

IN TERMS OF PRINT

Marion Wasseenaar



Figure 1. Abbotsford Convent, Melbourne.

EXHIBITION STATEMENT

The News Network Project is a trans-Tasman network of visual artists who have set themselves the task of examining 'the news,' as disseminated by the popular media, and the relationship of this dispersal of information to the fine art print. The group responds to current events and explores how the news media and contemporary art intersect, with a special focus on the print. Printed materials have a particular, historical relationship with current events that are made public in newspapers, magazines, websites and other media outlets. Responding to and recontextualising these materials, The News Network Project pairs the print's capacity for sharing and spreading topical information with the special significance of the print as fine art object, utilising strategies of repetition, authenticity and repositioning.

Exhibition Report: The News Network Project at c3 Contemporary Art Space, Abbotsford Convent, Melbourne, 11 April – 6 May 2018

Exhibiting artists: Alison Alder, Marian Crawford, B&T & Emboss, Neil Emmerson, Richard Harding, Trent Walter and Marion Wasseenaar.

This report focuses on two artworks in the exhibition and seeks to demonstrate their relationship to current events in the context of the fine art print, as outlined in the above statement. Familiar from the history of print production, the term 'halftone' is discussed in relation to Marian Crawford's work *Fake Pearls*, followed by the terms 'limited edition' and 'relief' in relation to own work, *111 200 Let's Do This*. I explore these terms in the context of these works in order to demonstrate the connection between the news media and the print in contemporary art.

HALFTONE¹

/ˈhɑːfˌtəʊn/

noun

1. a process used to reproduce an illustration by photographing it through a fine screen to break it up into dots

2. the etched plate thus obtained

3. the print obtained from such a plate



Figure 2. Marian Crawford, *Fake Pearls*, 2018, intaglio and laser prints on cut paper; thread, laser print and fake pearls, letterpress and zines. Photograph: Screaming Pixel.

There are a number of print processes employed in Crawford's work including intaglio, laser printing and letterpress, all of which refer to what appears to be a magnified version of a newspaper image, but is in fact an image of pearls. Some prints incorporate fine thread as a method of attaching the work together in the way that the key image of this body of work has, I imagine, been stitched together using 'fake' pearls attached to black velvet. Pearls are a symbol of status and nobility; however, the title of the work, *Fake Pearls*, suggests a kitsch commodity or souvenir. The image honours Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, king of Saudi Arabia from 1964 to 1975. His death at the age of 69 was by assassination and the embellished pearl, a museum piece, could be seen as a devotional icon of some kind.

Crawford has produced a facsimile of the image of the king in a number of variations. One shows a small letterpress edition, titled *In a Private Museum*. The image is adorned with two pearls and alongside it is a text that describes her encounter with the framed image in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia:

In a private museum we wandered past dust-covered Bedouin necklaces, rings and coins, Arabian coffee pots and copper vessels, the pelt of an Arabian wildcat, weaponry; until we saw the portrait. The glittering picture was an image of the King. His face, sitting on a ground of black velvet, had been dotted into existence in pearls. Pearls are valuable, iridescent, but those jewels, surely, weren't for real? In this image's tribute to power, the pearls had been transformed into sad copies of the beautiful and rare.

Crawford's reference to the transformation of "sad copies" seems to mean that the effect created in the reproduction is similar to the halftone screen that produces multiple copies through the print process, associated with the photomechanical printing of newspaper images. The halftone process translates the various tones of a photograph into dots of various sizes.² In other words, the pearls create the illusion of the halftone dot, a technology which is associated with consumerism and mass production and which has simultaneously become an analogy for fake news or deliberate misinformation. In the corresponding works in the series, Crawford exaggerates this misconception by reproducing enlarged versions of the image that accentuate and duplicate the scale of the pearls, making the halftone dot appear more evident.

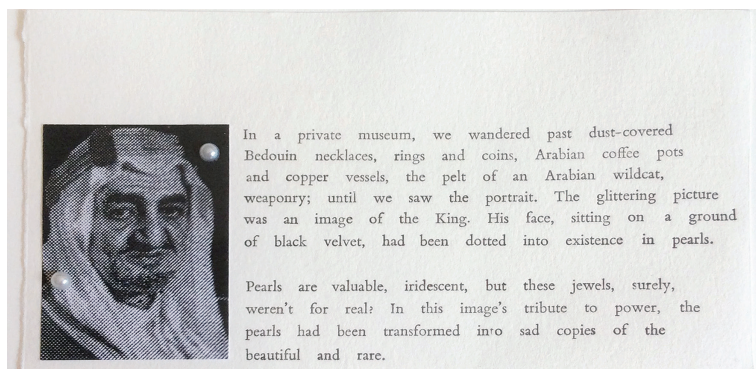


Figure 3. Marion Crawford, *Fake Pearls, In a Private Museum*, 2018 (detail).

