



KIRSTIN BERG

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I am fascinated and driven by the drama and randomness of life; by the primal forces that occur in nature and how these forces mirror our psychological and physical experience.

I grew up in the bush of North-East Victoria that, over the years of my childhood and early adolescence, was continually ravaged by bushfire, drought or flood. So, the bush for me was, and still is, an amazingly free yet ominous playground where I was both witness to and an active investigator into the brutal and inevitable cycles of life and death. I have always been drawn to the tragic and ecstatic aspects of nature as a source of emotional power for my work.

Most of the compositions and forms I use are inspired by elemental forces and/or the juxtaposition of organic matter that I have photographed or drawn directly from the bush; the convergence of water and granite, fire debris butting up against fallen branches or weathered tree stumps, all of nature in various states of growth and decay. I am not at all interested in a literal interpretation. I am tapping into the emotional gravity and dramatic tension that lies beneath the surface.

My works on paper have often been described as 'Unconscious Landscapes'. They are a combination of sculpture, drawing and

painting techniques that I began developing in Berlin, Germany, whilst living and working there on an Australia Council grant. My frustration at the time with the limitations of a flat pictorial space literally led me to start tearing things up. I was also greatly affected by the devastation of Berlin's recent past. It was still a city in the process of rebuilding itself, fractured and transitional, and I naturally began tearing and reconstructing in response.

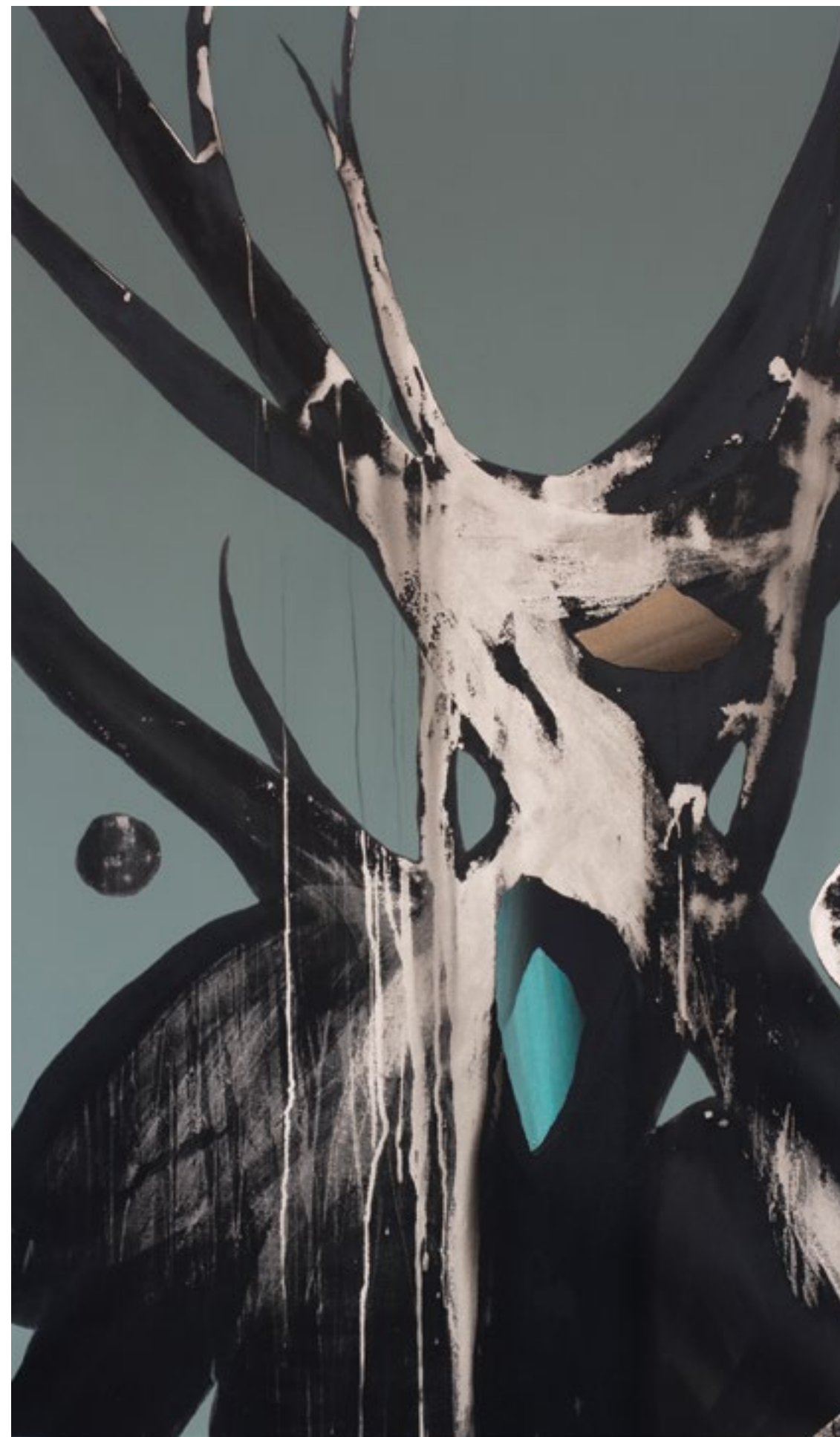
My process involves hand colouring and ink drawing on 2-3m lengths of watercolour paper. Primarily I use fire ash (made from burning bush debris), pure pigments, watercolour and spray paint. I use black India ink in a calligraphic-like gesture when I want to create specific forms. I push the paper to its material limits by total water saturation, vigorously rubbing ash and pigment into it, or applying excessive amounts of paint. The idea is to obliterate and transform the paper surface to give it colour, texture, weight and history.

