La Trobe Art Institute
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I think future, I think past

Artists
Peggy Ahwesh
Sophia Al-Maria
Daniel Boyd
Jessie French
Jemima Wyman

Curator
Amelia Wallin

Via, and on ruination

I think future, I think past is an exhibition of artworks that draw from colonial and capitalist ruins.[1] Technological, societal and environmental ruins become both condition and material for imagining alternative futures. Conceived during the Australian summer of 2023–2024, against the backdrop of global wars and genocides, mounting unrest and increasing climate emergency, the exhibition posits the question: how are we to imagine the future at a time that feels like the end? The imagination, and its limits, is threaded throughout the artworks in this exhibition. Here, utopian thinking and a capacity for hope is paired with an unflinching gaze at the realities of the present.

To aid in conceptualising the future, the exhibition brings together artworks by Peggy Ahwesh, Sophia Al-Maria, Daniel Boyd, Jessie French and Jemima Wyman that reckon with our culpability in the present and near future. Using strategies of reappropriation and enactment, the artworks in the exhibition offer different lenses for imaging past and future conflicts that are fuelled by growing resource scarcity and planetary degradation. Across sculpture, collage and moving image, the artworks use materials that range from emerging to near obsolete technologies: new algae polymers, computer generated imagery, CRT televisions, high-definition video, and found digital and photographic source material.

Awkward and unruly, a vertical stack of five CRT monitors occupies the gallery's atrium. *Lessons of war* (2014) by American artist of Syrian descent Peggy Ahwesh images the violence of war and occupation through animation. This video installation draws its imagery from approximately 200 animated clips of news events produced by a Taipei based animation studio.[2] This is actual footage that depicts the 2014 Israeli war on Gaza, known as Operation Protective Edge, coded through CGI. The effect is one of distance, dark humour and accountability. As Ahwesh wryly observes, 'the cuteness effect of the cartoon form, and the buffer it allows from reality, makes for economical and stress-free viewing … making it easy to convey the drama of war at a safe distance from violence and its consequences.'[3] Read vertically, the five clips playing simultaneously echo the chaos of daily news and their arrangement recalls an endless doom-scroll. Ahwesh, who taught at Al-Quds Bard College in Abu Dis and lived in Ramallah in, Palestine, made the decision to present the media on CRT monitors in reflection of Palestinian 'resilience with available resources.'[4]

Ahwesh has frequently used appropriated imagery across her four-decade career. Indeed, the same archive of images lends itself to her work, *Verily! The Blackest Sea and the Falling Sky* (2017). Presented as a two-channel projection, one channel surveys the sea and the other attunes itself to the sky and the invisible flows of data around us. Presented side by side, *Verily!* … drifts across various crises: migratory, climate, warfare. Again, the effect of the CGI animation is distancing. Across the two screens, images collide, yet, certain moments, such as the body of two-year-old asylum seeker Alan Kurdi, force a reckoning with the reality of these animations and hit the viewer with a soft thud.

Palawa woman and artist Jemima Wyman maintains a longstanding interest in the visual histories of resistance and collective actions of global demonstration. Like Ahwesh, Wyman also appropriates found source material; her collages are drawn from her personal archive of global protest images, which she has been compiling since 2008. Printed, traced and cut by hand, her images are layered into complex arrangements, dizzying in their volume and precision. Her series *Like a siren it repeats* (2019) combines images of masked and costumed activists with aposematic animals and plants, such as the European paper wasp or the yellow-banded poison dart frog. Aposematism is a form of camouflage in which an animal or plant's colour and pattern—often yellow and black—warns off predators. In her collage, Wyman blends images of these animals with clothing adopted by protestors including the Yellow Shirts or the People's Alliance for Democracy in Thailand, the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong, the Yellow Vest Revolution in France and the international Black Lives Matter protests. Their patterned arrangement recalls the decorative wallpaper of the Victorian arts and crafts movement, specifically the designs by renowned socialist and utopianist William Morris. Through her employment of this repeating visual motif, Wyman draws attention to the repeating patterns of protest and civil unrest, as a siren or a warning, as suggested by the series' title.

In a later body of work, also included in this exhibition, Wyman extends her interest in the masking and camouflaging strategies employed by activists. In the series *Haze* Wyman explores conditions of air and its pollutants through images of smoke gathered from scenes of civil uprisings. In protests, smoke can be a means of camouflage, a tool of control and oppression, and in the case of burning buildings and property, an act of destruction and defiance. The collages *Haze 16* and *Haze 17* (both 2023) depict plumes of smoke from global protests in regions as diverse as Kyiv, Melbourne, Minneapolis, the West Bank, Belfast, Yangon, to name just a fraction. These works are accompanied by citational titles which list the locations of the various source images, many of which are from 2021. Reading the title in full highlights the felt escalation of global tensions, and provides a condensed history of recent geopolitics that span the political left to the political right, including protests against COVID vaccines, military coups, police violence, and protests in defence of Black Lives Matter, Indigenous land rights and democracy. Plumes suffocate the surface of the collages, covering the entirety of the pictorial surface. These works read as sweeping depictions of universal unrest, as moments of uprising already experienced, not yet resolved. When the smoke lifts and the haze evaporates, what kind of world will we find?

