



REBECCA MAYO
HABITUS

4 MARCH –
18 JUNE 2017







REBECCA MAYO HABITUS

Rebecca Mayo's art connects her interests in sustainable practices, local ecologies, textiles and forgotten printmaking techniques. In this cross-disciplinary installation she considers the pre- and post-colonial environment of Heide in relation to broader climate issues. The centrepiece is a wall of cloth sandbags printed using contemporary adaptations of eighteenth-century Toile de Jouy methods, and dyes made from indigenous and introduced plants collected in the museum's gardens and nearby.¹ Arranged like geological strata, the sandbags allude to the history of the site and physical changes imposed upon it over time, while also symbolising the cumulative impact of everyday and habitual activities.

This is the most recent in a sequence of projects by Mayo inspired by urban green spaces and the shifting relationships people have with them. While earlier work investigated matters of identity, family, memory and place, it seemed a natural progression for such themes to 'unfurl and take into account the implications of our actions individually, collectively, historically and in the present'. As Mayo suggests, 'Right now, how we navigate our daily lives and live with other species, including plants, is something worth attending to'.²

Previous and left:
*Porous Borders, Impermeable
Boundaries* 2017
hemp, wool, natural dyes, sand
360 x 130 x 38 cm



Typically Mayo's practice is process-based, theory-driven, and labour intensive, acknowledging the performativity of printing and its iterative and multiple nature. As such, her work rarely starts and ends in the studio; rather, the repetitive and meditative acts of walking, collecting and reading are intrinsic to the conceptualisation of her work, which subsequently involves screenprinting, sewing and constructing. Sometimes the finished artworks are temporarily returned to the locale that inspired them—perhaps in the form of a tent or garment—in a continuation of the creative process, invoking further resonances.

Mayo's Merri Creek project of 2013 brought together the full range of these possibilities. Its pivot point was a seven-day walk tracing 70 kilometres of the creek from its source at Heathcote Junction, in the foothills of the Great Dividing Range, to its confluence with the Yarra River in Abbotsford. Though she had lived near the Merri for many years and participated in programs for its restoration, Mayo wanted to better understand its ecological character



Zeltbahn (as shelter tent) at Cooper St Grassland gorse mop-up November 2013
calico dyed and screenprinted with weeds and indigenous plants from the Merri Creek, zinc buttons, eyelets, tope, tent poles
each tent quarter 200 x 200 x 280 cm
Photograph: David Burrows

Gaiter, worn by Rebecca Mayo, day three—Walking the Merri 2013
bidgee widgee, hemp, wool, buttons, hook and eye tape, dyed and screenprinted with gorse, periwinkle, willow bark, oxalis, broom, mistletoe
48 x 40 cm
Photograph: Lesley Harding



*7 pairs of collecting pockets—
Walking the Merri 2013*
cotton, linen, wool, silk, dyed
and screenprinted with weeds
and indigenous plants from
the Merri Creek
48 x 34 cm each

beyond her neighbourhood, and gain a sense of it as a whole. She carefully reflected on how the walk might be activated not only as source material for new work, but as an artwork in itself.

Beforehand she prepared a series of garments to wear, one set for each day, which were printed with dyes made from weeds gathered from the creek's banks: tie-on external pockets to hold harvested plants, and protective gaiters. As the journey progressed the attire accrued mud and dirt, seeds and burrs, taking on both the shape of the walker's body and of the walk itself. She later made new apparel printed with dyes made from plants collected along the length of the Merri Creek—'high-vis' jackets and zeltbahns (ponchos-cum-tents, based on shelters used during World War II)—which were worn by workers at organised creek-restoration events. Underpinning the project was a theoretical proposition akin to the one that informs the current installation: what can be discovered when we think and act in creative collaboration with the world around us?³

Overleaf:
*Rebecca Mayo at Merri Park—
Walking the Merri 2013*
Photograph: Lesley Harding





