

STILL LIFE WITH EV

Pam McKinlay



Figure 1. Electric Vehicle as media player during exhibition installation.

Climate change is now more than ever a social issue – it is no longer the province of science (if it ever truly was). The emerging field of Earth jurisprudence seeks to change the discussion from commodification of Earth's resources – which has led to the current crisis in what is now termed the anthropocene – to a relationship where nature is granted the right to exist, persist and flourish.¹ "The 'Great Work,' as Thomas (Berry) called it, is then to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficent manner."²

The recently formed movement 'Claim the Sky' seeks to introduce the concept of guardianship for future generations as the basis for negotiation, rather than competing national interests and backroom deals by the juggernauts of multinational capitalism.³ To paraphrase Berry – whatever preserves and enhances the air quality in the natural cycles of its transformation is good; whatever opposes or negates it is not good. It is a responsibility which each and every one of us needs to engage with, because we live in an open room⁴ and in this room without doors we all partake of the one atmosphere. In this context of climate-change watching, a glimmer of hope appeared during the signing of the Paris Agreement in 2016, where we collectively set the goal to reduce 1990 greenhouse emissions by 80 percent by 2050.

“Think global, act local” has become the new mantra as we scramble against the clock to achieve this. In this context, global attention turned on Beijing in 2014 following the *Huffington Post* headline, “Beijing Watches Fake Sunrise on Video Screen amid Smog Emergency.”⁵ China of course is not alone in this, and the headline could just as easily have been about Mexico City,⁶ Singapore⁷ or Delhi.⁸

Two years down the track and China is creating new headlines as it leads the world in solar power generation⁹ and other efforts to improve air quality and mitigate its greenhouse gas emissions. In addition, China has taken on an ambitious project to reverse centuries of deforestation.¹⁰ These changes have been rapidly enacted and, as well as directives from the government, China is looking to engage all its citizens to do their part and contribute to cumulative change through a multitude of individual positive actions. At the bottom of the 2014 *Huffington Post* story was another photo which featured a simple line of text in the background:

保护大气环境人人有责

(it translates as “protecting the atmospheric environment is everyone’s responsibility”).

We took this line of text as our guiding inspiration for the work *Sweeping up the Sparrows*, and it has echoes running through each of its four parts. This sentence is a call to action for ordinary people and ordinary lives, and it brings to mind a modern parable, often referred to simply as “The Starfish Story.”¹¹ In this tale, a child comes across a beach littered with dying starfish baking in the sun after they are stranded by the outgoing tide, and she begins to throw them back into the ocean one by one. An old man watching comments that her actions are futile, and that she will never save them all. The child replies that she can make a difference to those that are returned to the sea. The moral of the story is that we can all make a difference as ordinary people by the small, ordinary actions made necessary by the time we are born into. To quote Berry once more: “This is a work not chosen by us; indeed, it was chosen for us, by the fact of our being born into this time of crisis when the very structure of the Earth is threatened and the extinction of species continues unimpeded.”¹² Such actions are a necessary antidote to inertia, apathy and the banality of evil.

The installation *Sweeping up the Sparrows* is based on a poem with the same title, written during the week of the 2014 *Huffington Post* article and as a response to the stories which followed in the days after the reported air quality event. The artwork is an installation which features a large poster-photograph; a bare tree surrounded by over 200 smokey ceramic tiles; a sound recording of the dawn chorus; and a reproduction of the message originally screened in Tiananmen Square¹³, emblazoned on a large-screen TV in the gallery.

The tree is stripped bare, bound and braced at its trunk, with a ‘climate change barometer’ – its gauge needle permanently fixed on **CLIMATE CHANGE** – braced at the base of the branches. The tree has three porcelain tiles each hanging precariously by a fine thread, imprinted with the message from the screen. It is reminiscent of the prayers and wishes one writes on joss paper and leaves on the wishing trees in Chinese temple gardens. The

