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LOOK UNDER THE LEAVES

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Artist in Residence Report:

BigCi, NSW Australia, 15 February – 14 March 2023



Figure 1. Entering the village of Bilpin during the 'Black Summer' fires in early January 2020.

In March 2019, an email arrived with the offer of a self-funded residency at BigCi, the "Bilpin international ground for Creative initiatives."¹ The directors wrote that "your artistic practice would be much enriched by the unique environment around BigCi with the different, sometimes strange but always beautiful landscape, fauna and flora that give inspiration to so many artists who come to BigCi."² Following further email correspondence, a date for the residency was confirmed for June and July 2020.



Travelling to Sydney in early 2020 on family business proved timely for a reconnaissance visit by car to Bilpin, a quaint mountain village near BigCi. The area is in the northern reaches of the Blue Mountains and is renowned for apple orchards and cider. However, the devastating 'Black Summer' bush fires that occurred at this time, affecting a large area of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area, had a catastrophic impact. Pockets of bushland still smouldered, the season's apple harvest was left in doubt, and the biodiversity of the area was threatened. The smell of smoke hung in the air, with trees on either side of the road visibly blackened by the fire. The landscape was eerie, like entering an apocalypse. What followed was the COVID-19 pandemic and the postponement of the residency. Ironically, the project proposal involved researching local plant material for charcoal use as an artistic medium.

Fast forward to February 2023 and the residency opportunity finally eventuated. The original proposal to create charcoal was not deemed appropriate in the height of summer, with the fires remaining raw in the locals' memories. It was, however, astonishing to see the rapid recovery and regeneration of the bush. The shedding of the outer layer of singed bark and the coping mechanism of epicormic regrowth for many eucalyptus species unveiled a bushland reincarnated amidst impressive resilience. Evidence of the fires remains throughout the area with the occasional burnt-out stump, sparse tree trunks yet to shed blackened bark and the scattered debris of charcoal littering the forest floor.

BigCi is a short walk from the village of Bilpin, less than two hours' drive from Sydney. On BigCi's doorstep is the protected area of the Wollemi National Park, declared a wilderness under the NSW Wilderness Act of 1987. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), an international organisation promoting nature conservation and sustainable use of natural resources, defines wilderness as: "Usually large unmodified or slightly modified areas, retaining their natural character and influence, without permanent or significant human habitation, protected and managed to preserve their natural condition."³ The primary objective for a wilderness categorisation is: "To protect the long-term ecological integrity of natural areas that are undisturbed by significant human activity, free of modern infrastructure and where natural forces and processes predominate, so that current and future generations have the opportunity to experience such areas."⁴

Figure 2. Lichen encrusted sandstone is in abundance in the Wollemi National Park.



Figure 3. Exploring the Wollemi wilderness.

Figure 4. Marks made by moth larvae on the Scribbly Gum tree made visible by the shedding of bark.

Figure 5. Detail of the Wollemi Pine (*wollemia nobilis*) seen thriving at the Mt Tomah Botanic Gardens.

Figure 6. Sundown over the Wollemi wilderness from sunset rock.

After establishing the facility in early 2012, directors Rae and Yuri Bolotin run the residency programme at BigCi. Both Rae and Yuri are enthusiastic about the programme, with Rae, a sculptor, providing artistic support and feedback and Yuri, an explorer, writer and environmentalist, offering his knowledge of the local area.

Accommodating five artists during the four-week residency, the Art Shed and Art Barn, set in native bush, provide ample studio space and generous facilities in which to create, reflect, discuss ideas, engage in discussion and navigate bushland adventures, including unexpected encounters with the local wildlife. Chirping cicadas resonate as a constant reminder that we were in the height of summer, with temperatures often exceeding 30 degrees Celsius. The cackling kookaburras present an audible sign of cohabitation in the Australian bush. A bush rat, making its presence known in the kitchen and caught in a live capture cage outside the building, became the lure for an elusive female diamond python, not seen in the area for two years. The rat was suitably despatched at a distance from the Art Shed, but the encounter with the snake lingers as one of highlights of the stay. This does not apply to the mosquitoes, though the mosquito net provided to sleep under was a blessing.