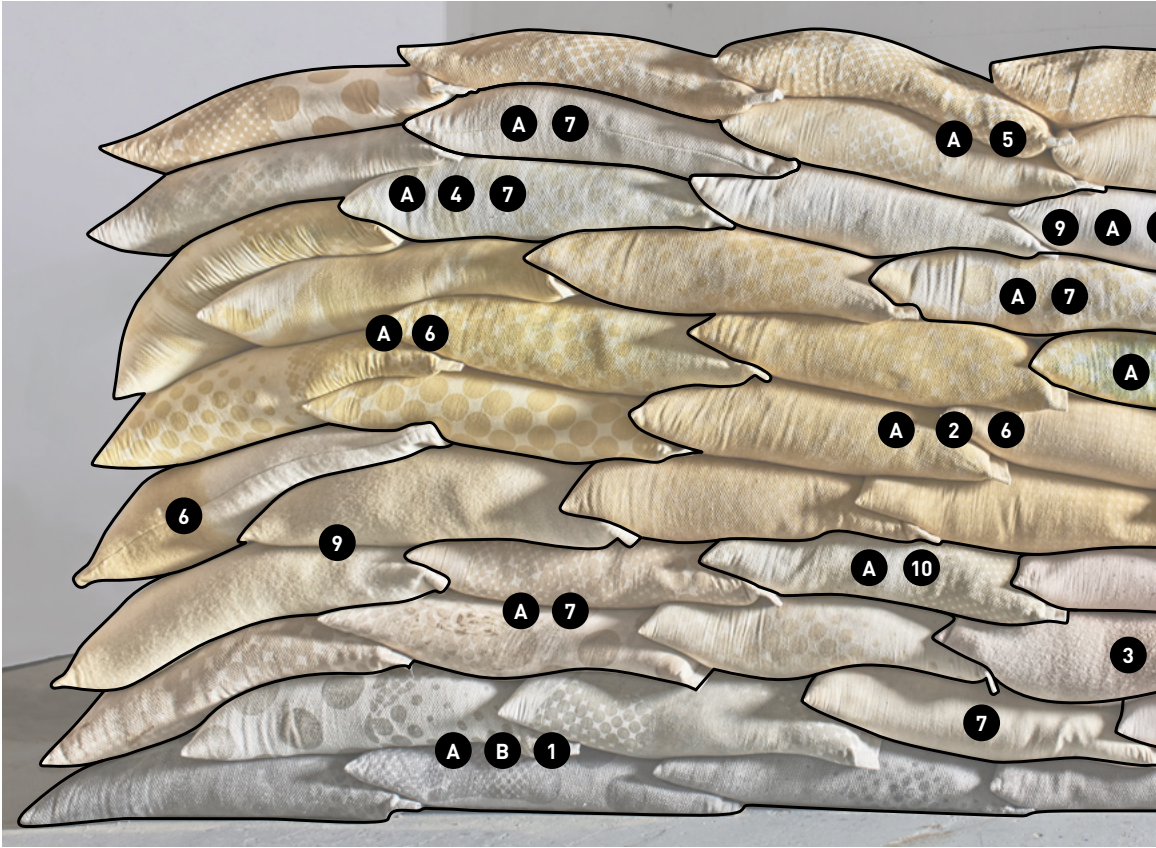


For *Habitus*, Mayo undertook a twelve-month program of harvesting leaves, bark, seeds, fruit and flowers from a variety of trees and plants at Heide, both historical and contemporary, native and exotic, taking in the full seasonal spectrum. A walk between her house and studio in Preston near the Merri Creek and the museum's location on the Yarra River in Bulleen in April 2016 provided further raw materials for producing a range of natural dyes. Her preparatory reading related a host of connections between ecology and culture, and included narratives of the site's Indigenous past and post-contact uses—ideas which are distilled in the installation.

Heide's history of flooding was one such touchstone, as was Mayo's thinking about urbanisation, with its preponderance of hard surfaces that direct surplus water into our rivers and creeks, and the inability of our waterways to cope with storms and deluges. The idea to create a sandbag wall soon evolved. While sandbags are an effective device to protect from rising floodwaters and keep people and property safe from danger, for Mayo they are also symbolic of 'the last line of defence'. There is a colloquial interpretation, too, that adds a further inflection: to be 'sandbagged' is to be coerced, duped, or misled, charges frequently cited on both sides of the climate change debate.