The silent, single channel video work *Quiver* (2021), by Kudjla/Gangalu man and artist Daniel Boyd, offers a moment of contrast against Ahwesh's and Wyman's bombardment of visual information. *Quiver* carries Boyd's celebrated and distinctive pointillist method into digital media. In this honed technique, a blackened surface is pinpricked by a swath of 'lenses' that reveal the information beneath. Translated into video work, hundreds of 'lenses' cut through the dark, in pulsating and swirling patterns that move across the breadth of the gallery's auditorium. This profusion of dots suggests a collective viewpoint or a multitude of perspectives, a means to question what becomes defined as history, and by who. *Quiver* undermines linearity and scale; are we looking at flickering stars burning thousands of light years away, or the microscopic molecules on our skin that are the building blocks of all life? Boyd underscores the smallness of our human scale and the opposing gravity of our planetary impact to meditate on the past, present and future, and our position therein.

The artistic practice of artist and designer Jessie French began with a provocation: to imagine the world without plastic. This thought exercise led French to devise algae-based bioplastics and polymers, which can be constituted into almost any form. French creates her polymers from sustainably grown and harvested new algae, as opposed to ancient algae—better known as fossil fuels—a finite, mined resource from which petroleum is derived. For this exhibition, polymer films are cast over the glass doors of the La Trobe Art Institute courtyards, filtering light and matter, whilst others hang across the galleries. Recognising our unsustainable dependency on the planet's finite reserves, French's invention of plastic alternatives leads us towards the possible of a post-petrochemical reality.

'Twenty-first century technoscience and technoculture are nothing if not frontier practices,' observes Donna Haraway, 'always announcing new worlds, proposing the novel as the solution to the old, figuring creation as radical invention and replacement.'[5] But French goes beyond frontier practices of replacement and continual renewal, drawing her materials into a circular economy, where they can be cooked back to liquid and reconstituted into new forms. After their useful life, her films will be returned to French's studio, awaiting new forms and applications.

In a similar vein, artist and writer Sophia Al-Maria contends with the complexities of petro-capitalist economies in her two-part video work *The Future was Desert I* and *II* (2016). Prophesising the eventual collapse of human life, Al-Maria's videos survey post-human time in the Gulf Region. Known for her feminist science fiction books and video works, these delirious, dream-like videos employ humour in their post-apocalyptic depictions. In Al-Maria's words, it's about 'knowing that the planet is going to be fine … even if we're not.'[6] As the videos insist, the existence of humanity is just a pinprick within a vast scale of time, within which past and future appear as arbitrary temporal references.

Together with friend and collaborator, musician and artist Fatima Al Qadiri, Al-Maria coined the concept of 'gulf futurism' to describe 'the growing atomisation of individuals and the

shifting ground of urban planning, aesthetics, and media', and their impact on everyday life in the post-oil Persian Gulf.[7] The term suggests that aspects of the West's imagined future—infinite skyscrapers, airconditioned luxury villas, motorisation—are already manifest in the Gulf states of the Middle East.

Al-Maria, echoing French's work in this exhibition, invites us to contemplate a post-petrochemical future, and a time scale that is beyond our lifetime. In doing so, the artworks of both artists resist and reject 'frontier practices of the new', as endorsed by the colonial project and extractive capitalism. This rejection of the new is extended in Boyd's video installation; *Quiver* underscores the vastness of time. In emphasising the plurality of perspectives, it asserts that 'thinking future' requires thinking collectively, and at scale that extends beyond our individual life span. Both Ahwesh and Wyman consider the cost and the impact of human life through means of conflict and resistance. Ahwesh's reenactments of humanitarian and ecological crises through CGI animation reflect our current dystopic reality (from a digestible distance). Wyman's collages drawn out patterns of human protest, both visual and historical, to speculate on what bears repeating. Using appropriation they both explore the visual representations of recent geopolitical events. In these ways, *I think future, I think past* ruminates on destruction and renewal at both a human and a planetary scale. From this multi-directional perspective, the artworks in the exhibition emphasis our capacity for a different future.

1 The exhibition takes its title from a comment by artist Peggy Ahwesh, in conversation with Andrea Lissoni, reflecting on the cyclical nature of her films in 2021 for *Mouse Magazine*.
2 Jenelle Troxell and Peggy Ahwesh, 'Neither Day Nor Night: Peggy Ahwesh's Palestinian Essays', *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, Vol. 58, No. 1–2 (Spring/Fall 2017), pp. 227–261
3 Peggy Ahwesh, artist statement
4 Op Cit., Troxell and Ahwesh
5 Donna Haraway, 'Speculative Fabulations for Technoculture's Generations: Taking Care of Unexpected Country', *Australian Humanities Review*, Issue 50, May 2011.
6 Erika Balsom, 'Sophia Al-Maria on Dystopias, Gulf Futurism, and Sad Sacks', *Art and America*, 2020
7 Project Native Informant, https://www.projectnativeinformant.com/artists/sophia-al-maria