

Western Downs Regional Art Exhibition 2021.

Living in the Anthropocene Epoch

An essay by judge and curator - Leigh Schoenheimer

The theme of the 2021 Western Downs Regional Art Exhibition - Living in the Anthropocene Epoch - asked artists to explore experiences unique to this time – that of the Anthropocene, and this place - the Western Downs - in order to foster a collective desire for a culture of care, respect, and positive action. They were challenged to respond to how a person, image, object or place had captured their experience of environmental and cultural change.

Clearly, artists of the region found much scope in this year's brief. Artists' responses to the theme have stretched from the anxious to the philosophical, with works including references to the botanical, meteorological, zoological, technological, ecological, traditional, political and whimsical. In its totality, Living in the Anthropocene Epoch is an exhibition which will give visitors pause to reflect upon these many different approaches taken to interpreting the theme. Without exception, each artist has had something valuable to contribute to the conversation around what it is to live in this part of Australia, at this time in the earth's history.

Time can be quantified by many measures: eons, eras, periods, epochs, and ages. Theorists are now suggesting that we have entered a new epoch, that of the Anthropocene. Derived from the Greek 'anthropo' - man, 'cene' -new, the term is taken to mean the 'recent age of man'. Made popular by biologist Eugene Storer and chemist Paul Crutzen in the year 2000, this term has since been used to demarcate a new, *unofficial* unit of geological time, describing the age in which widespread human activity began to significantly impact the earth's ecological and geological systems. Accordingly, in eons to come, these impacts will be visible in the very strata of the planet's crust.

Stratigraphers are those scientists who specialize in the study of geological layers to piece together Earth's history from clues that can be coaxed out of layers of ice and rock, thousands and millions of years after the fact. Changes to sedimentation through farming and damming practices, shifting carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere and oceans, along with the sudden upswing which we are witnessing in species extinction rates as we populate and develop, are amongst phenomena that will ultimately create unique signatures in those future layers of rock and ice. Some have argued that a layer of plastic and concrete will also be evident in the strata – two potent signs of the urban spread now occupying 10% of the total earth's surface. While scientists can't yet agree upon the exact commencement date of the Anthropocene epoch, they are generally united in the understanding that our impact upon the ecology will be literally 'cast in stone' in the fullness of time.

Whilst our growing awareness of the unfolding effects of the Anthropocene Epoch is doing much to raise our anxiety levels and informs a great deal of current media, political and creative discourse, there is of course a flip side to this story. It is important that we don't

lose sight of the multitude of ways in which human existence has improved over time, as a direct result of the very same forces of industry, technology and agriculture that some might hold responsible for all of our current problems. Technological advances have made human lifespans longer and more comfortable. What were once very widespread, levels of hunger, poverty and illness have dropped dramatically in the last 100 years. Advances in the field of medicine continue to improve global health standards, as so clearly demonstrated by the unprecedentedly rapid development of vaccines during the current pandemic. Scientists, farmers and policy makers continue to work towards the provision of plentiful, safe and nutritious food for the world's population such that the global percentage of people living in poverty and hunger has been trending steadily downward, throughout the last century. Technology allows us to do things better and faster, has improved distance communications and made the benefits of shared information something we perhaps take for granted.

The implications of this 'era of human kind' for the environment are evident in many of the works, with concerns about climate change and affirmations about the importance of caring for our environment informing many. Overall, (rather like our recent census) the exhibition forms a snapshot of the issues and concerns that occupy the minds of this particular group of artists, giving us insights into the broader hopes and concerns of the people of the region.

One notable feature is the positivity that underpins many of the works. Hope for the future, gratitude for nature's largesse, an appreciation for all that technology can offer us, embedded signposts pointing our way towards improvement and a celebration of life in the country are all evident in the works presented. It goes without saying that expressions of anxiety are also present. Shaped into thoughtful, artistic responses, these anxieties about our future are presented as a call to action; a warning siren to make us take heed and respond. The artworks presented in 'Living in the Anthropocene' signal that we are indeed paying attention, and that now is the time to think carefully about our heritage and the preservation of it.

In expressing their ideas about the world, the language that artists speak is visual, requiring engagement with many different realms of thinking. Curiosity, reflection and imagination are possible starting points. Engaging in decision making, experimentation and innovation, feedback must be taken from the work itself throughout the creative process. The artist endeavours to form new connections, generate new ideas and establish new meanings through their understanding of visual language combined with their mastery over materials and processes. In the final step of this complex, creative process, the artist must surrender the results to the glare of an audience, who in turn will frame their viewing of the work through their own personal, cultural, social and emotional lenses. This visual language, employed by the artist and subsequently 'read' by the viewer, forms the basis of a unique mode of communication – that of an art work. The universal language of art has the power to transport emotions, transform thoughts, transcend the ordinary and uncover universal truths.

This year's theme 'Living in the Anthropocene' was a challenging one, but in setting the bar high, artists of the region have been stretched to produce an empowering set of works that speaks to their audience in ways that are both timely and engaging.