

Imaginative and quietly radical, *rivus*, the 23rd edition of the Biennale of Sydney, collapses the hierarchy between nature and culture.

Deep waters



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The oysters have teeth. At first, the shells that encrust a far wall of the century-old wharf shed in Sydney's Walsh Bay appear benign. But look closer and a serrated surface is sprouting a set of molars. One grows hair. Another, skin. What do we make of these molluscs? And how should they think about us?

Never the same river twice is a 2021 installation by Erin Coates. It's part of *rivus*, the 23rd edition of the Biennale of Sydney. The work revolves around the Derbarl Yerrigan, or Swan River, where the artist free dives. Here – as in Warrane, the Gadigal name for Sydney Harbour – the oyster reefs that once filtered the water have been destroyed by colonial occupation. Now the estuarine ecosystem is polluted by industrial runoff and toxic waste.

The oysters' teeth and hair and skin nod to eco-horror. It's a genre in which the nonhuman world bares its fangs, destroying the human delusion that nature is a resource to be conquered, rather than an animate life force. Outside, rain bears down on Pier 2/3 at Walsh Bay Arts Precinct, as propulsive as a heartbeat. The week *rivus* opens, roads turn into rivers. The city floods. It feels like cosmic timing.

Too often the art world treats colonisation and its shadow, ecological crisis, as theme rather than reality – an occasion for

teachable moments that reinforce colonial ideas such as the neoliberal cult of the individual or the Enlightenment notion that nature and culture are separate.

Rivus, conceived by Colombian artistic director José Roca alongside a curatorium featuring Paschal Daantors Berry, Anna Davis, Talia Linz and Hannah Donnelly, rejects these assumptions. The show takes its name from the Latin word for stream. It brings together more than 330 works by 89 "participants", rather than artists. The major sites – Pier 2/3 at Walsh Bay Arts Precinct, the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), the National Art School (NAS), the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) and the Cutaway at Barangaroo – are called "conceptual wetlands".

This spirit of interdependence, thankfully, runs deeper than semantics. Except for the Arts and Cultural Exchange in Parramatta, the venues are walking distance from each other. The presentation itself feels fluid, less like a biennale – a model that assumes increasingly fraught beliefs about borders and nations – and more like an ecosystem that overrides our human understanding of geography. An organism that knits different but related forms.

In 2017, New Zealand's Whanganui River was the world's first body of water to be granted legal personhood. Across *rivus*, rivers speak. At the MCA, Ecuador's Napo River voices its fight against extractive industries through Manari Ushigua, a healer from the Zápara nation in the Ecuadorian Amazon. At NAS, Professor

Anne Poelina, a Yimardoo warra marnin and Indigenous woman and guardian of the Martuwarra Fitzroy River, warns of the impact of climate change on food scarcity.

That these rivers take part through their custodians via video screens could feel like a conceit. Instead, it invites us to take an imaginative leap, decentring ourselves in the process.

A Glossary of Water, the poignant art book that accompanies *rivus* in place of a catalogue, quotes Toni Morrison, who in a 1995 essay famously wrote: "All water has a perfect memory." At the newly refurbished Pier 2/3 in Walsh Bay, participants wade towards their watery origins. Alongside *Never the same river twice, p/re-occupied* (2022) follows Trawlwoolway artist Julie Gough as she kayaks along her ancestral waterways. She 3D prints 100 Tasmanian stone tools used by her ancestors held at the Australian Museum. The items are suspended from the ceiling and also adorn her boat as stickers, stand-ins for the promise of cultural repatriation.

Elsewhere, participants draw on their own mythologies of water, tracing folktales back to their source. Clare Milledge shows *Imbás: a well at the bottom of the sea*. The series of silk panels and hanging cauldrons evoke the Irish story of Sinnan, about the formation of the river Shannon. Shrouded in half-light, it inhabits its own atmosphere. It chimes with *Seals' kin* (2022), a nearby video work by Hanna Tuulikki that revolves around the selkie. The half-seal, half-human, a symbol of

loss in Scottish legend, is recast by the British-Finnish artist as an avatar for collective grief.

Near the back of the space, a standout work is *Requiem (Plegaria)* (2019-21) in which Yoan Capote imagines the sea that divides his native Cuba from the United States, its imperialist neighbour. Waves – a motif romanticised by European painters – are rendered in gold leaf, oil and fishhooks, a nod to political hostility.

This material inventiveness runs through *rivus*, as does a desire to dispense with the linear narratives beloved by Western art history to embrace a story of visual culture that's closely aligned with cycles of nature and circular time.