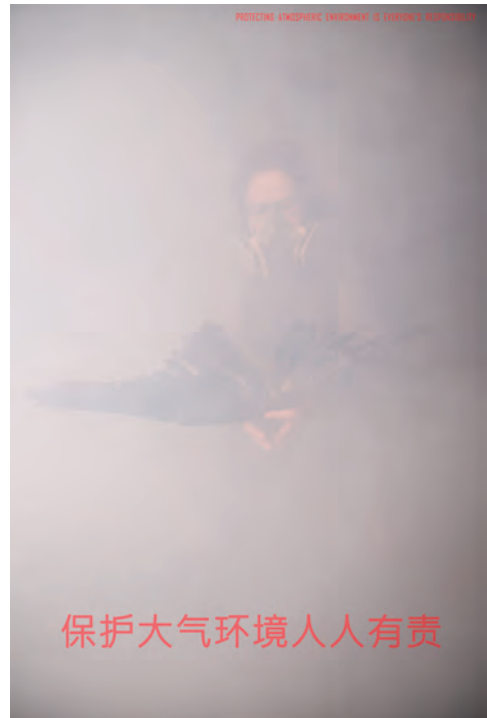


Figure 2. Pam McKinlay, *Bird in the Hand*, photograph on lustre paper, 120 x 80 cm.

保护大气环境人人有责

Figure 3. From Pam McKinlay and Jesse-James Pickery, *Good Morning: 保护大气环境人人有责*

("protecting the atmospheric environment is everyone's responsibility"), 2016, digital photograph, 60" flat screen, IPOD, Blue-tooth speaker.

message reminds us that our last-ditch hopes to hold the tide against catastrophic effects fuelled by changing climate (in the form of the fragile Paris Agreement) are hanging precariously by a thread. Beneath the tree are scattered a litter of smokey tiles, each bearing the same message. These are the remains and shards of broken promises of previous climate accords, trumped by the tyranny of greed which sidesteps environmental protection for short-term personal gain.

The poster image refers to the proverb "A bird in the hand" and reminds us that birds have long been used as biomonitors of air quality (think canary in the mine), as smog events impact directly on birds. They have a higher breathing rate than mammals, and are exposed to more airborne particles in the open air;¹⁴ hence bird prevalence is an indicator of a decent, healthy environment capable of supporting life forms including humans. Once the tiny house sparrows falls, the sparrowhawk falls. What befalls the bird befalls man.

In the empty bird's nest in the top of the tree, a recorded soundtrack of bird calls from the dawn chorus broadcasts-signifiers of the new dawn. In China, caged birds, often wild birds bought in the bird markets, are customarily kept



Figure 4-5. Pam McKinlay and Jesse-James Pickery with E M Davidson, *Foreseen, Forsaken*, 2016, stripped elm tree, rope, barometer, photograph on lustre paper with 200 ceramic tiles, stoneware, terracotta, porcelain and marbled clays (details) and sneaky electronics by E M Davidson. Tiles by Jesse-James Pickery (detail of raku tiles below).

for their melodic chirping, particularly at sunrise.¹⁵ “Where there was a dawn chorus in Beijing, it turned out to be a group of men gathered with their cagebirds which were hung up in the early morning sun. The gathering apparently stimulates the birds to sing and there is much competition as to who has the best songster.”¹⁶ The same soundtrack could be heard playing from an electric car (doubling as a media player) at the gallery entrance, which attracted (live) birds into the courtyard during the course of the exhibition.

Where once the Chinese government denied there was air pollution – they called it fog or haze (wu mai in Chinese) – now there is clear recognition from the government and citizens alike that the country’s rapid economic growth has come at a cost to the environment.¹⁷ One of the measures implemented during ‘red alert’ smog events¹⁸ is the taking of all conventional petrol-powered vehicles off the roads and the closure of factories, construction sites and schools in the areas most severely affected. In a city of 23 million inhabitants, this is a logistical nightmare.¹⁹ But for a certain market sector, business is booming. Automakers of completely electric vehicles are thriving, as these vehicles are permitted to operate in the capital at ANY time,²⁰ and as a consequence sales of EVs are booming,²¹ with China now the world leader in the latest EV sales statistics.

In China, we are witnessing pro-environmental action in a country which increasingly recognises that every kilometre travelled in a petrol-powered car is a cost to the environment which is not being paid. We all share this common air and we need to quit our addiction to oil. Time’s really up for this road trip.

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Jesse-James Pickery is in his final year BVA, studying ceramics at the Dunedin School of Art.



Figure 6. “Sweeping up the Sparrows” was installed for the Art + Future Exhibition which accompanied a symposium of Art + Future: Energy, Climate, Culture at the Dunedin School of Art in October, 2016.

