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IN THE WORLD OF THE EARTHFORMS

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Jerry Howlett

THE MYTH OF THE EARTHFORM

At the beginning of all things the Mother Earth emerged from Chaos and laid an egg, its shell made of clay. From the clay she grew grass and trees and added water to nourish them. She peopled the water with fish and the earth with beasts. From the clay of the land she created a new people to act as guardians of the land, to tend to it and to help it grow and prosper. Then she birthed a son to watch over the people, to help them in their task. They were joyous and she taught them to speak, to sing and dance. But the Earth Son was jealous of his mother's people, and set to making people of his own. Created in jealousy and greed by the Earth Son, the new people took on those qualities. When he introduced them to the Earth and the people of the land, the newcomers took control. They treated the people of the land with ill will, enslaving some for their own means as they hacked and changed the contours of the Earth, creating deep valleys and mounding up tall hills and mountains. The Earth Mother wept as she saw what was happening, salty tears fell upon the earth and swelled into great seas, surrounding the land and creating huge islands. The newcomers would not listen to the Earth Mother as she called for them to stop their careless destruction. They only cared for and listened to themselves and their Creator, who was content to stand back and watch as they carved out their own lands to rule.



Figure 1. Jerry Howlett, *Reworlding*, 2024.

They became greedy and violent warring against each other over land, resources and ideologies. Where once the Earth Mother and the lands had been the source of life, to be looked after and cared for, now they were only seen as a resource to be used for individual benefit. And so it came to be that the natural balance of the world was lost. The Earth Mother's strength was failing and all that was once green and good began to die. The air and waterways became polluted and the weather systems changed, the planet warmed, the ice at the ends of the earth melted and the waters rose, continents burned.

Cracks formed in the surface of the earth and the eggshell broke and from it emerged mountainous creatures. These children of the Earth Mother, carrying the earth from where they had broken through, were living islands in the chaos. They were new worlds where life could survive and rejuvenate, another chance.

Stories and narratives have been an important part of human development, helping to inform the way we think, communicate and see the world. They have the ability to transport us to distant places and times past, present and future or to entirely new worlds. Stories have always had a part in shaping my art practice, informing and inspiring. This article brings together research and writing from my Master of Fine Arts project at Dunedin School of Art. The resulting exhibition, *Reworlding*, consisted of five large-scale figurative sculptures, the 'Earthforms.' These large earthly creatures appeared to be walking through the gallery, carrying on their backs miniature landscapes, vibrant worlds built upon the ruins of the old. Placed in possible times yet to come, the project is a 'speculative fabulation,' a weaving together of old stories and new, influenced by real places, events and actions. It is a story of stories, of ongoingness in a time of crisis, of being present, worlding, living and dying, becoming with. The concept of speculative fabulation comes from American scholar Donna Haraway, who describes it as a way of telling stories that blend science and fiction to imagine and explore how humans, animals and the planet might live together in new and better ways. It has become both the methodology and framework for this article.



Figure 2. Jerry Howlett, *Reworlding*, 2024.

The following narrative gives an account of our past. It follows a rough chronological trail of thoughts and moments in time, touching on theorists who sought to expand our world views and promote an interconnected approach to worlding. For me, this structure was important in thinking towards the development of the work, informing the world-building of my studio work and evolution of the Earthforms. The narrative finishes by looking forwards in time towards the birth of the Earthforms and an attempt to re-world. It is a story of a time yet to come should we not manage to correct our destructive path, which is causing the planetary crises that we are facing.

Let us begin with world creation. While science dates Earth's formation to 4.6 billion years ago,¹ most cultures tell their own origin stories. These myths – though fantastical to the Western rationalist mind – carry truths and reflect relationships between people and nature. They give rivers, animals and celestial bodies voices and roles, treating the Earth as alive and agential.