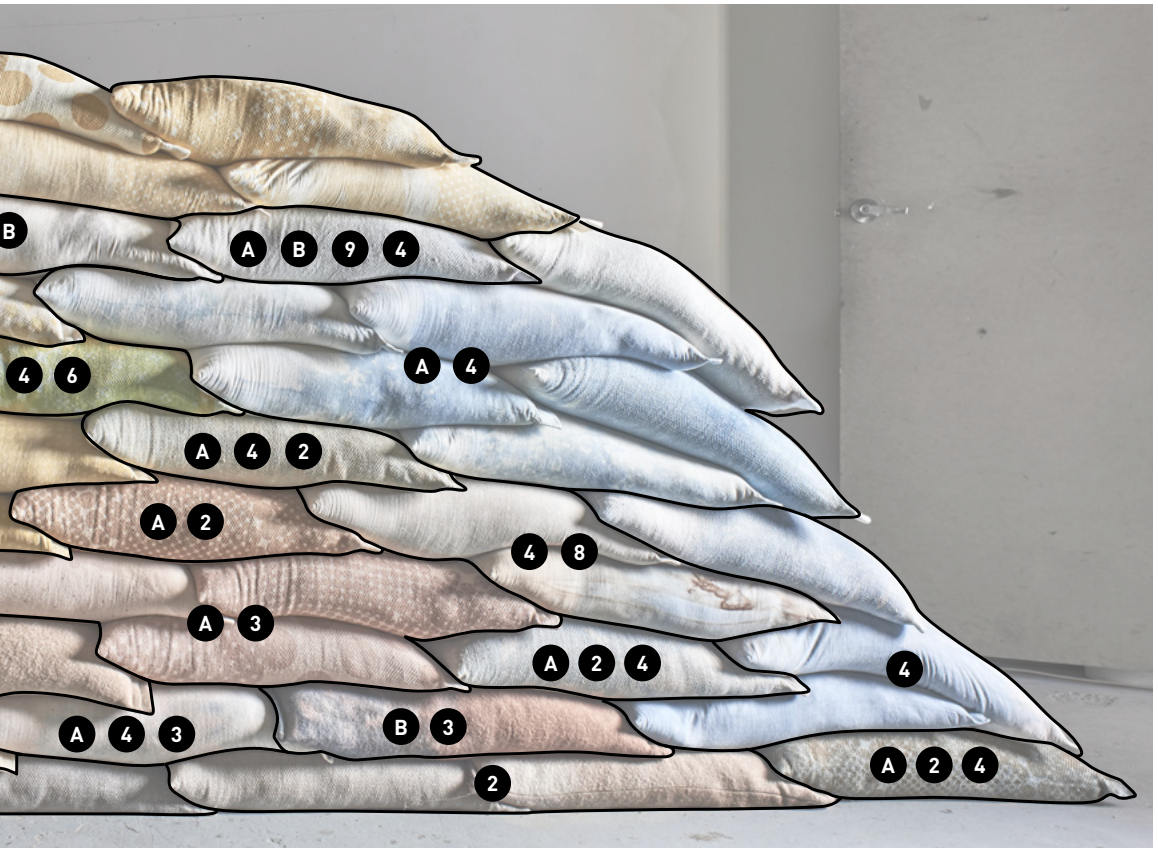
In *Habitus* the sandbags operate as an impenetrable barrier, but their shifts in colour and intensity also suggest a cross-section of the earth underfoot, and layers of history. Heide's present identity is overwhelmingly associated with the period since 1934 when the property was purchased by John and Sunday Reed, and became the crucible of Melbourne modernism.

Habitus 2017
(installation view)



Dyes

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| <p>1 <i>Quercus robur</i>
English oak and
<i>Quercus macrocarpa</i>
Bur oak (acorns)</p> | <p>3 <i>Salix babylonica</i>
Willow (cambian)</p> | <p>5 <i>Ulex europaeus</i>
Gorse (flowers)</p> |
| <p>2 <i>Eucalyptus camaldulensis</i>
River red gum
(bark)</p> | <p>4 <i>Indigofera australis</i>
Australian indigo
(leaves)</p> | <p>6 <i>Maclura pomifera</i>
Osage orange
(heart wood)</p> |



- 7 *Eucalyptus sideroxylon*
Red iron bark
(leaves)
- 8 *Acacia dealbata*
Silver wattle (bark)

- 9 *Melicytus dentatus*
Tree violet (leaves)
- 10 *Eucalyptus viminalis*
Manna gum (bark)

Screenprinted mordant

- A alum (aluminium sulphate)

Post mordant

- B iron (iron oxide)

It was at Heide that the progressive publishing firm of Reed & Harris was conceived and born, responsible for a number of leftist political books and the avant-garde journal *Angry Penguins*. Heide was also, and most famously, the place where successive generations of artists—from Sam Atyeo and Moya Dyring in the 1930s, Sidney Nolan, Albert Tucker and Joy Hester in the 1940s, through to Charles Blackman and Mirka Mora in the 1950s—received the necessary encouragement and support to persist with their early practices and develop their now celebrated careers.

