

Figure and Ground, making meaning in the Anthropocene

Contemporary Photomontage Exhibition

Written by Angela Rowe

Accumulated knowledge and experience combined with the ability to imagine and play is usually the key to solving novel challenges, it is a well informed leap of faith. This is a process of meaning-making that compels us to traverse from the familiar to the unfamiliar, enabling us to comprehend our current position and the paths we have traversed. *Figure and Ground, making meaning in the Anthropocene*, gathers together artists employing photomontage and collage as mediums to offer distinct viewpoints on the intricate tapestry woven between human beings and their environment and speculate on the future.

In a 2022 interview with Katy Hessel, art critic and writer Jerry Saltz reminds us that the purpose of art making and art writing is to embed ideas into matter¹. The technique of photomontage and collage disrupts familiar concepts and images through the literal act of cutting, tearing, and pasting. Whether employing analog photographs or digital files, our conventional understanding of the familiar is ruptured, inviting the challenge and distortion of meaning. Such transformation allows ideas to be repurposed within novel, previously unimagined contexts, engendering fresh avenues for comprehending the Anthropocene—our current epoch marked by significant human-induced planetary transformations.

*The Anthropocene Epoch is an unofficial unit of geologic time, used to describe the most recent period in Earth's history when human activity started to have a significant impact on the planet's climate and ecosystems.*²

The Anthropocene is generally regarded as a geological time frame defined by the scale and long term impact of our human activities. A testament to the scale and enduring impact of our actions, the Anthropocene underscores the irrevocable modifications we have imposed on our planet. From disrupted climate systems to altered landscapes, the magnitude of our interventions is paralleled only by the Earth's intricate responses. Amidst the complexity our planet keeps spinning.

These artists observe, document, create, and reflect—offering us a mirror to our shared existence. Commenting on the built environment, the relationships between the plants that inhabit our city scapes and how human relationships are in flux.

¹ 'The Great Women Artists'.

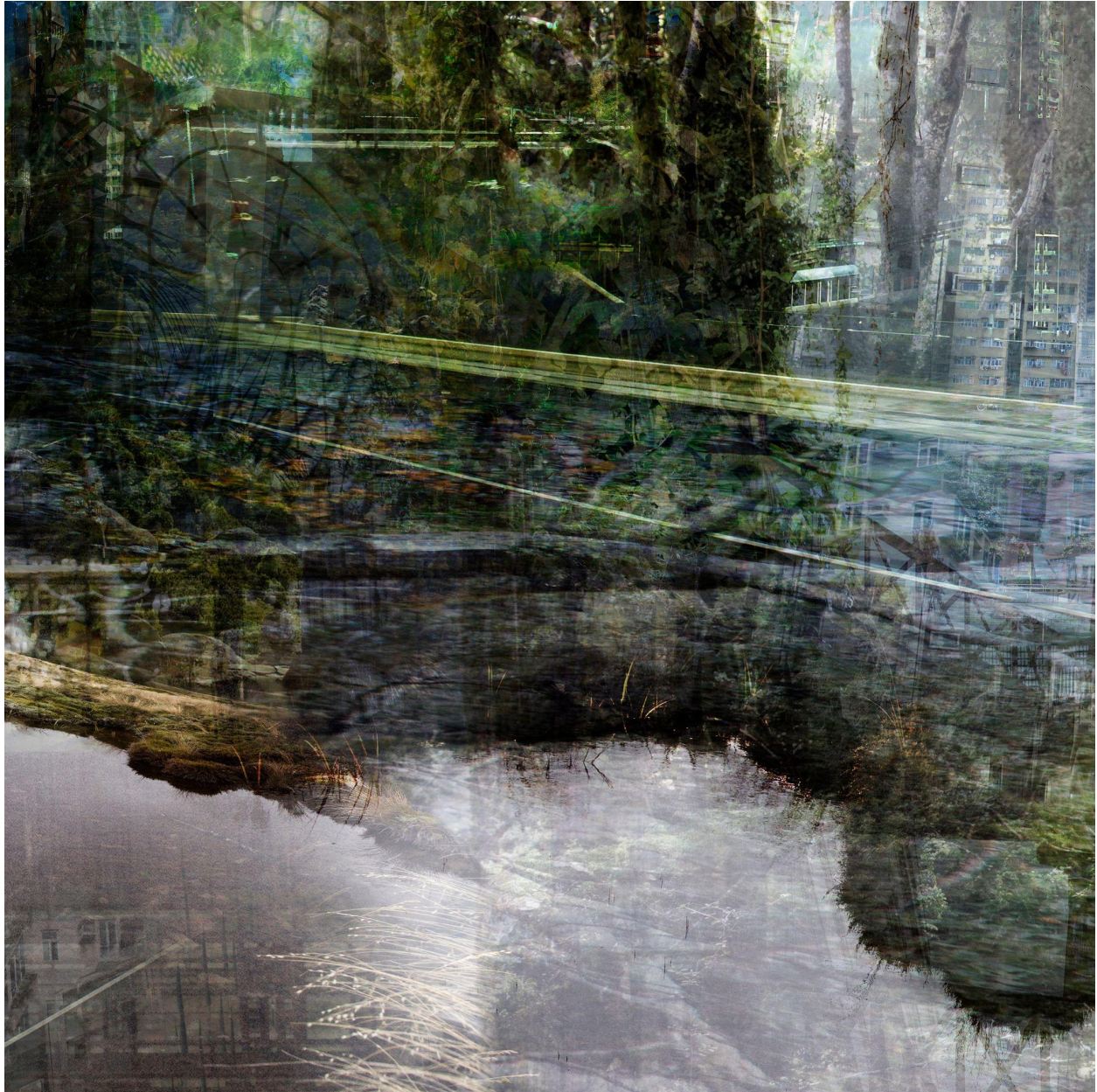
² 'Anthropocene'.