In her artist statement, Crawford states that the work is about the proposition that there could be “fake” and “not-fake” news; the dearth of news from the Middle East due to her remoteness in the southern hemisphere; her experience of living and working in Saudi Arabia (and the fear she felt there), and her gratitude for the privileges and freedom offered to her as a female artist in Melbourne, Australia. More importantly, in relation to this review, Crawford also describes the work in terms of the power of the image, referring to its artistic lineage that includes Andy Warhol’s celebrity portraits denoting fame and power. Finally, she asserts that the work is about the pixel that converts an image into the language of the print.

Viewing this work, my mind drifts to Johannes Vermeer’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, 1665.³ The young girl who is wearing a turban that exposes the sumptuous pearl earring has an air of fictitious, exotic grace about her, allowing the viewer to reflect on her expressive character and emotions. Vermeer’s work has been celebrated through both an historical novel and a well-known film, complete with reproductions and merchandise, which in turn has made the image legendary. In contrast, the image of King Saud is an iconic likeness that has been faithfully rendered using pearls that mimic the halftone dot, and thus more closely resembles the dot-screened and celebrity portraits produced by Warhol. A striking example can be seen in Warhol’s *Most Wanted Men* series.⁴

Unlike Vermeer’s historical painting from the Dutch Golden Age, the halftone represents an artistic language, medium and technical process that was developed between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries and that underwent major changes from the Industrial Revolution through the Pop Art Movement that began in the 1950s. Crawford utilises this technique to navigate and to comment on the sheer amount of information available through print, and now widely accessible through our screens. I find myself pondering the contemporary relevance of Marshall McLuhan’s assertion in *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects*: “Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication.”⁵

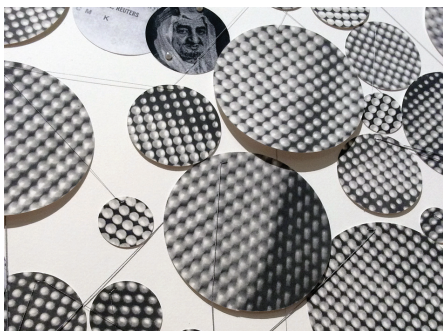


Figure 4. Marion Crawford, *Fake Pearls, Fake Pearls_2*, 2018 (detail).

LIMITED EDITION⁶

noun

1. an edition of something such as a book, plate, etc., that is limited to a specified number

RELIEF⁷

/riˈli:f/

noun

1. a printing process, such as engraving, letterpress, etc., that employs raised surfaces from which ink is transferred to the paper



Figure 5. Marion Wassenaar, *Ohai Coal*, 2016.

111200 Let's Do This is the fourth iteration of a body of work that commenced in 2016 with a public lightbox exhibition in Melbourne for The News Network Project. The original work, titled *111200 Rising Tides*, showed an image of a coal sack stationed at the water's edge, functioning as a sentinel for the impending rising tides of climate change. This was followed by *111200 Limited Edition (after Duchamp) Take 1*, an installation for the "Art & Future" exhibition at the Dunedin School of Art gallery in October 2016.

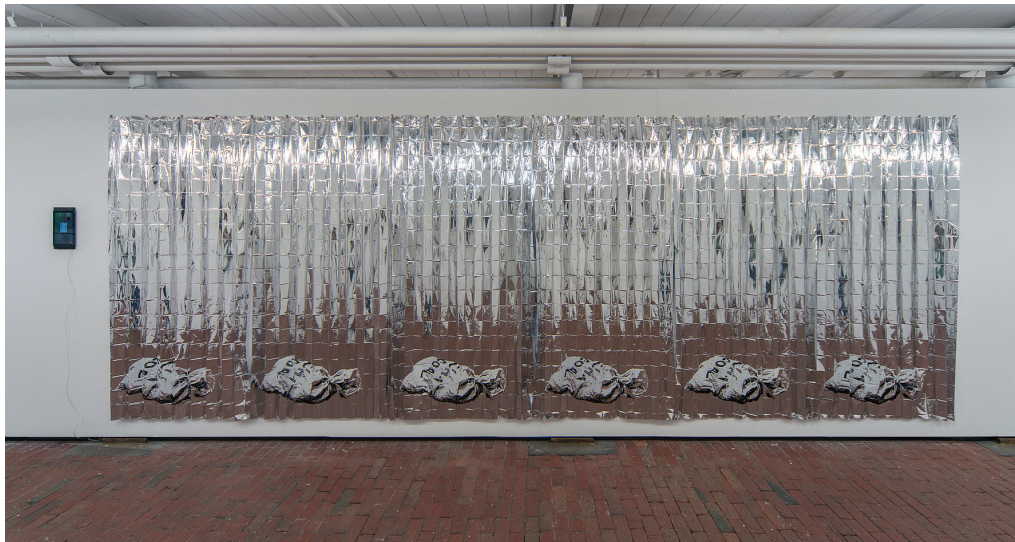


Figure 6. Marion Wassenaar *111200 Let's Do This*, 2018, video and relief print on emergency blankets. Photograph: Screaming Pixel.