Greek mythology offers Gaia, who emerged from Chaos, followed by deities like Pontus and Cronus who ruled seas and harvests. The Babylonian *Enuma Elish* describes the Earth formed from the goddess Tiamat's body. The motif of the cosmic egg spans Greek, Egyptian, Chinese, Finnish and Polynesian traditions. In the *Kalevala*, the world hatches from a bird's egg. In many Indigenous stories, the Earth rests on the back of a turtle or serpent. These stories reveal a shared sense of deep interconnection between people and more-than-human life.

Such stories teach respect and care for land. But during the time known as the Age of Exploration, from the late fifteenth to the seventeenth century, colonisation and Christianity disrupted Indigenous beliefs, imposing dualistic worldviews. The Scientific Revolution replaced spirits with laws and dismissed myth as primitive. Nature became objectified, the binary of culture versus nature shaping ecological exploitation well into the twenty-first century.



Figure 3. Jerry Howlett, *Earthform I*, 2024.



Figure 4. Jerry Howlett, *Earthform I*, detail, 2024.

In the 1970s, James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis' Gaia Hypothesis proposed that Earth functions as a self-regulating organism. The theory, while formulated in the realm of science, using a scientific framework to explain the functioning of the planet, was criticised by scientists, stating that it is only weakly supported by, or at odds with, the available scientific evidence. Because of this criticism, the Gaia Hypothesis finds itself in an unusual position. Not recognised by the scientific community, it has become something of a speculative fabulation. It proposes an alternative view that manages to give the Earth back some of the agency lost in most scientific practices. The Gaia hypothesis bridges the gap between science and cultural myths and engages in a broader discussion about Earth's interconnected systems and concepts of planetary health.

The Holocene epoch, lasting 11,700 years, offered relative climate stability that enabled civilizations to flourish.² But industrialisation, urbanisation, deforestation and population growth destabilised this balance and as a result we now live in the period of time called the Anthropocene. This is a time marked by the overwhelming influence of human activity on Earth's systems, a time of climate change, loss of biodiversity and mass extinction. Greenhouse gases have raised global temperatures by 1.2°C since preindustrial times. Exceeding 1.5°C would trigger irreversible damage.³ The Anthropocene has revealed both our entanglement with planetary processes and our responsibility for the widespread harm we are causing. Biodiversity is collapsing.

The concept of biodiversity hotspots, introduced by Norman Myers in 1989, identified regions rich in endemic species under severe threat. By 2022, 36 such hotspots covered just 2.5% of Earth's surface, with only 30% of original vegetation remaining. These zones shifted the idea of conservation from single species to entire ecosystems. However, efforts to protect these hotspots often fell into conflict with development goals, particularly in regions struggling with poverty.

Deforestation and land conversion degrade ecosystems. Forests regulate temperature, retain moisture and support biodiversity. Once cleared, soil erodes and deserts advance. Environmental destruction feeds back into climate change, trapping us in a cycle of loss.

A root issue is the Eurocentric division between nature and culture. This worldview assumes human dominance and detachment from ecological systems. Philosopher Bruno Latour calls our crisis a “mutation in our relation to the world.”⁴ What Latour proposes instead is to move beyond the division between nature and culture and embrace ‘worlding,’ a way of being that acknowledges entanglement, co-becoming and embodied presence.

Colonialism violently interrupted many Indigenous ways of worlding. Yet these practices persist and provide valuable insights. In the Philippines, the animistic belief system of Mariit sees all things as possessing souls. It shapes daily decisions, from construction to wildlife protection, and holds that natural disasters arise from disrespecting nature.⁵