Figure 7. Artists at work in the generous studio space.



Figure 8. Marion Wassenaar; *Look Under the Leaves*, 2023, monoprints on paper.

The first full day of the residency, Yuri introduced the artists to the local area with two bush walks. The morning walk toured the BigCi property, introducing the native flora, fauna and geology. The property is not highly cultivated, allowing natural regeneration to take place. Evident were mighty angophoras, with their pink bark, scribbly gums with their 'scribbles' made by moth larvae as they tunnel between the layers of bark, flowering banksias and the remnants of an abandoned Finnish settlement. The leech, appearing stealthily and attaching to the lower leg, remains an anti-climax. Decent boots, long socks and thick trousers would be recommended on future bush walks. The single Wollemi Pine (*Wollemia nobilis*, family Araucariaceae) is a tree gifted to the property and is less than a metre tall. Thought to be extinct, a chance exploration of a temperate rainforest canyon in the Wollemi National Park in 1994 led to their rediscovery. This location remains top secret. The Mt Tomah Botanic Gardens propagate the Wollemi Pine and have seedlings for sale, with many trees already established in the grounds.

Venturing across the road from BigCi for the second (late afternoon) walk, at a cooler time of the day, Yuri led the group into a valley. To uphold the wilderness status there are no defined walking tracks, so the group became reliant on and trusting of Yuri's extensive knowledge. On the way he discussed landmarks and signs of Aboriginal habitation. Aboriginal artefacts offer a significant cultural legacy rooted in these lands today, both visible and felt. Sandstone shelters with handprints using natural pigment on sandstone walls, spear-sharpening furrows and early fireplace remnants reveal a past human presence. We traversed sandstone outcrops and boulders, with Yuri pointing out the significance of the sandstone and how the porous stone retains moisture to support plant survival, given the limited soil available. The tour concluded at the aptly named sunset rock, an enormous sandstone boulder, where we sat and absorbed the vista across the valley towards Mt Wilson in the west. This became a regular resting place at the end of the day to watch the sun go down.

While these walks prompted contemplation on the cycles of life, an illustrated children's book on ecology by Elsie Locke, *Look Under the Leaves*,⁵ provided inspiration and the title for a project; one that reflects on resilience and adaptability following the extraordinary recovery of the bush from the devastating fires. Forest-floor litter, including leaves, shedding bark and charcoal debris, are all important beneficial elements of the ecosystem, serving as habitat for invertebrates and as a valuable source of nutrients, providing a foundation for subterranean food webs.

Beneath the litter, the local sedimentary sandstone forms the bedrock for a considerable area of this wilderness region, and the foundation for the project. My initial experience with sandstone occurred in the form of Sydney's built heritage; visits to Sydney over the years regularly involve a visit to the Art Gallery of NSW. Emerging from the underground station at St James, having navigated the tunnels under Hyde Park to come into sight of St Mary's Cathedral and the other towering buildings nearby, also constructed of sandstone, is an all-encompassing experience. In a different context, the BigCi residency highlights sandstone as an active agent continuously supporting a vital ecology. There is beauty in the escarpments, overhangs, deeply channelled gorges and canyons, and awe-inspiring geological features such as pagoda rock formations.

