



Julian Frichto x Pony Express, Epoch Wars, 2019, Chorus Art Center, Shanghai, China.



Mott Sev x Pony Express, Carnivorous Plant, Ecosex Porno (Still), 2016.

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TRACEY CLEMENT

## Crisis management in interesting times

**FEATURE** 27 May 2020

In the wake of the global coronavirus pandemic, the entire Australian arts industry was categorised as a non-essential. But that doesn't mean that artists stopped working. After all, responding to crisis is one of the traditional strengths of visual art.

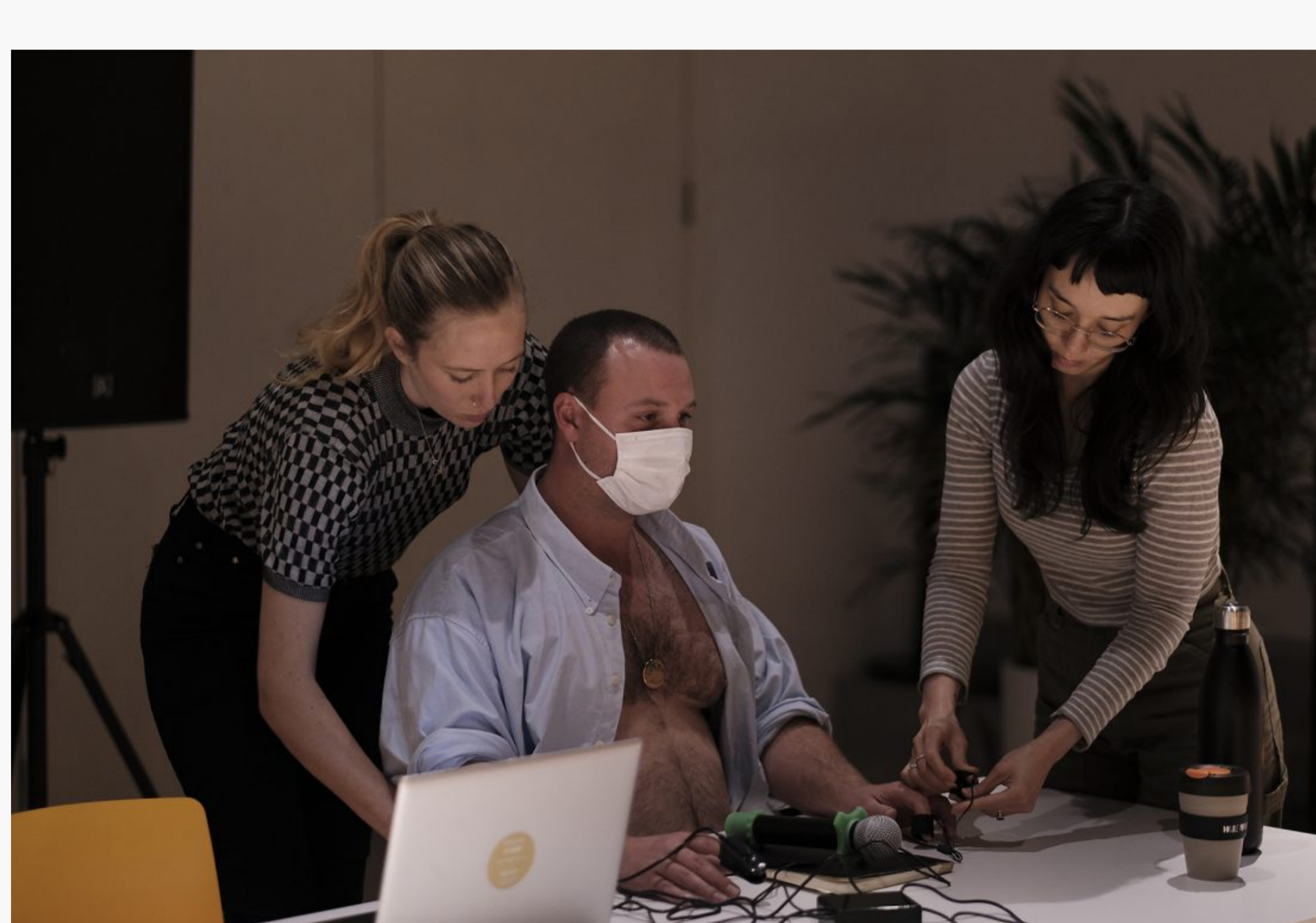
The canon of Western art is liberally scattered with references to pestilence, war, famine, and death: catastrophes of the Four Horseman variety. Some well-known examples include *The Triumph of Death*, 1562-1563, a plague-infected vision by Pieter Bruegel the Elder; Francisco Goya's visceral *Disasters of War* series, 1810-1820; James Rosenquist's cool Pop Art ode to the Cold War, *The F-111*, 1965; and Keith Haring's emotive graphic reactions to the AIDS epidemic of the late 20th century.