Around the MCA there's a sense of nature as both muse and collaborator. *Lost Paradise* (2022) a dazzling installation by Milton Becerra, a pioneer of land art in Venezuela, sees a web of Technicolour thread recall rays as a riff on optical phenomena. *Cathedral*, an exquisite 2013 tapestry by Kiki Smith – perhaps the best-known artist in a biennale disinterested in celebrity – portrays a wolf that locks eyes with the viewer.

On Barangaroo's Stargazer Lawn, *The Great Animal Orchestra*, an installation by the American soundscape ecologist Bernie Krause and United Visual Artists, plays the calls of 15,000 animal species – insects and hyenas, lions and tree frogs. Recorded over five decades, it's an archive of biodiversity and a sonic reminder of worlds that don't exist anymore. The presentation at AGNSW is

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Rivus isn't didactic, but it makes clear that there's no division between humans and nature, that we can no longer conceive of ourselves without each other.

Tabita Rezaire's stone circle installation *Mamelles Ancestrales*, 2019 (left), and detail of Julie Gough's *pre-occupied*, 2022 (right), with Clare Milledge's *Imbds: a well at the bottom of the sea*, 2022, in the background. Document Photography

dedicated to rewilding Country, a reminder that we're living through the sixth mass extinction. The vestibule is home to two five-metre-tall portraits of Gadigal Elder and community leader Uncle Charles "Chicka" Madden and his granddaughter Lille Madden, an environmental activist, made by the London duo Ackroyd & Harvey. They materialise on native Australian grass, monuments to the Indigenous farming practices that thrived before first contact. They're also an elegy for what can't be recovered, their rich greens and golds and yellows designed to fade as the months pass.

Biennales are usually synonymous with novelty. *Rivus* invites us to consider what's in front of us. In 1984, the curator René Block planted a Moreton Bay fig outside AGNSW on behalf of Joseph Beuys as part of *7000 Oaks*. Beuys and his seminal work of land art inform *Asleep in the Tree*, a performance by Mike Parr that took place in the Blue Mountains. But *rivus* also complicates Beuys' legacy: it positions the 20th-century art hero as just one among a chorus of voices who insist that art lives and breathes, whether acknowledged by art history or not.

Rivus isn't didactic, but it makes clear that there's no division between humans and nature, that we can no longer conceive of ourselves without each other. Some of the show's most memorable works speak to collectivism and community, to acts of healing. NAS plays host to a suite of mixed-media drawings and paintings by Palestinian

artist Jumana Emil Abboud, ethereal female figures who float in space. Next to them hangs the Myall Creek Gathering Cloak. It was created by The Friends of Myall Creek, whose members have met for two decades to remember the Myall Creek Massacre on Gomerol Country. It's emblazoned with stories, totems and songlines, a re-creation of living culture that can't be erased.

At the Cutaway, a cavernous space under Sydney's north-western headland, a sandstone cliff confronts us with the smallness of our existence. Here Peruvian artists Ana Barboza and Rafael Freyre present *Water ecosystem* (2019-22), a woven wetland that pays homage to the canals invented by pre-Colombian society. The Iltja Ntjarra (Many Hands) Art Centre paintings are on recycled road signs. Images of Arnerre Country are interspersed with doctored phrases such as "Greed" and "Don't Give Way".

Look up and Cave Urban, a group of artists, architects and designers, have installed *Flow* (2022), a 600-square-metre bamboo structure that echoes the path of a river. Half the poles used in its making were harvested from a renewable forest. Like *rivus* itself, it twists and loops and turns, respecting where it came from while wrestling with the language to describe a future that hasn't quite arrived. ●

The 23rd Biennale of Sydney, rivus, is showing at various venues throughout Sydney until June 13. Morry Schwartz, publisher of The Saturday Paper, is on the board of the Biennale of Sydney.



ARTS DIARY

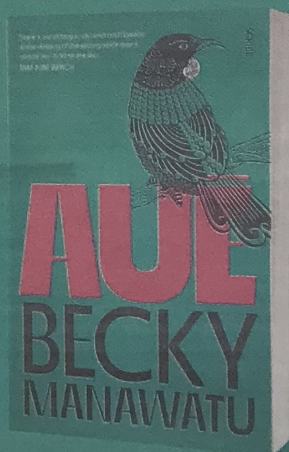
EXHIBITION	<i>QUEER: Stories from the NGV Collection</i> NGV International, Melbourne, until August 21
VISUAL ART	<i>Jacqui Stockdale: Paper Doll</i> Olsen Gallery, Sydney, March 23–April 9
THEATRE	<i>JALI by Oliver Twist</i> QPAC, Brisbane, March 23–26
BALLET	<i>Genesis</i> West Australian Ballet Centre, Perth, March 25–April 2
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