Purple Haze - Pollution II, detail, Megan Corbett.

Megan Corbett's works function as temporal bridges, merging photographs captured three decades ago with contemporary images, a visual dialogue spanning eras. These images, captured before climate change's palpable effects, beckon us to contemplate the journey that propelled us toward the current

landscape of heatwaves and unprecedented storms. The potential for these images to reform further is present in the footprint of the object, the substrate that holds the images. These works are a pause in an unfinished process, the result of which Corbett allows us to imagine.



An Other World, detail, Deborah Crowe.

In *'An Other World,'* familiar plant forms, traces of urban matter; concrete or steel is absorbed in a surreal landscape like and unlike the world as we currently experience it. This physical and conceptual sharing of space is present in the works by Deborah Crowe, her experience of living and working in cities brings to the fore the relationships she sees in the hard edges of the city and the way plants and

organisms colonise and embed themselves in our landscapes. Plants soften the boundaries by eroding the edges and spaces between, humans curtail the plants they share an environment with, both indoors and out. Crowe says of her work, "Part field-photography, part proposition, and part representation of my fears and hopes about potential future environments, the work is underpinned by concerns and preoccupations about humans' treatment of the planet and climate crisis"



The paradise you're leaving for us, detail, Gemma Keene.

In contrast to the rapid skimming and scrolling over visual imagery via social media platforms the artists in this exhibition have thoughtfully engaged with a familiar visual language, replacing, displacing and in

some cases regenerating images upon each other. Gemma Keene subverts the familiar, reshaping images of discarded materials into vibrant assemblages that underscore humanity's relationship with waste. Recolouring, representing and layering what we have tried to throw 'away' is acknowledging the cycles and systems humans are collectively trying to reverse. The rubbish and detritus of our lives is amassed, repeated, layered into the dense and fragmented images. Despite the desire to look away from our collective problems, such as waste and pollution, there is no 'away'.



Please listen, Sightseeing on the edge, Goodbye 2, Ros May.

Ros May's unsettling compositions merge taxidermy animals with dated cityscapes, eliciting a haunting unease. Pushing the uncanny into focus, the animals are obviously not quite right, but how? These hybrid images, both captivating and repellant, remind us of the indelible mark we leave on the environment, akin to how concrete structures colonise the land. May's juxtaposition of lifeless creatures and urban sprawl highlights the interplay between human intervention and the natural world's inherent resilience.