Included in this work was a stack of printed posters as giveaways showing a suspended coal sack commercially printed from an original relief print. Twenty-five prints were available sitting atop a stack of plain paper, giving the impression of a large stack of posters. A GoPro camera mounted above the posters recorded the audience as they took away the posters, leaving 900 blank sheets of paper. As the pile decreased, the print ran out, revealing a stack of plain paper ghosted by the projection of the inverse image, giving the effect of a negative afterimage retained in one's vision. The inverted coal sack image hovers on the page as if strangled by the rope that holds it and deprived of air – a commentary on our finite fossil fuel reserves and growing carbon emissions.

It is in this context that I attribute a dual meaning to the term "limited edition." The notion of the limited edition, as well as referring to the very few prints made available to the public, became a commentary on our planet's limited resources due to human impact on the environment.

The work refers in part to Marcel Duchamp's *Twelve Hundred Coal Bags Suspended from the Ceiling over a Stove*, exhibited at the 1938 Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme at the Galerie Beaux-Arts in Paris – although the total number of 1200 hanging coal sacks was never confirmed. The sacks, suspended above the audience releasing coal dust, were lit by a workman's brazier in the middle of the gallery, along with flashlights issued to the audience.⁸ The dim, shadowy atmosphere would have created an unwelcoming environment and would perhaps have evoked the feeling of being in the depths of a coalmine, highlighting the reality of manual labour rather than the surrealist subconscious. This work was exhibited at a time of continuing economic downturn and industrial unrest, including coalminers' strikes – perhaps staging a twin critique of fascism and capitalism.⁹

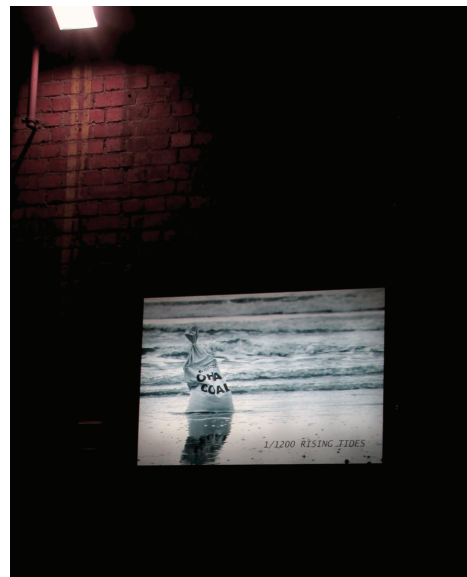
For this most recent work in the series, *111200 Let's Do This* at c3 Contemporary Artspace, the edited video recording from the "Art & Future" exhibition was displayed on a tablet mounted on the wall alongside relief-printed coal sacks lying on emergency blankets. The artist statement asserts: "Coal bags take on a new lease of life as protection against rising tides."

Coal is a finite and polluting resource. New Zealand's Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, signalled climate change as "this generation's nuclear free moment."¹⁰ Her catchphrase during the election was "Let's do this!" The motif of the coal sack can be seen as a symbolic barrier to rising tides. The term "relief" now takes on an alternative meaning to describe the aid and support needed for the casualties of climate change:

RELIEF¹¹

1. a feeling of cheerfulness or optimism that follows the removal of anxiety, pain, or distress: *I breathed a sigh of relief*
2. deliverance from or alleviation of anxiety, pain, distress, etc.
3. a. help or assistance, as to the poor, needy, or distressed
 - b. (as modifier): *relief work*

Figure 7. Marion Wassenaar; *111200 Rising Tides*, 2016, digital lightbox project, Rodda Lane, Melbourne.