Closer to home, artists Loren Kronemyer and Ian Sinclair (aka Pony Express), Alison Clouston, and Sonja Carmichael have made managing contemporary crises—from structural social inequities to environmental degradation, colonisation and anthropocentrism—central to their practices.

Throughout the ages artists have borne witness to times that are altogether too interesting, but they don't just stand back and watch. Making art is not a passive activity.

Works by Pony Express, Clouston, and Carmichael highlight the fact that making art is a form of action. Art is a method for both generating and spreading knowledge, a way of fostering resilience and recovery; key reasons why making art is essential in a time of crisis.

Loren Kronemyer and Ian Sinclair are both in their early 30s; they've lived under the looming shadows of multiple ongoing crises their entire adult lives—some physical, others existential. The end may be nigh, they say, but that is no reason to stop making art. "Our work is driven by the view that we are all in the mid-apocalypse," explains Sinclair. "We are well beyond the tipping point; return is not possible. But we reject fatalism; we embrace community, opportunity and bio-diversity."



Julian Frichto x Pony Express, Epoch Wars, 2019, Chorus Art Center, Shanghai, China.

Kronemyer adds, "For many people of our generation and younger, we have seen the facts for what they are for a long time, and we make work as a means of creating and exploring strategies for facing this reality on our own terms." And, she says, art is a good way of doing this because "artists can remain fluid, responsive, and transgressive with respect to the boundaries between disciplines and knowledge systems."

In fact, art itself is a way of creating knowledge, a point neatly summed up by Werner Heisenberg (1901-1976) in his 1958 book *Physics and Philosophy*. As the pioneer of quantum theory put it, "the two processes, that of science and that of art, are not very different. Both science and art form in the course of the centuries a human language by which we can speak about the more remote parts of reality."

Kronemyer and Sinclair began working together as Pony Express in 2016. Their first immersive installation, *Ecosexual Bathhouse*, debuted at Next Wave Festival in Melbourne the same year, then toured extensively, both nationally and internationally. "It kicked off a tidal wave of online media coverage," says Kronemyer. "We suddenly saw the language of eco-queer feminism in the mouths of Murdoch media reporters." In this way, art brought new knowledge to mainstream audiences, exposing them to what Sinclair calls "the logic of queer sexuality."

While all of their work can be framed as a response to crises made by man, their current project, *Epoch Wars*, tackles the dangers of human arrogance head-on. Their aim is to subvert the notion that we are living in the Anthropocene, a label indicative of a human-centric attitude that Kronemyer says "will condemn our planet to 'more of the same' for the next several thousand generations."

Due to premiere in 2021, *Epoch Wars* will draw on conventional methods of knowledge sharing, such as questionnaires, conferences and lectures. Sinclair describes the project as "a live artwork camouflaged as a symposium in which audiences decide the name of the era we will all die in." And Kronemyer highlights the fact that this artwork embodies action, saying, "We will attempt to radicalise audiences to play an active role in making this decision."

Alison Clouston, who came of age during the second wave of feminism, also uses art to take action. "I learned early that the person is political," she says. "I realised as a young adult that my work would require of me ethical and moral, and thus political, considerations." Clouston often works in collaboration with her musician and composer partner Boyd, and is known for making large-scale sculptures and installations that address the destruction of the environment (and the pressure this puts on human cultures), the sixth great extinction, and the failure of capitalism. Since the 1980s, she has also been making elaborate masks for performances staged at massive public rallies.

Alison Clouston and Boyd, *miriyana - out in the sunlight*, 2019, detail, Dubbo Regional Gallery. Foreground: Dragon/Goat/Mulga, mulga tree, soundtrack, wild goat horns, old sawhorses, sheep leather. Rear left: Darwin's Tree (phylogenetic tree), recycled metal, solid rivets, wild goat horns, soundtrack, ochre. Rear right: works on paper, Alison and Miriyana lizard scientist, Claire Melcum in collaboration.

