

## *Poisonous* Ellis Hutch

Combining charcoal drawings and digital video projections, *Poisonous* investigates the microscopic world of our waterways – a realm invisible to our eyes and critical to our survival. Hutch navigates the complexities of the health of our waterways and looks with awe and wonder at the molecular structure of minerals and microbes that are both toxic poisons and useful contributors to the ecosystem.

### The Summer Swamp Happening of 1964

‘The gates of Scrivener Dam were officially closed in late 1963; but a dry summer followed and large swamp developed, reaching from the Dam to about Commonwealth Bridge. This immediately attracted an amazing number of swamp-loving species, some of them new to the ACT list. Heavy rain the following April caused the lake to fill for the first time, and the swamp birds dispersed.’

Steve Wilson OAM (1912-2009) in *Birds of the ACT: Two centuries of change* (1999)<sup>1</sup>

As the lake neared completion, a ten-year-old boy, with his parents and three younger brothers, was living at the Kurrajong Hotel in Barton, newly arrived in Canberra from Adelaide, and awaiting a house. He was, in his own words, ‘a budding birder’ and sixty years on, Neil Hermes remembers seeing the pelicans arrive at the momentary wetland during this dry summer of 1964. In January, when his family moved into their house in the new suburb of Hughes, the summer winds constantly blew dirt across from the building site that was to become Curtin. Canberra’s population at the time was around 70,000. ‘Everyone’, Neil tells me, ‘was waiting for the lake to fill.’

In the meantime, not only pelicans but silver gulls, pacific black ducks, spotted crakes, painted snipes, spotted grebes, brown quails, buff-banded rails, dusky moorhens, and eastern swamp-hens enjoyed the ideal conditions of this shallow marsh.

<sup>1</sup> Steve Wilson, (1999) *Birds of the ACT: Two Centuries of Change*, Canberra Ornithologists Group, 1999.

### About | Ellis Hutch

Ellis Hutch creates drawings, videos, installations, and performances inspired by powerful stories, significant places, and the mechanisms of curiosity and wonder. She questions how people establish social relationships and transform their environments to create inhabitable spaces. Recently Ellis has been paying close attention to the place she lives and works, unceded Ngunnawal, Ngunawal and Ngambri country, investigating the effects of ‘invasive species,’ including humans on the Molonglo river. Ellis completed a PhD in Photography and Media Art at the ANU in 2019 and identifies rigorous research combined with playful approach as core elements in her practice.

Visit [www.gallery.photoaccess.org.au](http://www.gallery.photoaccess.org.au) to learn more about *Poisonous*.

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Most of these, along with coots, hoary-headed grebes, little black cormorants, marsh terns, white-headed stilts, Japanese snipes, yellow-billed spoonbills, royal spoonbills, and plumed egrets were listed in the Canberra Times on 11 April 1964 as amongst the 46 species that ornithologist Steve Wilson 'at the request of the CSIRO and the Department of the Interior' had recorded in the first three months of 1964.<sup>2</sup> The white egret, white-necked heron, black swan, mountain duck, blue-winged shoveler, pink-eared duck, white-eyed duck, musk duck, and the little grassbird also got a mention in this report of rare birds suddenly gracing the yet-to-be lake and surrounds. The birds were an inspiration for Steve and, in 1964, he helped found the Canberra Ornithologists Group.

What is it about this moment that so inspires me? As a birdwatcher, I wish I could time-travel back to see it. As an art curator, this moment in Canberra's history feels like an account of 'a happening'. The term was coined by Allan Kaprow in 1959 to describe an event where theatre and visual art met to create a spontaneous ephemeral experience. In one formulation, according to the Oxford Dictionary of Art: a happening 'should bring into being situations or events in which the elements of everyday life ... are invested with the strangeness of the poetic or fantastic.'<sup>3</sup> Canberra, this summer of 1964, saw a spontaneous once-only-ever event where nature briefly paused the grandiose plans for Australia's national capital and, marvellously, took control. Then the happening was over.

