

Jasmine Targett, *Life Support Systems: View from Tomorrow*, 2011



Jasmine Targett, *Life Support Systems: Ether*, 2011.



Debbie Symons and Jasmine Targett
**Life Support Systems –
Making Sense of the Earth's Ecologies**

Craft Victoria and Federation Square Urban Screens: **8th September – 15th October, 2011.**

Jasmine Targett, *Life Support Systems: from Earth*, 2011.



Debbie Symons, *Tomorrow Land*, 2011.

There are several well-known types of imagery recurring in the public arena that are now icons of climate change, and photos or film of massive slabs of melting ice in the polar regions have become one of these key indices of escalating global environmental change.

In this exhibition, the Australian artists Debbie Symons and Jasmine Targett focus on Antarctica in ways that extend and reconfigure these iconic images, taking them into the imaginative realm of art. Their works invite us to consider the Antarctic region from two different perspectives: from the position of endangered species on the ground, and from the aerial perspective of the hole in the ozone layer.

Interpreted through the affective language of art, Symons and Targett's thoughts on Antarctica invite the viewer to reflect on the immanent threats to the region itself, and further, to the ways in which the deterioration of Antarctica is now represented as a key to environmental and ecological deterioration on a global scale.

Assoc. Professor Linda Williams, RMIT University.

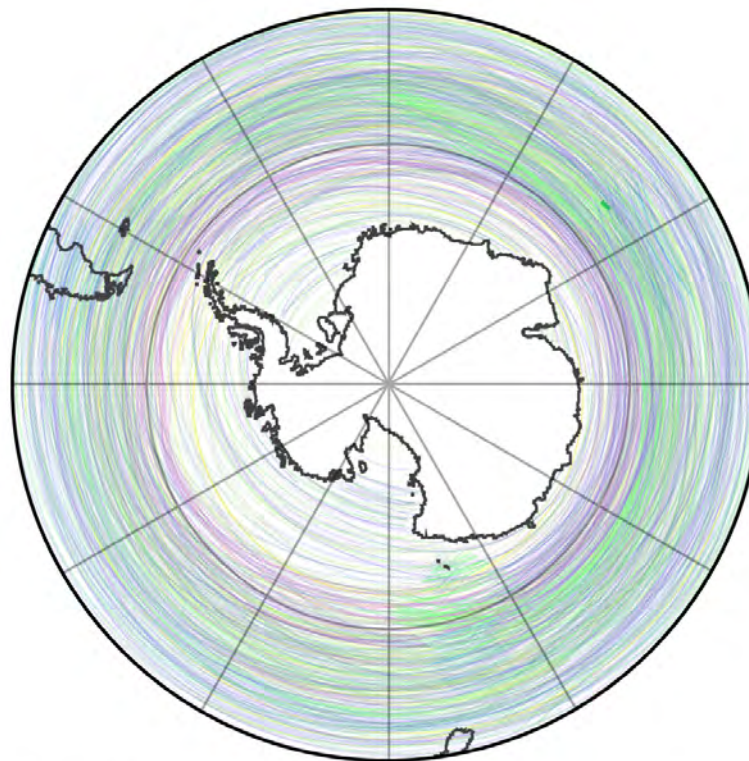
Making Sense: from the Sublime to the Meticulous

It's hard to imagine a more opportune moment for 'making sense' of environmental issues, which clearly present us all – scientists and non-scientists alike – with a huge challenge. In this regard, Debbie Symons and Jasmine Targett's works bridge a crucial gap, presenting complex, disturbing data in lucid, evocative, even surprisingly beautiful form.

Human beings have always tried to tame and exploit nature, but typically, in the past, with some sense of awe. Traditional belief in the spiritual power of the land may underpin later responses like the Enlightenment 'Sublime,' or Marcus Clarke's famous 19th-century lines on the gloomy and mysterious grandeur of the Australian landscape.¹

For Kant, contemplating fashionable aesthetic categories in 1764, the Sublime involved 'the feeling of the beauty and dignity of human nature.'² But, post 1945, and especially post 2001, the idea of the Sublime may seem fatally flawed, perhaps even totalitarian, with terms like 'Shock and Awe' now coopted by the U.S. military.³ Yet there still seems to be scope for a contemporary Sublime, for instance in the work of Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson, who explores environmental and scientific issues, often on a massive scale, as in *The Weather Project* (2003).⁴

In 'Making Sense' (a title borrowed from Eliasson), Symons and Targett also address large issues, and grapple with science, in considerable detail, but on an intimate scale, implying a 21st-century Sublime with subtler,



Debbie Symons, *Tracking (Antarctica)*, 2011.

darker tones. Antarctica, from all accounts (unfortunately I can't speak from first-hand experience), is a majestic place, exemplifying that combination of awe-inspiring beauty, fear and melancholy that made up the Enlightenment Sublime, and still capable of astonishing contemporary visitors. However – as both Symons and Targett demonstrate – it's also a fragile ecosystem showing obvious and increasing signs of damage, as temperatures rise, the ice melts, and species disappear at an alarming rate.

Faced with such destruction, it may seem impossible not to succumb to despair – or at least *melancholy* – that richer, more energetic concept central to Kant's idea of the Sublime.⁵ But these artists suggest another, more productive approach. For, in a final paradox, the works in this exhibition also project considerable beauty – in the vivid colours of Targett's glowing weather maps, for example, or Symons's delicate delineation of species' decay and death. It may remain debateable whether these responses constitute a transcendent Kantian gesture, bitter-sweet mourning for what's already irrevocably lost, or a vital redemptive act.

Dr. John Gregory.

Notes

¹For a lively recent discussion of Clarke's comments, see John McDonald, *Art of Australia, vol.1: Exploration to Federation*, Sydney: Macmillan, 2008, pp.150-52.

²Immanuel Kant, 'Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime' [1764], in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Patrick Frierson & Paul Guyer, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p.24.

³Christine Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference*, London & New York: Routledge, 2007, p. 205; see also Gene Ray, *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory: From Auschwitz to September 11*, Gordonville: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

⁴In a recent interview, Eliasson, while voicing considerable mistrust of the idea, continued: '...I like to think of the sublime as something which does not exclude the context. If suddenly the world appeared as a construction and therefore changeable – that would in my view be subliminal' (as quoted in Michael Fitzgerald, 'Nature as Culture: Olafur Eliasson and the idea of a contemporary sublime,' *Art & Australia* 47.3, Autumn 2010, p.405).

⁵For melancholy, see Kant's 'Observations...' *op.cit.*, pp.25ff.; the classic text is Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (first published in 1621); see also Jacky Bowring, *A Field Guide to Melancholy*, Harpenden: Oldcastle Books, 2008; Eric G. Wilson, *Against Happiness: In Praise of Melancholy*, New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2008, esp.pp.69ff. ('Generative Melancholia'); and Shirley Law, 'The Darkness Within: The "Spirited Sadness" of *Jane Eyre*,' *Screen Education* [Australia], vol.63 (Spring 2011), pp.30-39.

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