Oxford researcher Ashley Massey found that belief in mythical beings can foster conservation.⁶ In Sabah, Malaysia, fear of the forest-dwelling Kopizo has protected habitats. In The Gambia, the Ninki-nanka is said to haunt mangroves, leading to their preservation. But when colonial authorities and missionaries dismantled these beliefs, ecological degradation followed.⁷ Such local, culturally embedded systems of care often succeed where top-down conservation fails. They are rooted in reciprocity, responsibility and intergenerational continuity; not abstract science, but lived experience. They require no empirical proof to be effective, only a deep sense of duty to protect.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, a botanist and Citizen Potawatomi Nation member, writes about Indigenous ways of knowing that see the world as full of life and agency. To name beings is to enter into relationship with them. The idea of the ‘honourable harvest’ teaches that we must take only what we need, give thanks and never harm the source. It is a guide to sustainable living rooted in gratitude and mutual care.⁸

Some governments have embraced elements of these principles. In 2014, the New Zealand government redefined Te Urewera from a national park to a legal person, recognising its inherent worth through a settlement with Ngāi Tūhoe.⁹ In 2017, the Whanganui River received the same recognition through the Te Awa Tupua Act.¹⁰ These shifts reflect a growing willingness to honour Indigenous relationships with land, not as ownership but as kinship.



Figure 5. Jerry Howlett, *Earthform II*, 2024.

Meanwhile, Western philosophies have also reconsidered non-human agency. Object-oriented ontology (OOO), led by Graham Harman, posits that objects exist independently of human perception and exert influence.¹¹ Jane Bennett, in *Vibrant Matter*, describes a “thing-power” that runs through all matter. She argues for a “political ecology” that acknowledges distributed agency across humans, tools, ecosystems and debris alike.¹² While these perspectives overlap with Indigenous thought, they arise from different traditions. Indigenous worldviews often see spirit as inherent in all things, while recent Western theories remain grounded in materialist ontology. Still, both challenge anthropocentrism and invite deeper ethical consideration of the non-human.

Donna Haraway encourages us to “stay with the trouble,” to remain present in the midst of environmental and social complexity, and demonstrate “response-ability,” the capacity to respond with care and accountability. She urges multispecies collaboration and imaginative kinship, forms of connection that transcend human exceptionalism.¹³ There are examples of community-driven sustainability that are aligned with the idea of taking response-ability. In Kamikatsu, Japan, residents sort waste into dozens of categories, striving for zero waste.¹⁴ In Capannori, Italy, grassroots efforts have dramatically reduced rubbish.¹⁵ In Cairo, the Zareaeb community recycles nearly all collected waste.¹⁶ These models have shown what is possible but also contrast with the global waste trade, where wealthy nations offload refuse onto poorer ones.¹⁷

We are living in a time of ruination.¹⁸ Climate change, war, extractive industries and displacement have left behind broken landscapes and shattered ecologies. Sociologist Georg Simmel saw ruins as places where the balance between human intention and natural forces collapses.¹⁹ Coral reefs – once vibrant, ancient ecosystems – are now bleached and lifeless, destroyed in moments by deep-sea trawling and rising temperatures.²⁰ They are underwater ruins, like bombed cities. Ruins warn us. They hold memory, grief, and potential.²¹ Haraway’s *Camille Stories* imagine a future shaped not by escape or denial, but by collective repair. She calls for “making kin,” a practice of extending care beyond bloodlines to include animals, plants, ecosystems and technologies.²²



Figure 6. Jerry Howlett, *Earthform II* detail, 2024.

Kin-making is about building relationships, not hierarchies. It supports resilience through diversity and reciprocity. It is a feminist, post-anthropocentric politics of survival. Haraway likens it to string figures – games of weaving connections, passing meaning from hand to hand, species to species. Not all patterns succeed. Some fail, others surprise. But the act of making and remaking is itself vital.

We are not separate from the world. For Haraway, we are humus, not Homo. In the compost of multispecies life, not all contribute equally, but those who can must care for those who cannot.²³ This ethic of response-ability urges us to act in solidarity with the vulnerable: human, animal and ecological.