Does Neil remember the lake filling? Absolutely, it was a big deal: 'In April 1964, there was this huge storm and it started to fill overnight, and after 3-4 days, suddenly we had this lake.' The Canberra Times reported that the lake reached its full height at 2pm on 29 April 1964.<sup>4</sup> With his family, Neil attended the inauguration of the lake on 17 October. You can listen to the speech that Robert Menzies gave that day, from a recording in the National Library of Australia's collection. The Prime Minister confided to the attending crowd: 'I would rather like to see a few more patches around this lake in which the wall had fallen in, and in which the rushes had grown, and in which the wildfowl might have their nests, because I see this lake, ultimately not as something purely artificial in its surroundings but as a haunt of birds, as a haunt of wildlife ...'<sup>5</sup>

In reality, the 1,748 acres of lake only provides diverse bird habitat on its edges as it is generally around two or three metres deep, which is not suitable for most birds. However, the water rediscovered paleochannels – remnant streams buried by sediment over tens of thousands of years – and backfilled out towards the dairy flats forming what is now known as Jerrabomberra Wetlands. 'My most vivid memories were after the lake had filled', Neil tells me. 'We would take canoes and paddle up to these creeks and pitch our tents and be there for days. All these birds started to arrive – Latham's snipe, bitterns, rails, crakes, different species of ducks. We would camp along the edges of the water, and that's where I learnt my birdwatching.'

At the encouragement of Steve Wilson, the young Neil Hermes began joining birding groups and research teams during his teens. He was a bird guide by 20, and on committees for managing the wetlands. I asked Neil if there was a particular bird sighting from the time that he treasures: Without hesitation he nominates his 'first observation of a pink-eared duck – an exquisite little duck. With my new camera in 1966 I photographed a pair of them at Jerrabomberra wetlands. I was sitting on a chair in the water, inside a wheat sack with a slit cut in it. They arrived in those couple of years.'

I have ridden along the lake on my way to work for 13 years now in Kamberri, on unceded lands of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples. This body of water remains an imposed 'purely artificial' landscape. Some days the sunset, clouds, carefully designed vistas, and reflections appear as intended by the National Capital Development Commission. Other days a stench hangs heavy alongside this strange unnatural stretch of water. Neil observed during our conversation that one of the reasons why the lake is so muddy and turbid is because from around the 1830s huge stretches of land were cleared between the Queanbeyan River and the Molonglo River, which was then overgrazed. The tons of mobilised surface soil then went into the creeks, and now ends up in Lake Burley Griffin, as it will for many hundreds of years to come.

Neil went on to graduate with Honours in Zoology from the Australian National University. He then worked as an ornithologist for the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and with National Parks at Kakadu, Uluru-Kata Tjuta, Norfolk Island and Booderee. Back in the ACT, he was Director of Parks and Conservation Service Urban Parks. The author of more than 20 books, he is currently the Canberra Ornithologists Group (COG) President. For Neil, the Jerrabomberra Wetlands remain a special place. In 2014 on the 50th anniversary of COG Neil was instrumental in inaugurating the Steve Wilson Medal, in honour of his mentor, which annually recognises 'meritorious services to birds through COG'.

It is one of the lake's consequences that remains special to Neil: Jerrabomberra Wetlands: 'I've spent countless hours for 50 years there. It is the subject of huge amount of research and is the most significant bird place in the Territory – it is absolutely amazing and very important.' These wetlands are mentioned in birding guides nationally and internationally, they attract rare migratory species, and are visited by numerous threatened and scarce Australian birds. These wetlands also contain a hint of that enchanting and singular event: the great summer swamp happening of 1964.

**Penelope Grist** is a curator, writer and creative collaborator with over 15 years experience working in leading Australian museums, galleries and libraries. She is currently Curator of Exhibitions at the National Portrait Gallery of Australia and Chair of PhotoAccess.

<sup>2</sup> 'Rare Birds on Lake', Canberra Times, 11 April 1964, page 1 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article104278100>

<sup>3</sup> Ian Childers, Harold Osborne, and Dennis Farr, The Oxford Dictionary of Art, Oxford University Press, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> 'At last', Canberra Times, 30 April 1964, page 1, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article104290963>

<sup>5</sup> Robert Menzies, Robert Menzies address at the Inauguration of Lake Burley Griffin, Canberra, A.C.T., 17 October 1964, Menzies MS 4936 collection, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-222211020>