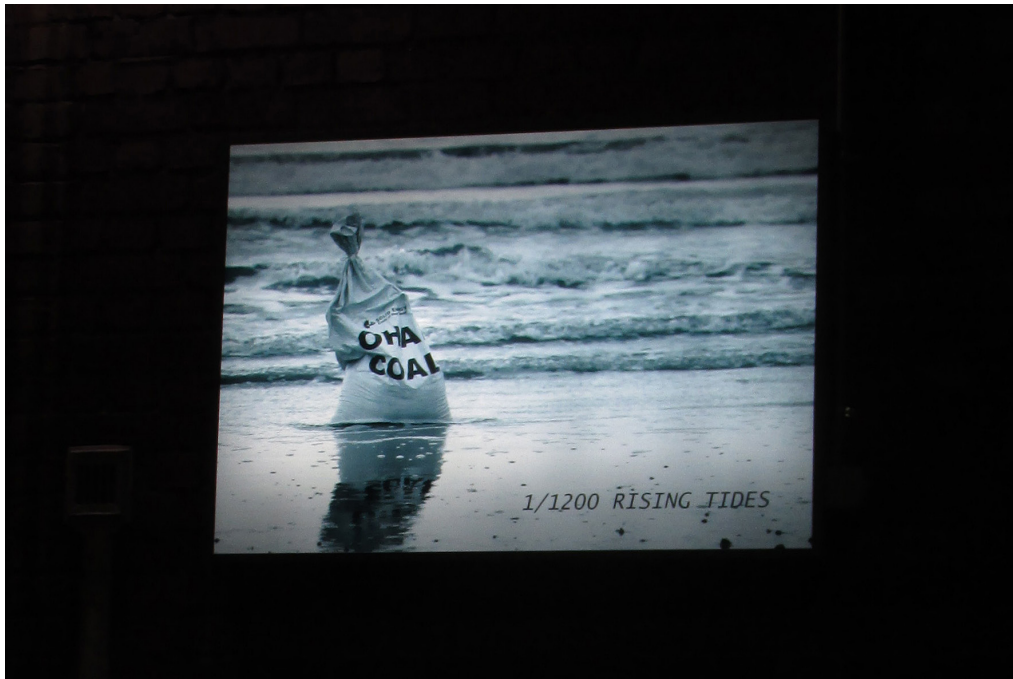


Figure 8. Marion Wassenaar; *1/1 200 Rising Tides*, 2016, digital lightbox project, Rodda Lane, Melbourne.

A little over 30 years ago, New Zealand's then Prime Minister, David Lange, declared that nuclear weapons were morally indefensible and that we would no longer play any part in the arms race that threatened to extinguish all life on Earth. In 1984, the country became legally nuclear-free and this position remains a part of New Zealand's foreign policy. Today, as Prime Minister Ardern states, climate change is a major priority for the government, and is as relevant to the country now as the nuclear issue was in the 1980s.

This project addresses coal mining's impact on climate change and the pressing opposition to expansion of the industry on both sides of the Tasman. Recent news reports, for example, have featured the controversial Adani coal mine project in Queensland and the proposed mine site at Mt Te Kuha, near Westport, New Zealand, that threatens the ecological integrity of the area. Also, US President Donald Trump is attempting to revive the coal industry, denying climate change by declaring that: "The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive."¹²

In a gesture of despair, the relief-printed image of the prostrate coal sack is exhausted and laid to rest. Acting as its support, the emergency blanket offers a sense of security and possible renewal for what the future may hold.

All images by the author unless otherwise stated.

Marion Wassenaar holds an MFA from the Dunedin School of Art and specialises in print practices. Her research focuses on the collision between humans and their environment. She lectures in the Print Studio at the Dunedin School of Art and is a member of The News Network Project (<http://www.thenewsnetworkproject.org>).

- 1 *Collins English Dictionary* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2014), <https://www.collinsdictionary.com>.
- 2 Dusan C Stulik and Art Kaplan, *Halftone*, The Getty Conservation Institute, 2013, https://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/pdf_publications/pdf/atlas_half_tone.pdf.
- 3 Johannes Vermeer, <https://www.mauritshuis.nl/en/explore/the-collection/artworks/girl-with-a-pearl-earring-670/#>.
- 4 Blake Gopnik, "What the Dots Mean in Andy Warhol's Pop Art," *The Daily Pic*, 17 March 2017, <https://news.artnet.com/opinion/andy-warhol-broad-894944>.
- 5 Marshall McLuhan and Q Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*, new ed. (Corte Madera, Calif., Gingko Press, 2005), 104.
- 6 *Collins English Dictionary*.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Lewis Kachur, *Displaying the Marvelous: Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dali, and Surrealist Exhibition Installations* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 68-88, quoted in David Hopkins, "Duchamp, Childhood, Work and Play: The Vernissage for *First Papers of Surrealism*, New York, 1942," *Tate Papers*, 22 (Autumn 2014), <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/22/duchamp-childhood-work-and-play-the-vernissage-for-first-papers-of-surrealism-new-york-1942>.
- 9 Hopkins, "Duchamp, Childhood, Work and Play."
- 10 "Watch: 'This is My Generation's Nuclear Free Moment' – Jacinda Ardern's Passionate Speech on Climate Change at Labour's Campaign Launch," *Newsnow*, 20 August 2017, <https://www.tvnz.co.nz/one-news/new-zealand/watch-my-generations-nuclear-free-moment-jacinda-arderns-passionate-speech-climate-change-labours-campaign-launch>.
- 11 *Collins English Dictionary*.
- 12 Donald J Trump, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/265895292191248385?lang=en>.