

Huw Davies Gallery
2nd - 27th November, 2021

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Experiments in Living [Melt]

Sammy Hawker

Encompassing text, video and negative prints produced in collaboration with the chemical activity of rain, hailstones, seawater and flame, Hawker's exhibition challenges our culture's belief in human control of the natural world.

Responding to the diverse meanings of 'melt', the artist presents a sequence of works embodying the tumultuous disruptions – personal, environmental, global – of recent months. Reflecting on experiences of vulnerability, anxiety and loss, Hawker proposes that such experiences open up possibilities for new practices of love and care.

Experiments in Living [Melt] presents outcomes from Hawker's PhotoAccess 2021 *Dark Matter* residency.

/melt/

- become liquified by heat
- leave or disappear unobtrusively
- dissolve in liquid
- make or become more tender or loving
- change or merge imperceptibly into (another form or state)



Sammy Hawker, *Melt*, 2020-2021, 6x6 photographic negative exposed to flame, pigment ink print on archival paper

Another Form

I read recently that one of the reasons that making sourdough bread has become so popular between 2019 and 2021 was that it brought people a sense of agency and purpose that they had otherwise lost. In this period, punctuated by devastating bushfires, destructive hail storms and a global pandemic, it is no wonder that simple acts, like breadmaking, are being used as a salve.

Instead of assuaging anxieties, Sammy Hawker's exhibition *Experiments in Living [Melt]* proposes an alternative: to accept and embrace the newly established power dynamic between humans and the natural world. Hawker firmly states, "the idea that we are autonomous is something that we desperately need to reconsider".¹ The photographs, text and video work that form the exhibition act as a fragmented archive of the last three years, charting moments of personal and environmental destruction, darkness and transformation.

When I visit Hawker, she tells me of a devastating moment following the Orroral and Clear Range bushfires which both started in Namadgi National Park in the southern Australian Capital Territory in February 2020. These fires decimated the property where she lived at the time, near Michelago outside of Kamberri/Canberra. In 2019, as part of the Scarlet Robin conservation project, there were hundreds of Eucalyptus trees planted on the property.

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Following the fires, Hawker discovered that the plastic tree guards which were installed to protect the saplings had turned into mangled sarcophagi, suffocating and stunting. This was one of the catalysts for her experimentation in using open flame to distort and develop her photographic negatives. This process is one which straddles the boundaries of creation and destruction, with overexposure to the flame mutilating the negatives beyond repair. Hawker shows me a collection of these melted negatives, with the translucent black plastic contorted into impossible shapes, left shrivelled and bubbling from the heat.

One image that thrived under this process, titled *Melt* (2020-21), captures the landscape of Scottsdale Bush Heritage Reserve, a property in Ngunawal Country which was badly burned in the fires. Hawker encountered this landscape with Ngunawal educator and cultural leader, Tyronne Bell, who was undertaking a cultural heritage survey of the site. Her fire-exposure technique reunites the charred trees with the very process that transformed them, overlaying the image with a ghostly haze which blanketed the land not so long ago.

Hawker describes her methodology of using materials collected from specific sites in the development of her analogue photography as “acts of co-creation”.² They represent an active collaboration between the artist and her subject, the natural world. Materials like rain water, salt-rich ocean water and open flames leave an indelible impact on the photographic negatives – continuously corroding, crystallizing and concealing the captured image. The unpredictability of the process partially returns authorship and control to the site itself. Hawker says, “to me it feels the image becomes alive; the ... vibrant matter painting its way onto the negative”.³

These processes also add a temporal dimension to Hawker’s photography, with the images animated by moments which lie beyond the frame. *After the Storm* (2020) was processed with a combination of ocean water and melted hailstones collected within Murrumbidgee National Park following a tumultuous downpour. An understanding of Hawker’s process provokes a recollection of lived experience in the viewer. We can conjure an imagined series of events based on these fragments of visual and written information. Prior to the sparse, wispy clouds in the sunny sky that we can see in the obscured image, there was a thunderous, churning cloud of grey that came before. We exist in the aftermath.

In the video work *Melt* (2021) Hawker documents the vastly different ways that our bodies and minds experience periods of darkness. The heart-racing fear of a natural disaster is felt in stark contrast to the elongated, numbing dread associated with government-sanctioned isolation. The video is scored by NASA’s recordings of electromagnetic vibrations on the surface of the moon. The vacuous crackling of space becomes the soundtrack to our isolation, reminding me of the static heard on long, unwieldy Zoom calls throughout lockdown.

Tom, evacuated to Narooma, watching pyrocumulus travel over the Pacific (2019) is the only photograph in the exhibition that depicts the direct encounter between the human and the natural world. The composition is reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich’s painting *Wanderer over the sea of fog* (1818) where a gentleman in tails with a cane stands atop a cliff, confronting the sublime power of nature. Unlike Friedrich’s heroic figure, Hawker’s subject is captured in a moment of startling submission, displaced as the bushfires engulf the land. The figure is claustrophobically contained between the heavy, looming pyrocumulus cloud and the beach below, humbled by the destructive potential of the environment.