There was a time when things could have gone either way, when there was still hope that we could band together and save our world from the catastrophes that we were heading towards. Looking back, it was a time of great dithering, inaction was the one action, talk but no follow through. For decades the science had been there pointing to the obvious fact: that we were heading towards a manmade disaster of global proportions, that our greed and lack of responsibility towards the natural world was putting it and thus ourselves at risk. Carbon emissions were steadily climbing, the temperature of the planet increasing. Deforestation and agriculture were cutting into habitats of many of the world's species, leading towards a loss of biodiversity in favour of monocultures. Weather events grew more frequent and aggressive, drought, wildfires and hurricanes flourished.

Over the next decades the climate continued to change. In 2032 the 1.5°C target, set by the Paris Agreement to reduce warming, was missed as the temperature was reached well before it had initially been predicted. Caught on the back foot, a new target of 2°C was set, but that too was reached in 2040, only eight years later. Work had been too slow to keep up with the speed at which the warming was going. Like a snowball rolling down a mountain, the problem was only getting bigger the further it went. By 2044, unified governments and corporations had finally begun to lower emissions and developed new technologies that began to slow and stabilise the increase in global temperature. But the damage had been done.



Figure 7. Jerry Howlett, *Earthform III*, 2024.



Figure 8. Jerry Howlett, *Earthform V*, 2024.

The northern Polar Region faced its first ice-free summer in 2033. The Arctic Sea now endures entirely ice-free summer months. This event in turn fuelled the acceleration of global temperatures; the Arctic had lost much of its ability to cool the planet. Species that had once depended upon the floating ice, such as the harp seal, were now all but extinct. The once mighty Polar bears, the great predators of the Arctic, now numbered only a few hundred, surviving as scavengers. The ice shelves of the Antarctic were no better, and colonies of penguins, from Chinstrap to Adélie, disappeared, their home gone with the ice, mud replacing the frozen shores, habitats no longer fit for their survival. The Emperor Penguin is now on the brink of extinction with only two known colonies left, holding on for survival.

The loss of ice from the Polar Regions contributed to a rise in sea levels and increasing flooding events in low-lying coastal cities around the world. By 2054 the levels had risen by two metres, leading to the displacement of many cities and communities in coastal areas. And as the levels continued to rise, more and more communities were forced to move away to higher land, away from the changing coastlines.

The arctic permafrost thawed at an alarming rate all through the 2040s, adding to the flooding and slowly changing the landscape. The land, once a frozen solid structure, became unstable and vulnerable to collapse. Huge landslides flowed across the tundra, creating channels that would become seasonal rivers. Huge mudflats formed or expanded as the silt was deposited after its journey, washed from inland to the coast. This build-up of sediment only added further to the pressures of sea rise.

Human population was still on the rise, the cities needing vast amounts of resources just to feed their growing populations. In richer nations, technology enabled the production of food more efficiently within smaller areas of land and huge glasshouses could grow plants vertically, requiring far less space than traditional farming methods. For poorer nations this was not possible. Fertile lands became increasingly valuable and more and more forests and other ecological hotspots were being cleared for agriculture by the day. Food came at the cost of important ecosystems and biodiversity. The diminishing biodiversity increased the likelihood of viruses, pathogens and diseases, spreading through species, leading to more pandemics as they jumped from animal to human.



Figure 9. Jerry Howlett, *Earthform IV*, detail, 2024.



Figure 10. Jerry Howlett, *Earthform 1*, 2024.

In 2069 a virus swept through the human population with a mortality rate of two in every five people infected. Within a few weeks it had burnt itself out, but it had become the biggest health crisis in human history, spreading across the globe faster than it could be traced and prevented. Human population numbers had peaked at 9 billion before the virus outbreak and in the weeks following it was estimated that the population had dropped sharply to 5.4 billion. In the years that followed, this number would continue to fall.

The increasing natural disasters resulting in the destruction of towns were also taking a toll, and all around the world the number of displaced people was in the millions. About 55% of land had become uninhabitable for human life, making it harder for those displaced to find new locations to settle.