For Clouston, art and activism go hand in hand. "I think it is impossible to separate the protest and the performance," she says. "I do think the arts can galvanise people." And some of these objects—sculptures which were first shown in massive crowds, among thousands of people raising their voices in unison: chanting, hoping, demanding change—find their way into the quieter, more contemplative space of the gallery. For example, Clouston's *Nuclear Death Mask*, made for an anti-nuclear protest in 1984, is now part of the permanent collection at the Art Gallery of Ballarat. Masks from her ongoing *Coalface* project (a collaboration with Boyd designed to highlight the devastating repercussions of 'big coal') have been seen all over Australia in the 2014-2017 touring show, *Bimblebox: art—science—nature*.

Clouston's most recent *Coalface* masks were in a group show, *Particulate Matter* at Cross Arts Projects, which closed early due to the spread of COVID-19. One has a long curved beak and bears an uncanny resemblance to medieval plague masks. While this wasn't a conscious response to our current crisis, the artist has no doubt that the pandemic will seep into her work, one way or another. "It will be a process of osmosis, and might take a long time to clearly emerge," she explains. Like many, Clouston is self-isolating in her studio. "But I don't want it to become simply a chance to bury my head in the sand. I have been making things that I imagine will show up at the next street rally."

Alison Clouston, *Coalface 4*, 2020 (recycled high voltage power wire, wool, coal) at National Day of Climate Action, Sydney 2020.

For Sonja Carmichael, a Ngugi woman of the Quandamooka people, the knowledge embedded in her woven objects marks the regeneration of her culture. "We brought weaving back," she says. "The mission mentality was to erase those practices. But it didn't work; the knowledge was retained even if the practices ceased for a time."

Carmichael's weavings, and those of her kith and kin, are also inextricably tied to reinstating native title on Minjerribah (North Stradbroke Island), an incredibly significant action. As she explains, her contemporary art practice can trace its lineage to traditional looped Quandamooka dilly bags, made from reeds known as ungair. Both the complex diagonal knot used and the reeds themselves are unique to Minjerribah. "Solving the knot, reclaiming it, that ties in with native title too," she says. "We reclaimed our Country; you know—always was, always will be."

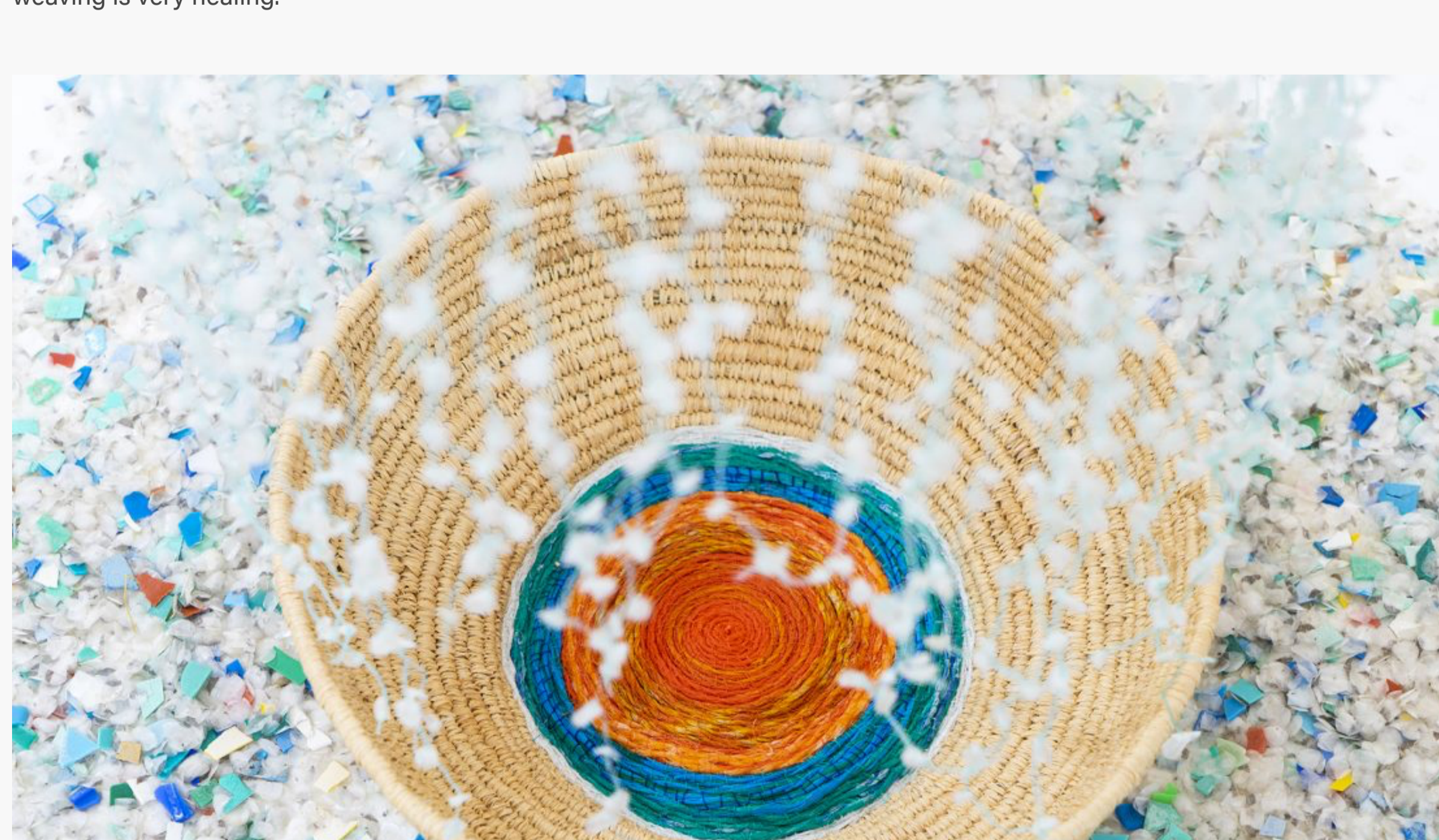
In this way art played a very direct role in mitigating an ongoing crisis: the deep scars of colonisation. But Carmichael says her weaving is also about resilience and healing.

