

## swansongs

A 'swansong' is a metaphor for an action or performance prior to an ending. The term conveys the notion of something both grand and final. However, in this exhibition, and in its plural form—'swansongs'— it has a different set of connotations. Deriving in part from the name of a place where Laing spends much of her time, Swanhaven, and extending on her previous works made in response to the south coast of NSW, such as *swanfires* (2020), this exhibition contains four sequences of diminutive objects made from shells and rocks, with accompanying photographs hung low to the ground. Entitled 'shellworks', the small objects share a titling lineage in Laing's oeuvre—'greenwork', 'brownwork', 'from Paradise work'. There is nothing 'final' about these works, such is the mobility and suspension contained within, the titling lineages, along with the sense of work and effort embodied in the small creatures. Laing's performers are on the move, away from an uncertain present, in search of an alternate future. The animated nature of these small beings beckons the question: where are they from, and where are they going? What is their song? What do they desire?

Imbued with a sense of both pathos and humour, the 'shellworks' will surprise some viewers familiar with Laing's previous imagery which often captured her large constructions in the landscape. These works were created both at home and in the studio: eyes and heads are formed with small spiral or natural holes; weathered rocks are given shell legs; and some travel in family groups. Like extinct animals, or strange birds, they appear determined to survive, as they follow each other along precarious shelves. Pareidolia is a condition of the human species that enables us to see faces, animals, or objects in inanimate things. (The 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian artist Giuseppe Arcimboldo, who created heads from various flora and fauna, and bodies from inanimate objects, used pareidolia in his work.) Pareidolia is part of our survival instinct affording the human species a superior ability to flee danger through immediate visual recognition.

Three of the four photographs in the exhibition capture a shellwork suspended, ungrounded, in vibrant, yet undefined hues. *crustatesta & littoral (with bul-tac and bandages)* is photographed against an image from a previous series *effort and rush* (2015). The fluctuation in the background provides an unsettling ambience. In *fisheyes (with blu-tac and bandages)* the creature seems to bow down to inspect a small abject assemblage of everyday things that mend, bind or heal a wound. The background image from *Buddens* (2016) provides a river where the running water is replaced by the flow of voluminous discarded clothing. *broken green* is bisected with a diagonal cut, suggesting a life cut short, as the creature nestles into verdant green, as if to breathe it in.

*Blackbutt Road (swanfires 2020)* depicts the impact of the bushfires in Swanhaven, the burnt remains settled on a carpet of ash. Blackbutt Road is presumably named after the common Australian tree, blackbutt, often used for the construction industry. In this exhibition, Laing prints on the materials of our renovated lives: acrylic used for splash backs and lightboxes; high end packaging used in retail displays; fluted cardboard used for packaging. This truth to recycled materials provides a further level of insight into *swansongs*: life's waste coalesces with life's losses. The time has come to work with what remains and that which survives.