Often overlooked, sandstone plays host to lichens. Lichens are an intimate symbiosis in which two species live together as a type of composite organism made up of algae (photobiont) and fungi (mycobiont).⁶ Lichens create a lush, mantled tapestry of form and texture reminiscent of the vintage crochet doilies that once adorned dressing tables. Lichens respond to environmental extremes by becoming dormant, quickly becoming metabolically active again when they experience more benign conditions.⁷ There is also value in the way sandstone, with its porosity and permeability, supports such a diverse ecosystem. Sandstone aquifers sustain so much life, decanting nutrients into the surroundings, their cracks and crevices providing a solid foothold for tree roots. Merlin Sheldrake's book *Entangled Life*, which has a chapter on lichens and interconnectedness, provides insightful dialogue on the tenacity of lichens to weather extreme conditions in situations of fragile instability.⁸ Sheldrake sees lichens as resembling the archipelagos and continents of an unfamiliar atlas.⁹



Figure 9. Gloria Sulli, foreground and Han Qing at rear preparing for the Open Day.

Figure 10. Annette Köhn presenting original drawings used in her publication, *Annette in Australia*.

Figure 11. Mike Wall, presenting his photographic works at Open Day.

As is characteristic of printmaking, the project took on a repetitive task, not in the form of an edition, but as unique state prints representing the lichen-encrusted sandstone. The single monoprint matrix creates a palimpsest over the previous print, leaving a barely visible trace between each printing. Eco-friendly soy-based printing inks were trialed and proved versatile in their slow drying time, conduciveness to hand-printing and clean-up. The circular filter papers, including some with the faint printed impression of leaves, represent the many permeable layers of material and matter that support this cyclic environment.

A Sunday morning visit to the Mountain Spring Buddhist Monastery in Bilpin, in week two of the residency, allowed an opportunity for both a sitting meditation and a walking meditation. Brother Phap Hai introduced the morning programme, stressing the importance of attentiveness to all you do, to be fully present and aware. In the walking meditation the emphasis was to begin where we are and take a step, one step at a time – to become aware of the contact of our feet with the ground. So much of the time spent at the residency involved direct contact with the land. One felt connected. The final installation for “Look Under the Leaves” consisted of 27 monoprints and 42 filter papers, with the installation extending from the floor and up the wall. It felt vital, in terms of access and response to the environment, that the project installation originated on the ground.

At an Open Day event on the last Sunday of the residency, the resident artists exhibited their artworks and each presented an artist talk. A wonderful atmosphere ensued, with locals and visitors from Sydney and further afield attending the daylong event and shared lunch. Gloria Sulli, an artist originally from Italy and now living in Melbourne, produced a breathing sculpture made from plastic that referenced the tenacity of plants' survival with their epicormic regrowth. Han Qing, a Chinese painter and four-time resident, worked with oil paints to produce a colourful series of works based on the iconic Australian jacaranda trees in flower. Annette Köhn, a comic artist and publisher from Berlin, Germany, displayed original sketches and a 16-page publication of her travels and residency to date titled “Annette in Australia.” Mike Wall, photographer from the southern Blue Mountains, displayed a series of optically intriguing gridded works showing the beauty of local caves.

The BigCi residency offers an incredible opportunity to experience these treasured surroundings and befriend fellow artists, one that will continue to inspire and hold special memories.

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All images are by the author, Marion Wassenaar.

- 1 BigCi, "Bilpin international ground for Creative initiatives (BigCi)," <https://bigci.org/> (accessed 28 June 2023).
- 2 Rae Bolotin, email correspondence with the author; 31 March 2019.
- 3 Sue Stolton, Peter Shadey and John Dudley, "Guidelines for Applying Protected Area Management Categories," *IUCN*, 2013, <https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/pag-021.pdf> (accessed 28 June 2023).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Elsie Locke, *Look Under the Leaves* (Christchurch, NZ: Pumpkin Press, 1975).
- 6 Bill Freedman, "Lichens," *The Gale Encyclopedia of Science*, eds. K Lee Lerner and Brenda Wilmoth Lerner; 5th ed. (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2014), link.gale.com/apps/doc/CV2644031304/CSIC?u=per_dcop&sid=bookmark-CSIC&xid=be54ca86 (accessed 28 June 2023).
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Merlin Sheldrake, *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds & Shape Our Futures* (New York: Random House, 2020).
- 9 Ibid, 75.