From these coloured sheets and ink pours, all the fragments and shapes for building the composition can then be torn, cut, layered and pinned into new configurations.

It can take anywhere from a few weeks to many months to complete or be satisfied with



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a single work, so I develop several pieces simultaneously because they inform each other and it keeps the process fluid. I do a lot of preliminary sketching and thinking before I commit. I always have a compositional idea to begin with but as each piece gains a life of its own I go where it takes me. Some works are intensely built up whilst others are stripped right back to the original ink pours and ash/pigment. Some completely fail and never see the light of day!

I generally work on a scale that is much bigger than myself. I want to set up a feeling of intimacy yet at the same time create an awesome distance that is similar to the experience of being IN nature (rather than just looking at it). I aim for total intellectual, emotional and physical involvement.

Working on a large scale demands everything from me. Most works are a battle, rarely are they effortless. It's the battle that compels me.

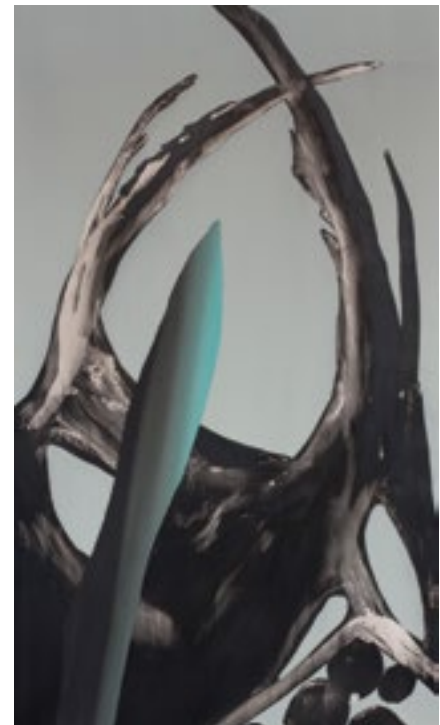
Art allows me to meld ideas of past, present and future into a space where contradictory systems and meanings can coincide. When I was in my 20s I read a quote by Louise Bourgeois that has stayed with me since. She said, "if the past is not negated in the present you do not live, you go through the emotions like a zombie and life passes you by." For me this is incredibly wise and true. It has become a personal philosophy for my art and life. My past and growing up in the bush have been and remain great sources of inspiration for me and although there is often a sense

of longing in my work, I am not bound by nostalgia and this gives me great freedom.

I think it is easy to be cynical in the world today and art can be an antidote. I combat cynicism by being very active. I am always looking to create a new space and am always hoping for something profoundly unexpected. I can never repeat myself because the randomness of the process and life does not allow it. For me it's all about the ability to change and reinvent. ■

Kirstin Berg is represented by Gallerysmith, Melbourne

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- 01 **The Distance Between Us**, 2012, fire ash, watercolour, metallic ink, paint, pins on 300g Arches. 160 x 240 x 10cm
 - 02 **Weeping Song**, 2014, fire ash, pigment, watercolour, India Ink, pins on 300g Arches. 155 x 105 x 8cm
 - 03 **Untitled Epic**, 2013, fire ash, pigment, watercolour, spray paint, pins on 300g Arches. 172 x 254 x 10cm
 - 04 **Mother**, 2014, fire ash, pigment, watercolour, India ink, pins on 300g Arches. 155 x 105 x 8cm
- Courtesy the artist and Gallerysmith Melbourne.