

Image list

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The whole world felt like a dream
With Tess Horwitz, from the video series Body and Breath: Remembering Black Summer, 2021-23
Stereo channel, 1920 x 1080, H264, 30 FPS
Duration: 4:17"
Production assistance: Oliver Martin
- 25 Toni Hassan
It felt like the end of the world
With Rhiân Williams, from the video series Body and Breath: Remembering Black Summer, 2021-23
Stereo channel, 1920 x 1080, H264, 30 FPS
Duration: 4:50"
Production assistance: Oliver Martin
- 26 Toni Hassan
Grace comes to meet us in the midst of all of this
With Sarah Bachelard, from the video series Body and Breath: Remembering Black Summer, 2021-23
Stereo channel, 1920 x 1080, H264, 30 FPS
Duration: 6:01"
Production assistance: Oliver Martin

About

Toni Hassan

Toni Hassan (born in Durban, South Africa, grew up on Gadigal land/Sydney) lives and works on Ngunnawal-Ngambri country in the Australian Capital Territory. Toni sees her social practice and multimedia work, first and foremost, as a democratic act. She explores the themes of personal and collective histories, identity, resistance and voice, liminality and the indivisible intersections between the sacred and secular.

Toni completed Honours in visual arts in 2021. That project focussed on body, breath and lament in the wake of Black Summer, connecting sound and storytelling, politics and geography/site. Her work is held in the public collection of the ACT Legislative Assembly. Her paintings have been shown in the celebrated Fisher's Ghost Prize three years in a row, 2020-2022 and Stations of the Cross, Sydney.

Toni is a Walkley Award-winning journalist who has appeared in The Saturday Paper and The Sydney Morning Herald. Her formative years in the trade were at the ABC where she was a reporter, producer and presenter. She is a sometimes-guest presenter of the Religion and Ethics Report.

Visit www.gallery.photoaccess.org.au to learn more about *Between presumption and melancholy*.

Huw Davies Gallery
27th April - 10th June 2023

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Between presumption and melancholy Toni Hassan

Between presumption and melancholy by Toni Hassan showcases a series of videos that create a platform for public mourning. The works capture discussions among women in the capital region, sharing their firsthand experiences of Australia's Black Summer. The exhibition offers a safe space for viewers to process and engage with emotions related to climate grief. By exploring personal and collective experiences, Hassan invites us to confront and negotiate our re-relationship with this ongoing reality.

Fever Dreams: Collective Memory and Art in the Wake of Environmental Catastrophe

The haunting memory of the Black Summer of 2019-20 persists in the minds of Canberra and its surrounding regions. The brittleness of the equilibrium between humanity and nature was revealed when devastating bushfires caused the death of 33 people directly and almost 450 people due to smoke inhalation,¹ while also decimating 3 billion animals and trillions of invertebrates.² How do we process this unimaginable loss and our role within it?

Toni Hassan's *Between presumption and melancholy* emerges from the ruins as an expression of public mourning and coming to terms with this loss. A collection of three video works capture discussions among women in the capital region, sharing their firsthand experiences of Australia's Black Summer. The exhibition offers a safe space for viewers to process and engage with emotions related to personal loss and climate grief. By exploring personal and collective experiences, Hassan invites us to confront and negotiate our own relationship with this ongoing reality.

1 G. Cook, A. Dowdy, J. Knauer, M. Meyer, P. Canadell & P. Briggs, *Australia's Black, Summer of fire was not normal – and we can prove it*, CSIROscope, 29 November 2021, <https://blog.csiro.au/bushfires-linked-climate-change/>

2 A. Wright, *The black summer bushfires killed 3 billion animals. They are our relatives; they deserve to be mourned*, The Guardian, 1 April 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/apr/01/alexis-wright-black-summer-bushfires-vigil-sydney-speech-3-billion-animals-killed-are-our-relatives-they-deserve-to-be-mourned>

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As you enter the exhibition, the eye is immediately drawn to the evocative installation It felt like the end of the world (with Rhiân Williams). This hypnotic work displays a video of the Australian flag undulating against a backdrop of an azure sky. The voice of Rhiân Williams, a volunteer firefighter, accompanies the visuals as she recounts the suffocating smoke and the prevailing sense of helplessness that defined the Black Summer. Listening to her narrative, you are transported to a time characterised by fear, desperation, and an intense yearning for hope.

It felt like the end of the world is thoughtfully curated, with the video projected onto a floor-to-ceiling translucent curtain. A fan sets the delicate fabric in motion, creating a gentle ripple as if influenced by human breath and voices. This subtle movement, combined with the fragile nature of the material, conveys a sense of vulnerability and fragility in the face of climate disasters, reflecting the lasting memories and emotions associated with the Black Summer.

The flag that ripples through the background, imbues the piece with complex emotions and unresolved tensions concerning national identity and pride. The flag's presence in the installation fosters dialogue about our national response to climate change and our responsibilities as citizens, questioning our nation's commitment to environmental sustainability and whether we are collectively addressing the challenges of a changing climate.

The two other screen-based pieces that complete the exhibition offer similarly immersive experiences.

The Whole World Felt Like a Dream (with Tess Horwitz) grips the viewer's senses. This entrancing video begins with an array of tiny, piercing circles of light that shimmer among the leaves of trees. Their intense luminosity tempts the viewer to close their eyes, leaving an indelible afterimage if they do. The rhythmic sounds of inhalation and exhalation envelop your ears. Liquids in motion are woven into the video, conjuring a visceral connection between the viewer and the physicality of the environment. Tess Horwitz, who lost her father to a fire, recounts the strange interplay between natural disaster-induced trauma and the sublime surrealism of transformed landscapes. They merge into a dreamlike sense of congealed grief and awe.

Between presumption and melancholy by Toni Hassan draws viewers into a space of contemplation and reflection by merging meditative imagery with personal narratives. It offers an intimate engagement with moving images and sound, allowing for a deep connection with dialogues about the sorrows and hopes that permeate life in the Anthropocene.

Society often moves on rapidly and forgets, particularly for those not directly affected. Climate grief, built on foundations of personal mourning practices, is a novel terrain with expansive social implications, as it impacts communities and nations alike.³

By establishing a public space to reflect on the Black Summer and its effects on people and the environment, this exhibition serves as a powerful reminder of our intrinsic ties to the world we inhabit.

Contemplating the experiences of those who endured this calamity helps us better understand the challenges we face in the Anthropocene. *Between presumption and melancholy* calls upon viewers to pause, contemplate, and acknowledge the shared repercussions of environmental adversity within our community.

- Gabrielle Hall-Lomax

Gabrielle Hall-Lomax is a visual artist and curator based in Canberra.

³ T, Hassan, Social Art to Process Environmental Grief, Arts Health Network, <https://www.artshealthnetwork.com.au/social-art-to-process-environmental-grief/>