The physical environment in which that history was made held deep significance for John and Sunday Reed and their circle, nourishing them both physically and spiritually. The Reeds were devoted gardeners and this daily activity determined the rhythm of their life at Heide, but also that of those who visited or stayed.⁴ Such an enterprise, they felt, was at its most enhanced and rewarding when a collective endeavour, an outlook which led their friend, the writer Max Harris, to say: 'Heide is not a stream you paddle in: it is the ocean, the life system, the contact at depth'.⁵ Mayo's project responds to this view, and also to the quotidian rhythms of Heide and its seasons. Her processes and materials step in time with the cyclical and local nature of plant dyeing while at the same time pacing to greater temporal and global patterns through the distributed origins of the property's vegetation.

But this history is, in the overall scheme, a short and very new one, and the land has long provided cultural and physical sustenance to the traditional custodians, the Wurundjeri-willam people of the Woiwurrung language group, one

Habitus 2017
(installation view)





of five within the confederacy known as the Kulin nation. The Wurundjeri's ongoing connection to country is evident at the Heide site by way of a majestic scarred tree that continues to grow and prosper on the crest of the hill. Yingabeal, as this river red gum is now known, is a marker tree signifying the convergence and radiation of five Songlines, one of which—to the east—is a flood line. An estimated 400–500 years old, **Yingabeal** has been a silent witness to the drastic transformation conferred on the land from around 1837, when it became part of a sheep station and its trees were felled to build the fledgling settlement of Melbourne. An image of the tree, printed on a vintage damask tablecloth, appears behind yet also in conversation with the sandbags, which are themselves printed with small sections of the overall motif.

Yingabeal 2011
Photograph: Fred Kroh

For Mayo the river red gum, isolated on the hill a distance from the Yarra, represents a constant in an otherwise changing world: 'The site is Heide but it is also a completely expanded global site because of how plants from elsewhere have shaped it today. This plant and human movement is in some ways also related to climate change'.⁶ The link between the local and the rest of the world, from the household to the international, has been described by geographer and social scientist Doreen Massey as 'time-space compression': aspects of life are speeding up, we are more mobile and more 'international' than ever before, and our understanding of geographical boundaries has dispersed. Yet now, and particularly in relation to the environment, the actions of groups of people in one part of the world can limit and have consequences for the lives and actions of others elsewhere.⁷

Mayo has titled the exhibition *Habitus* as a reference to the way that our daily practices and social actions are formed by cultural and personal histories. A concept dating back to Aristotle and reprised by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, 'habitus' both affects how we engage with the world, and in turn is affected and changed—so we each evolve and adapt. It is a social rather than individual process created and reproduced unconsciously, that also shifts in relation to particular contexts and over time—and potentially over a long historical period.⁸ Considered in this light, Mayo's work can be understood to suggest that if we are to have a sustainable future, we need to understand the histories that have shaped us and our environment, in order to adopt less destructive habits.

LESLEY HARDING

NOTES

- 1 While the sandbags may appear abstract, they are each printed with a section of a broader image that appears as a wall piece, hung on the adjacent wall in the exhibition. Mayo's interest in historical and redundant printing methods led her to Toile de Jouy, a type of decorating pattern for printing on fabrics using one colour and in repeat, usually depicting a scene of political or scientific significance to its time. Of particular importance to her is the ability of the process to materially connect the textiles to place via colour extracted from the plants.
- 2 Rebecca Mayo, in Andrew Stephens, 'Under the gaze of an ancient tree', *Imprint*, Print Council of Australia, Melbourne, vol. 52, no. 1, 2017, p. 26.
- 3 See www.merricreekwalk.com; Lesley Harding and Rebecca Mayo, 'Merri Creek Walk', *Meanjin*, Melbourne, no. 4, 2013, pp. 104–113; Lesley Harding and Rebecca Mayo, *Walking the Merri: From Source to Confluence*, artist book and exhibition catalogue, RMIT Project Space, 2014.
- 4 Influenced by the 'back to the land' movement the Reeds began replanting the denuded former dairy farm with European trees: oaks, alders, golden ash, lindens and willows, among many other species. In 1936 they planted 400 birches which were decimated in a flood, the likes of which continue to affect the acreage episodically when, after heavy rain, the Yarra River bursts its banks and the area beyond the riparian zone and as far as the Heide II kitchen garden remains underwater for days.
- 5 Lesley Harding and Kendrah Morgan, *Sunday's Garden: Growing Heide*, Miegunyah Press, Heide Museum of Modern Art and State Library of Victoria, Melbourne, 2012, p. 10.
- 6 Rebecca Mayo, in Andrew Stephens, 'Under the gaze of an ancient tree', p. 26.
- 7 Doreen Massey, 'A global sense of place', in *Space, Place and Gender*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1994, <https://www.unc.edu/courses/2006spring/geog/021/001/massey.pdf>, accessed 20 February 2017.
- 8 <https://www.powercube.net/other-forms-of-power/bourdieu-and-habitus/>, accessed 17 February 2017.

