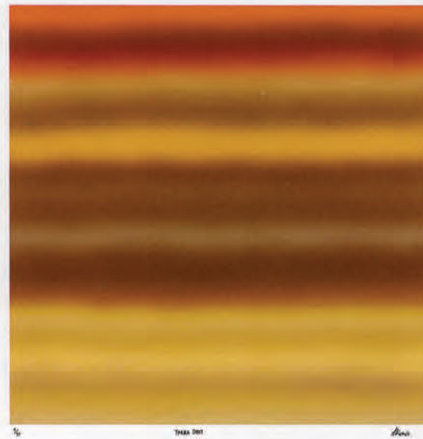
Photography: Andrej Kocis

a critical distance, organising digital impressions that mark damaging water flows with Pantone-like bands of digital colour information. Kocis gathers data relating to recent floods and droughts, extracting colour samples from endless accumulations (and reproductions) of digital news media and publicity images from the Internet. He searches methodically for iconic, yet sometimes unflattering news images of both Victoria's perennial waterways and the lagoons that fragment Venice's island embayment. He names and archives the colour channels like data entry. The resulting colour fields incorporate both a record of rising and/or falling water levels, as well as the deterioration in the integrity of the visual information stored and disseminated through twenty-four-hour news and social media.

Joanna Buckley began her collages with an old book of charts, *The Marine Observer*, and an ink-drip painting she made on a residency at Château de Longeval, France, in 2018. In her imagination, the dark inky drips from her painting alluded to the ocean, as she saw it represented in the numerous charts, diagrams and fold-out nautical maps in her book. The dismembered head of a woman has been cut out and collaged onto a piece of card and mounted onto a page of text taken from the old book. The woman's body is at the base of the page wearing silk gloves, holding lipstick

and a powder compact. With a third arm, extending out of her chest, she is gesturing toward the inkblot in the centre. This kind of photomontage and appropriation immediately recalls Dada artist Hannah Höch, who mined newspaper and magazine imagery to juxtapose things that draw attention to women's issues and suffrage. In *Marine Observer* (2019) and *Take it to the Grave* (2019), Buckley seeks to overlay the sensory experiences of reading and interpreting maps and visual material with greater existential questions—approaching themes of consciousness and collectivity that transcend the obstinate physicality of the body. In *Take it to the Grave* (2019), the viewer is eyeballed by an indifferent presence. What, exactly, does the marine observer take to the grave?

Kelly cites Italian novelist Italo Calvino's descriptions of Venice as a point of departure. In a book of essays published posthumously, *Saggi, 1945-1985,* Calvino writes, 'That's what you feel in the houses of Venice, that the door onto land gives access to a limited portion of the world, a small island, while the door on the water opens directly onto a borderless dimension.'[4] Yet, the notion of borderless dimensions is a fantasy; a *poetic* idea. On the south-east coast of Bangladesh, a refugee camp has formed, housing as many as 1,000,000 displaced Rohingya people. Desperation in the camp has enticed more and more asylum-seekers to turn

to human traffickers to help them escape by sea, trying desperately to bypass the coast guard to reach Malaysian shores. The UNHCR estimates 25,000 people have attempted this route across the Bay of Bengal in the first three months of this year and many of them perished. In reality, even if we imagine things teleologically beyond human purposes, we can easily see that truth is much bleaker than fiction.[5] This collection of artworks explored the notion of water in all its complexity to consider poetic atmospheres that travel between people. Strangely, the exhibition occurred during the declaration of a pandemic, bringing ideas and subjectivities together when people have otherwise never been so far apart.

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Notes
1. I spoke to Helen Kocis Edwards within the project space at Artery Cooperative studios on 14 March, 2020.
2. Victoria was first referred to as the Garden State in a pamphlet, published by direction of the Commissioner of Crown Lands and Survey, The Hon. J. E. Mackey, issued on 1st February 1908, titled *Victoria: The Garden State*. The moniker was used on Victorian motor-vehicle licence plates between 1977 and 1994. https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-352202375/view?partId=nla.obj-352207398#page/n2/mode/1up
3. Exhibition dates 13-22 March 2020.
4. Calvino, Italo. Preface to *Saggi: 1945-1985*, Volume 1, (Milan, Italy: Mondadori, 2001)
5. By this, I refer to the fact that phytoplankton populations in the sea are a vital factor in protecting the Earth's environment and counteracting global warming. Yet, environmental factors and pollution greatly endanger the health of marine diatom populations.