As the twenty-first century was drawing to a close, seismic activity began to increase around the planet. The activity started out small and unnoticeable, like the beating of a heart, but began to increase over a three-year period. Towards the end it was enough to collapse structures, shift earth and bury cities. Then one day the earth heaved and ruptured, and out emerged colossal beings of soil, stone, forest and sea – the Earthforms. The exact number of them is unknown. Born from the womb of the Earth, the upheaval of each being created mobile environments, the Earth's crust lifted up upon their backs, they and it becoming one, a symbiotic composite. The Earthforms arose in varying locations, but each of these locations contained some form of ecosystem, with or without the presence of humans. Many of these were endangered environments, and the Earthforms – some measuring hundreds, others thousands of metres in size – carried and supported life, nurturing it as though in a nursery. Often the Earthforms could be seen herded together with interrelated ecosystems, creating corridors of passage between.

These beings roamed large distances, not bound by land, able to pass through oceans between continents.

Following the event of the Earthforms' emergence, which came to be known as The Great Upheaval, there was a period of turmoil and uncertainty. The perception of the world had shifted dramatically in a way that no one could have ever predicted. Many people were scared of these new towering creatures, believing that they would lead to the destruction of everything, but there were others who embraced them.

For those who had been lifted up upon the Earthforms, life had changed suddenly. The land had shifted beneath them; in places buildings had sunken and been buried in the embrace of the moving earth. Other structures collapsed into piles of rubble, while some even survived intact. In the time that followed, the immediate thoughts were of shelter, food and water. While the human-made structures had fallen into ruin, the flora growing upon the Earthforms began to thrive as though this change had reinvigorated them. Within days, new growth had sprouted and started to reclaim the areas around the fallen structures, and older established plants grew with new energy, blooming and some even setting fruit. Where trees and shrubs were felled in order to provide materials to build, new seedlings rose up to take their places. It was as if growth had accelerated.

In their need to rebuild shelter, the people looked to the materials around them, the rubble and ruins of their old dwellings, the rock and clays of the shifted earth and the wood, grasses and other plant materials. Tools were in short supply and they had to make do sharing with each other those that they could find or even make amongst themselves. This for the most part drew communities together, to work and care for each other.

Food and water were their other priorities. Water, it was discovered, was not an issue, for they found sources of it trickling from what must have been springs in the ground, creating pools and streams. At first food was harder to source. Supplies were built from what could be scavenged from within the ruins of buildings and some with foraging experience were able to share what could be eaten from the land around them. This was limited within the first days but as the plant life continued to flourish more became available and gardens were set up to provide fresh produce for the community.

Non-human species too took time to adjust to the changes, but they did not take long; they found their habitats rapidly recovering around them, as though the Earthform was adapting its landscape to provide for them.



Figure 11. Jerry Howlett, *Earthform III*, 2024.



Figure 12. Jerry Howlett, *Earthform I*, detail, 2024.



Figure 13. Jerry Howlett, *Earthform I*, 2024.

And so life found a way to continue. Whilst it was hard and uncertain to begin with, as time passed the inhabitants soon found ways of living with the land, amongst the ruins of their past. Ever present in their minds was the notion that the land on which they were living was alive and that they were dependent upon it for their continued survival. The Earthform was not just ground, but kin. To harm it was to harm themselves. Its health was their health. Relationships were formed between Earthform and human. The Earthform provided the environments for life to thrive for human and non-human. In return, people took only what was needed. They gave thanks. They replanted, recycled, restored. Human and non-human lives interwove. Kin-making became necessity, not theory. Communities raised children with stories of the old world and the Earthforms, stories not of apocalypse, but of responsibility.

Jerry Howlett is a Dunedin based sculptor. He Graduated with a Master of Fine Arts with Distinction at the Dunedin School of Art in 2024. His work explores themes of sustainability and environmentalism and the connection between humans and nature, through storytelling and sculpture.

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