BIOGRAPHY

Rebecca Mayo is a visual artist currently based in Melbourne and Canberra where she teaches in the Printmedia and Drawing Workshop at the School of Art & Design, Australian National University. She has a Bachelor of Visual Arts from the University of South Australia and First Class Honours from RMIT University.

Mayo is in the process of completing her PhD at the School of Art & Design, ANU, for which she is examining the interrelationship between ecologically significant urban sites and people. Using dye extracted from plants gathered at urban restoration sites she has developed contemporary methods of 18th century printing techniques. The resulting textiles become objects or elements in her practice, either in situ, on the body, or within the gallery. A central concern is how a labour of care can be reiterated through practices of walking and printing.

In 2014 Mayo was awarded an iAIR Krems Residency in Lower Austria, where she undertook research on the Austrian botanist Karl von Hügel, who explored the newly

settled colonies of Swan River, King George Sound, Van Diemen's Land, New South Wales, and Norfolk Island in 1833-34. A residency at Geraldton, Western Australia, in 2011 saw her complete a new body of work marking the 70th anniversary of the sinking of HMAS Sydney II and HSK Kormoran during World War II—her paternal grandfather was one of the 645 crew lost.

Mayo's work is held in state and national collections, including the National Gallery of Australia and Artbank. Recent exhibitions include *Out of the Matrix* at RMIT Gallery (2016), *Walking the Merri: From Source to Confluence*, RMIT Project Space (2014), and *Impact 7: Intersections and Counterpoints* at MADA, Monash University (2011). She has been invited to participate in *Open House: 3rd Tamworth Textile Triennial* (October 2017), curated by Glenn Barkley.

Rebecca Mayo's work has been supported by an Australian Postgraduate Award through the School of Art & Design, Australian National University.

rebeccamayo.com

Overleaf:
Habitus 2017
(installation view)





LIST OF WORKS

Porous Borders, Impermeable Boundaries 2017
hemp, wool, natural dyes, sand
360 x 130 x 38 cm
Courtesy of the artist

Quiet Witness 2017
cotton damask tablecloth, natural dyes
175 x 300 cm
Courtesy of the artist

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Rebecca Mayo acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land, the Wurundjeri Tribe of the Woiwurrung language group in the Kulin Nation. It is on their land that she lives, and where she has walked and gathered plants for this project.

She would like to thank curator, Lesley Harding, and head gardener, Dugald Noyes, for their support, expertise and guidance during this year-long project, as well as the Heide team for all their behind-the-scenes work.

She thanks Guy Abrahams and Bronwyn Johnson, Climarte; Sam Popescu, Pack & Send, Preston, and Clare Humphries, who were instrumental in the printing of *Quiet Witness*; Isabel Young who helped in myriad ways, too many to mention; Caroline Henbest; and Margaret Mayo. Finally she is grateful to her family—Dave, Aphra and Romy—who rarely complain as they share their home with plant matter and dye pots.

Published to accompany the exhibition
REBECCA MAYO: HABITUS

Curated by Lesley Harding

Heide Museum of Modern Art
4 March 2017 – 18 June 2017

© Heide Museum of Modern Art, the artist, author, designer and photographers.

This book is copyright. Apart from any use permitted under the Copyright Act 1968 and subsequent amendments, no part may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means whatsoever without the prior permission of the copyright owners.

Designer: Ramona Lindsay
Photography: Matthew Stanton, unless otherwise stated

ISBN: 978-1-921330-56-8

Cover images:

Porous Borders, Impermeable Boundaries 2017 (detail)
hemp, wool, natural dyes, sand
360 x 130 x 38 cm

Heide Museum of Modern Art

Heide

Heide Museum of Modern Art
7 Templestowe Rd
Bulleen VIC 3105
T +61 3 9850 1500
www.heide.com.au

This exhibition has been supported by the Bequest of Erica McGilchrist, who advanced the standing of women's art throughout her lifetime.

ART+CLIMATE=CHANGE 2017 (www.climarte.org) is a festival of exhibitions and events harnessing the creative power of the arts to inform, engage and inspire action on climate change.



