

Multiple locations

23rd Biennale of Sydney: *rīvus*



MATIAS DUVILLE, *Petrified Dream*, 2021, charcoal on Tyvek, 350 x 600 cm. Photo by Document Photography. Courtesy the artist and the Biennale of Sydney.

The Biennale of Sydney opened on March 12 after weeks of heavy rain along the east coast of Australia. Catastrophic floods had affected several regions. Emergency relief lagged, and grassroots organizations scrambled to help their communities themselves. Titled “rīvus” after the Latin for “stream,” this year’s biennale was a provocation to consider how life depends on water. It was a timely one.

From the outset, José Roca had said he wanted to stage a more thoughtful, local, and sustainable biennale. The Colombian curator, who is also the co-founder of the nonprofit *Flora ars+natura* in Bogotá, planned to minimize travel and freight, and support the local production of artworks. He also collaborated with local curators Anna Davis, Hannah Donnelly, Paschal Daantos Berry, and Talia Linz. Together, they selected 89 artists, scientists, architects, designers, and community collectives to think through the complexity and importance of freshwater ecologies.

Zápara healer about the Rio Napo, which is also in Ecuador. One question kept resurfacing: if a river could talk, what would it say?

The biennale itself was conceived like a river, with ideas branching out in different directions. At the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), the emphasis was on how water can help us think about deep time. Presented alongside a 360-million-year-old fish fossil were Matias Duville’s immense charcoal drawings, including *Petrified Dream* (2021) and *Space crab pure* (2021), which appear to show landforms moving like water, collapsing millennia into moments.

Themes of interconnection quickly emerged. Five jacquard tapestries by Kiki Smith were also exhibited at the MCA, showing wolves, moths, spiders, crows, and humans all shimmering together. They were the first substantial local showing of her work, and a standout in the biennale. The tapestries began as collages, which were then translated into textiles by the studio

Many of the projects in “rīvus” explored, if not quite animism, the political rights of the natural world. Across all six venues were videos of people giving voice to the songs and stories of their rivers. One of the videos in this “River Voices” project is a documentary interview about the legal recognition of the Rio Vilcabamba. Another is a direct address—part call to arms and part ritual—from a

Magnolia Editions. The choice of a complex jacquard weave gave the works both texture and a numinous shine. Nearby, Milton Becerra’s installation *Lost Paradise* (2021) levitated rocks in cradles of string, with the taut threads suggesting networks of energy.

Others referred to human-knowledge systems. Gail Mabo’s sculptural arrangements of bamboo and shell relate to ancestral star maps used by Torres Strait Islanders to cross vast bodies of water. Yuko Mohri’s *Moré Moré Tokyo* (*Leaky Tokyo*) (2009–21) series comprises photographs of leaks inside the Tokyo subway, and the provisional attempts to repair them. Here, water is an unstoppable force.

Mohri’s works were one of many multi-part displays across the biennale. “Rīvus” was built in pieces and layers. Although there were over 330 works, the biennale felt smaller and quieter than previous years. Viewers were urged to stop and think about the roles that biennales can play in the contemporary world beyond spectacle.

At the National Art School, thought turned to submerged histories. Members of the National Committee of the Friends of Myall Creek and local First Nations communities worked together to sew and paint a possum skin cloak to remember the 1838 Myall Creek Massacre. Centering places of historical and cultural significance, Pushpa Kumari’s painting *Ganga Maiya* (2021) depicts the revered and heavily polluted Ganges River, while Jumana Emil Abboud visualizes oral folktales connected to water sites in occupied Palestinian territories. Her works have a dreamy, mythic quality to them, and the large body of work feels like pages torn from a book.

Artists here also responded to anthropogenic disruption. Erin Coates' works are about the destruction of the oyster reefs that helped filter water in Perth's Swan River. Her sculpture *Metallic Water* (2020), a row of suspended, bronze dolphin bones, references the heavy metals now present in the aquatic mammals' bodies. There were also several dark pencil drawings of skeletons from her series *Swan River Dolphin Bones* (2020–22), while her towering installation *Never the same river twice* (2021) was presented at Pier 2/3 at the Walsh Bay Arts Precinct. The work's cascade of cream-colored oyster shells are marred with sickly red patches and blemishes.

At Pier 2/3, which sits out over the harbor, the focus shifted to salt water. Cuban artist Yoan Capote presented a gilded seascape, *Requiem (Plegaria)* (2019–21), made from barbed fishhooks. Others drew attention to marine life in the heavily trafficked North Sea, while the Torres Strait 8 activists presented protest materials from their campaign to hold the Australian Government accountable for climate change. Yuko Mohri also extended her Tokyo subway series with *Moré Moré (Leaky): Variations* (2022), a haphazard and imperfect water system made from umbrellas, hoses, buckets, and teapots.

Roca's polyphonic approach felt like a natural extension

to the 2020 edition of the biennale, "Nirin," which foregrounded the work of First Nations artists and challenged institutional hierarchies. But the thing about rivers is that they can spread into deltas, estuaries, and wetlands. The pace slackened at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, which is in the middle of major construction work. Among the handful of works here were two portraits by Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey, made with a photographic process that manipulated the chlorophyll concentration of living grass.

These two works depict a young local First Nations activist and her grandfather, a well-known elder. A week into the exhibition, the images were already starting to fade.

The sense of urgency continued in *The Great Animal Orchestra* (2016). Housed in a tent at Barangaroo, this commanding work was a rolling soundscape of 15,000 animal calls, recorded by the musician and ecologist Bernie Krause over 50 years, and set to visuals by the London studio United Visual Artists. The "orchestra" flattened human hierarchies, with orcas played at the same volume as insects. It was a moving call on behalf of the many lives and ecosystems now threatened by pollution and climate change.

The biennale took up another venue at Barangaroo, known as The Cutaway. The relatively new and cavernous space cut into



Installation view of BERNIE KRAUSE and the UNITED VISUAL ARTISTS' *The Great Animal Orchestra*, 2016, multimedia installation: 1 hr 32 secs, projected on the Sydney Opera House as a special event for "rivus," Biennale of Sydney, 2022. Photo by Daniel Boud. Courtesy the artists; Fondation Cartier, Paris; and the Biennale of Sydney.

the sandstone by the harbor contained large installations. Cave Urban's mammoth bamboo sculpture *Flow* (2022) stretched the full length of the ceiling but was not enough to tie the presentation together. The industrial space felt empty and jangly at the same time. It was disappointing because there were powerful works here, many pointing to ways forward. Jessie French's laboratory shows how she makes gelatinous, seaweed-like bioplastics from algae. Diana Scherer's entangled grass works, with root systems grown into patterns like woven fabric, also suggest interspecies collaboration. Others pointed back in time. Ana Barboza and Rafael Freyre's *Water ecosystem* (2019–22) and Paula de Solminihac's *Fogcatcher* (2018–21) both modelled preindustrial water-management practices.

One of the most unsettling works at The Cutaway was David Haines and Joyce Hinterding's *Pink Steam* (2022). It is a video of a stream, shot in infrared to capture detail we can't normally see, but an odd sound keeps interrupting the audio. To the side, an instrument in a Perspex box displays a growing set of numbers. Both the sound and the numbers mark the passage of invisible muons through the space—and us too. At the end of it all, our bodies are just as soft as water.

JANE O'SULLIVAN



Installation view of MILTON BECERRA's *Lost Paradise - Vibrational Energy H2O*, Sydney, 2022, rocks and nylon fibers, dimensions variable, at "rivus," Biennale of Sydney, 2022. Photo by Document Photography. Courtesy the Biennale of Sydney.