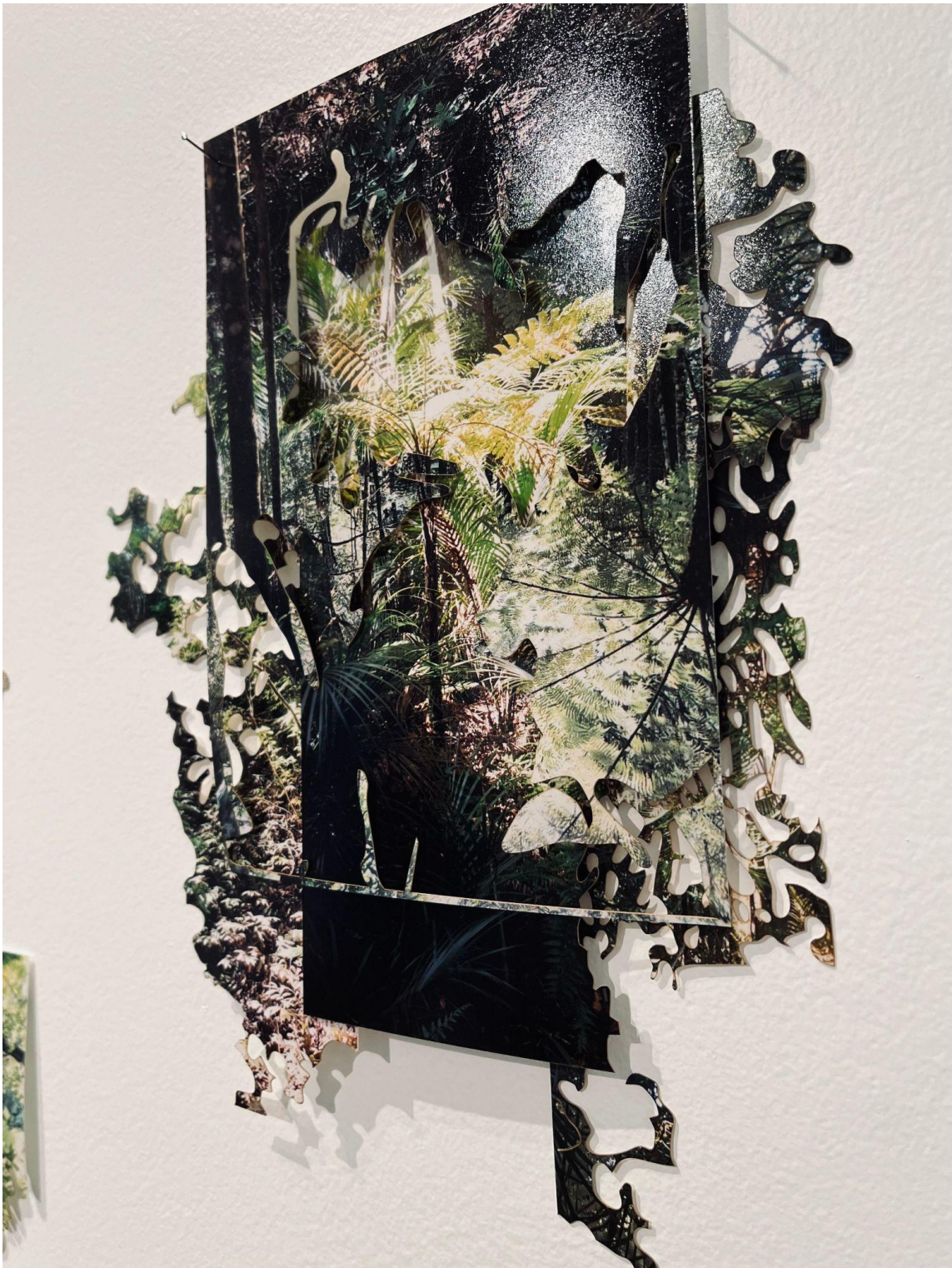
Omapere dreaming, Vicky Little.

By regularly engaging in 'natural' spaces, Vicky Little seeks out an alternative perspective and balance between the tensions present in the everyday. Little's work blurs the boundary between interior and exterior, inviting us to consider the synergy between these realms. Her layered compositions capture the interdependence of human relationships and the environment, affirming the necessity of both communal bonds and nature's embrace.



And we watched, detail, Mark Phobos.

In collaboration with artificial intelligence, Mark Phobos harnesses cutting-edge technology to explore the impact of humanity's unchecked progress. His images reflect the evolving digital landscape and the complex choices we face in safeguarding our future. Each of us is immersed following our own algorithms, the habits and patterns, nothing changes if nothing changes.



Fragments from the Pukenui Forest and beyond, installation detail, Megan White.

Photographic technology has a history intertwined with photomontage, making it an excellent medium for challenging ideas around the authenticity of the photographic image. It is the perfect medium for creating images of a photographic nature that are impossible to make using traditional photographic

equipment and techniques. This is evident in Megan White's Postcards from the Pukenui Forest, where sections of images and plants are edited, reassembled, repeating forms in reconstructed landscapes.



Veiny toys, George Hajian.

Photomontage, an art form interwoven with photographic history, provides an ideal conduit for challenging the authenticity of visual representation. This medium deftly forges images that transcend the bounds of traditional photography, conjuring the impossible through layering, juxtaposition, and textual interplay. The use of existing ideas via imagery, symbol and texture makes space for new modes of relationships, new meaning. George Hajian's works concern themselves with the images and ideas that continue to hold sway in a collective consciousness, being remade/re-aligned. Directly repurposing material and images from the masses of consumer culture to create his collages, Hajian's work consumes and destroys as it decontextualizes the familiar.

"The ability to imagine what we dread most is an evolutionary tool that nature has given us to transcend what we fear. I do not believe that imagining the worst makes it happen. Imagining the worst might be one of the factors that makes us prevent it from happening. That is the function of dystopias and utopias: one to make real to us a destination we must not follow, the other to imagine for us a future that is possible." Ben Okri³

Photomontage, interwoven with photographic history and synthesised meanings, demonstrates that the process of meaning-making is not stagnant; it is an ever-evolving force, powered by our knowledge, experiences, and imaginations. In the midst of a rapidly changing world, where the pace of transformation rivals the constancy of our habits, artists beckon us to explore new compass points. As we stand on the precipice of unprecedented challenges, these visual provocations inspire us to think differently, question the familiar, and unveil new solutions.

References:

Katy Hessel Interview with Jerry Saltz. [Link](#)

National Geographic Education: Anthropocene. [Link](#)

"Artists can help us to imagine how to fight the climate crisis." The Guardian. [Link](#)



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³ 'Artists Must Confront the Climate Crisis – We Must Write as If These Are the Last Days | Ben Okri | The Guardian'.