Carmichael often integrates plastic 'ghost nets' in her woven objects. Non-biodegradable and lethal to many ocean-dwelling creatures, her use of these nets is easily interpreted as a response to environmental crisis, but Carmichael points out that the ghost nets have a deeper, more positive symbolic meaning. "It's a metaphor, for me, for resilience," she says. "The nets somehow got lost at sea but they survived those injustices."

Sonja Carmichael and Elisa Jane Carmichael, *Jalo Boma (after the burn) tears from the sea (detail)*, 2019, Ungair, ghost net, discarded wire, silk, synthetic fibres, fishing line, discarded plastics, fish scales, lomandra and raffia, 135cm high x 100cm ground plane diameter. Photo: Louis Lim, Courtesy of the artists and Onespace Gallery.

Although she too came of age in the 1970s, Carmichael only began weaving in earnest in 2011. Recently she has been working on a large sculpture with her daughter Elisa (Lecce) for a group show, *long water: fibre stories*, curated by her daughter Freja. Carmichael is proud of the intergenerational work they are doing, and says Freja's research planted the seed that regenerated their weaving traditions. As she points out with pride, "Quandamooka women are coming together again: the past into the present into the future."

In addition to having survived the tribulations of colonisation, Carmichael has also survived breast cancer. She recalls that she did a lot of weaving while receiving chemotherapy treatment "during the contemplative time when you don't know what is coming next." She pauses and adds, "Like it is now!" As a response to both cultural and personal crisis, she says, "I find that weaving is very healing."

Sonja Carmichael and Elisa Jane Carmichael, *Jalo Boma (after the burn) tears from the sea (detail)*, 2019, Ungair, ghost net, discarded wire, silk, synthetic fibres, fishing line, discarded plastics, fish scales, lomandra and raffia, 135cm high x 100cm ground plane diameter.

And she is right. In fact, as we find ourselves in a seemingly perpetual crisis (in the early months of 2020 alone, here in Australia we've staggered, stunned, through a catastrophic bushfire season and widespread floods only to find ourselves mired in a global pandemic, while ongoing disasters such as the climate crisis continue to percolate) we need art more than ever; to gather and disseminate knowledge, to survive, and to heal. Artists like Sonja Carmichael, Alison Clouston, Loren Kronemyer and Ian Sinclair—in fact, all artists who refuse to give up in the face of existential despair and global crisis—are undertaking essential work in these all too interesting times.

*This article was originally published in the May/June 2020 print edition of Art Guide Australia.*

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Zara Siggakow

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Sheridan Hart

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Tracey Clement