- 1 Peter D Burdon, "Wild Law: The Philosophy of Earth Jurisprudence," *Alternative Law Journal*, 35:2 (2010), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1636564###.
- 2 Ibid., 4.
- 3 <http://claimthesky.org>.
- 4 See Mikekiev's beautiful artwork of the Earth cradled in a fragile swathe of clouds (often wrongly attributed as a photo taken from the Hubble telescope): https://www.shutterstock.com/image-illustration/clouds-earth-space-video-available-clip-102362062?utm_campaign=1dee%20inc.&irgwc=1&tpl=77643-108110&utm_source=77643&utm_medium=Affiliate.
- 5 "Beijing Watches Fake Sunrise on Video Screen amid Smog Emergency (PHOTOS)," *Huffington Post*, 17 January 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/17/beijing-fake-sunrise_n_4618536.html.
- 6 "Mexico City Cleans up its Reputation for Smog," *Associated Press*, 26 December 2008, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/28391130/ns/world_news-world_environment/t/mexico-city-cleans-its-reputation-smog. "Not long ago air in the capital was so bad birds fell dead in mid-flight, and children used brown crayons to draw the sky." Today Mexico city has 'environmental police' on the streets who issue fines to drivers with dirty exhausts.
- 7 Michael Graham Richard, "Singapore's Record-breaking Smog is so Bad, Birds are Falling from the Sky," *Treehugger*, 20 June 2013, <http://www.treehugger.com/environmental-policy/singapore-smog-breaks-records-indonesian-forest-fires-partly-blame.html>.
- 8 "Polluting in the Name of Diwali is Honour Killing of the Environment," *World Hinduism*, 31 October 2016, <http://worldhinduism.org/2016/10/31/polluting-in-the-name-of-diwali-is-honour-killing-of-the-environment/#sthash:JrCTBukB.dpuf>.
- 9 Richard Martin, "China is on an Epic Solar Power Binge," *MIT Technology Review*, 22 March 2016, <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/601093/china-is-on-an-epic-solar-power-binge>.
- 10 B Rose Kelly, "Seeing the Forest for the Trees: World's Largest Reforestation Program Overlooks Wildlife," *Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs*, 7 September 2016, <http://www.princeton.edu/news-and-events/news/item/seeing-forest-trees-worlds-largest-reforestation-program-overlooks> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grain_for_Green.
- 11 <https://eventsforchange.wordpress.com/2011/06/05/the-starfish-story-one-step-towards-changing-the-world>.
- 12 Burdon, "Wild Law," 5.
- 13 The giant screens in Tiananmen Square were originally erected in 2009 to mark the 60th anniversary of communist China. They are used to showcase tourist destinations and convey other government-sponsored messages. *Huffington Post*, "Beijing Watches Fake Sunrise."
- 14 "A Bird's Eye View of the Air Pollution-cancer Link in China," <https://www.nebi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3975183>.
- 15 <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg12316715-300-a-silent-spring-in-china-the-dawn-chorus-in-beijing-comes-from-caged-birds-pollution-covers-cities-with-smog-chinas-drive-to-protect-the-environment-may-have-come-too-late>.
- 16 David Goode, "A Land Where the Sparrow Became an Enemy of the People," *New Scientist*, 123:1671 (1 July 1989), 57.
- 17 "A Bird's Eye View."
- 18 Smog as we know it today is a type of visible air pollution derived from vehicular emission from internal combustion engines and industrial fumes that react in the atmosphere with sunlight to form secondary pollutants that also combine with the primary emissions to form photochemical smog.
- 19 Tom Phillips, "Beijing Issues First Pollution Red Alert as Smog Engulfs Capital," *The Guardian*, 7 December 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/dec/07/beijing-pollution-red-alert-smog-engulfs-capital>.
- 20 Jake Spring and Winni Zhou, "UPDATE 1 – In Smog-choked China, Drivers Check out Electric Cars," *Cyclical Consumer Goods*, 10 December 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/china-pollution-autos-idUJL3N13Z2S320151210>.
- 21 Bertel Schmitt, "For Tesla, Electric Car Sales Explode in all the Wrong Places," *Forbes*, 16 October 2016, <http://www.forbes.com/forbes/welcome/?toURL=http://www.forbes.com/sites/bertelschmitt/2016/10/16/for-tesla-electric-car-sales-explode-in-all-the-wrong-places/&refURL=https://www.facebook.com/&referrer=https://www.facebook.com/#3e43ddae5d39>. Although electricity in China is produced by coal-powered stations, the switch away from fossil-fuelled cars to electric will still see a decline in emissions. This is combined with China building the world's largest solar arrays or solar power farms and investing heavily in other forms of renewable energy sources. Further evidence of China's newfound clean air zeal was the recent condemnation and fining of revellers for setting off fireworks at Chinese New Year.