Throughout the exhibition, Hawker explores multiple definitions of the term ‘melt’. She leaves us with a hopeful possibility, that we can “change or merge imperceptibly into another form or state”.⁴ These words resonate as we are on the precipice of resuming the rhythm and pace of pre-pandemic life. *Experiments in Living [Melt]* encourages us not to revert but to continue our transformations, to continue to melt.

Yvette Dal Pozzo

Yvette is a Canberra-based curator and writer. She has worked as Curatorial Assistant at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra and held appointments at arts festivals, and auction houses. Yvette holds a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) Degree from the University of Melbourne.

End Notes

1. Unless otherwise stated, all quotes from Sammy Hawker are from a conversation between the author and the artist on 23 October, 2021.
2. Acts of Co-Creation was also the title of Hawker’s 2021 exhibition, <http://sammyhawker.com/acts-of-cocreation>.
3. Sammy Hawker, *Paradiso Magazine*, issue 19, May-June 2021, <http://sammyhawker.com/paradiso-magazine>.
4. Sammy Hawker, *Experiments in Living [Melt]*, 2021, <https://www.gallery.photoaccess.org.au/experiments-in-living>

List of Works

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| 1 | Sammy Hawker, <i>Tom, evacuated to Narooma, watching pyrocumulus travel over the Pacific</i> , 2019, 35mm photographic negative, pigment ink printed on archival Hahnemühle Photo Rag 308gsm paper, 59.4cm x 84.1cm

[5% of the artist's profit will be donated to Firesticks Alliance Indigenous Corporation.] | Edition 1 of 10 + AP signed and numbered | \$1100 framed
\$820 unframed. |
| 2 | Sammy Hawker, <i>How To Disappear Completely</i> , 2020, 6x6 photographic negative processed with rainwater collected from site, pigment ink printed on archival Hahnemühle Photo Rag 308gsm paper, 59.4cm x 84.1cm

[5% of the artist's profit will be donated to Lifeline.] | Edition 1 of 10 + AP signed and numbered | \$1100 framed
\$820 unframed |
| 3 | Sammy Hawker, <i>After the Storm</i> , 2020, 6x6 photographic negative processed with ocean water and hailstones collected from site, pigment ink printed on archival Hahnemühle Photo Rag 308gsm paper, 59.4cm x 84.1cm

[5% of the artist's profit will be donated to Lifeline.] | Edition 1 of 10 + AP signed and numbered | \$1100 framed
\$820 unframed |
| 4 | Sammy Hawker, <i>Broulee [Salt Sketch]</i> , 2020, 6x6 photographic negative processed with ocean water collected from site, pigment ink printed on archival Hahnemühle Photo Rag 308gsm paper, 59.4cm x 84.1cm

[5% of the artist's profit will be donated to Lifeline.] | Edition 1 of 10 + AP signed and numbered | \$1100 framed
\$820 unframed |
| 5 | Sammy Hawker, <i>Melt</i> , 2020-2021, 6x6 photographic negative exposed to flame, pigment ink printed on archival Hahnemühle Photo Rag 308gsm paper, 110cm x 110cm

[This work was created on the land of the Ngunawal People and what is now known as Scottsdale Reserve. 10% of the artist's profit will be evenly donated between Thunderstone Cultural and Land Management Services Aboriginal Corporation & Bush Heritage Australia.] | Edition 1 of 5 + 2APs signed and numbered | \$3200 framed
\$2500 unframed. |
| 6 | Sammy Hawker, <i>Melt</i> , 2021, 13 minutes, 14 seconds, single-channel high definition video, 16:9, colour, sound | Edition 1 of 1 + AP | \$6750 (rights to be negotiated) |
| 7 | Sammy Hawker, <i>Experiments in Living [Melt] Process Portfolio</i> , 2020-1. | | NFS |

Sammy Hawker | About

Sammy Hawker is an Australian-based visual artist. In her practice she examines methodologies of co-creation when producing work from sites of the Anthropocene. She is interested in how facilitating interaction with the more-than-human in the creation of a visual image, challenges her authorial control and celebrates the voices of the more-than-human world. This practice is grounded in conscious listening and active listening, considering the often invisible temporal realities, energies & cross-species entanglements of the site.

Artist Statement

The past few years have challenged us to reconsider our illusion of control over the natural world. The veil of autonomy is starting to slip.

Through the theme of 'Melt' this exhibition is a personal reflection of the artist's experience of the last two years, starting with the 2019/20 catastrophic bushfires and extending to the most recent COVID pandemic lockdown. While these two particular events are the consequences of more dramatic acts of more-than human agency this exhibition, through a mix of text, documentary imagery and entangled acts of co-creation, quietly reminds us that more-than human forces are constantly shaping our lives.

There is a tangible anxiety from the precariousness of our assumed position. This exhibition is open about the artist's own periods of darkness. The vulnerability is intentional in its offering, holding space for more honest communication and making a stand for the practice of love.

More Online

Visit www.gallery.photoaccess.org.au to learn more about *Experiments in Living [Melt]*.