

# ARTIST PROFILE

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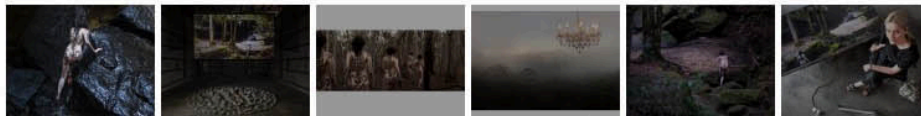
## Nicole Welch

By Artist Profile

**Artist Profile** chats to Nicole Welch about the dualities of endurance and surrender, urbanity and rurality, life and death, that interlace her media-based practice, as the artist prepares for her exhibition at MAY SPACE, Sydney.



'TRANSFORMATION – arrival' (film still), 2018, two channel HD video with sound, 4:51 min



**You grew up in Bathurst, studied at ANU in Canberra, moved to London and then returned to Bathurst. How have these different landscapes impacted your practice?**

Living and moving through these locations has confirmed my personal need to be connected to the natural environment. This is a universal human need increasingly recognised by science, and is one of the key threads that informs my art.

I'm shaped by my childhood in regional NSW, and when living in London I found myself drawn to the pastoral landscapes of England and wilderness areas in Scotland. These natural places anchored my experience while in the UK.

Living in the urban environment of London, I learnt that I wasn't a Metropolitan girl. While exciting, the pace and noise of London overwhelmed my body and senses, to the point that I couldn't make art.

**In your recent work for ArtState Bathurst, *TRANSFORMATION* (2018), you employed your own body as a symbolic vessel for female experience – exploring struggle, endurance, transformation, surrender and unity. Can you elaborate on this work?**

My works explore personal, cultural and environmental histories, echoing the symbiotic yet conflicted and fragile relationship we have with an enduring natural world, and our ephemeral place within it. They are physical and local, while simultaneously archetypal and universal.

Filmed on location in the lower Blue Mountains in the heart of winter over several hours, *TRANSFORMATION* involved exposing my body to the cold and water. It was physically hard to make. The two-channel video follows me walking naked through a rainforest creek bed in a slow and meditative journey towards a waterfall. It also shows an arrival scene where the body surrenders to and merges with the waterfall; a dissolving of self.

**This skeleton painted on your body is like a moving memento mori...**

The duality of life and death is referenced by the skeleton, which follows the anatomy of my actual skeleton. Although this symbol can conjure the macabre, in this work it is an homage to the living, emphasised by the movement of the figure and the lushness of the environment.

Whilst I am the figure and the journey reflective of my personal experience, it is also universal. Endurance and transformation are the central ideas: the struggle of the body against the elements in the making of the work mirrors the tension between life and living against our awareness of mortality. The journey in the work is wayfinding a path to reach resolution. The viewer witnesses a physical and symbolic act of surrender and then unity.

By using my body to enact a performance in the landscape, I'm also reclaiming the female form, stripping the figure bare yet at the same time covering the body by diverting the gaze to the moving image of the skeleton. Thus the figure embodies a lineage of women through time. The work then is an homage to women past, present and future. It's a celebration of our unique connection to nature and life giving qualities, and our strength and resilience throughout history.

**You've said that this is your most interesting work to-date; that it pulls together threads from many previous series. What are some of these threads, and why are they so important for you?**

*TRANSFORMATION* was first conceived in 2010 while undertaking a residency in Hill End, so the gestation time was eight years. Time is my most valuable tool for developing a work. I spend a lot of time reflecting and envisioning ideas, reworking and resolving questions long before I make the actual work. Eight years is a bit of a personal record, but I knew that I needed the right platform to make and show *TRANSFORMATION*, in that it was to pull together a number of threads – performance, installation, film, as well as layering and merging themes of land and body. It also references themes from my 'Illumination' series, including the layering of colonial histories on and in this landscape's ancient cultural and environmental histories – and my place in that story.

The work is significant to me because it is a reflection of my modus operandi. It references and uses all the elements that have evolved in my practice to express the nexus and the tensions between the body and environment, artifice and nature, past and present.

**Can you tell me about some important personal turning points in your practice?**

A significant turning point was an enforced return from London to my hometown of Bathurst in 2004, after falling ill. While convalescing at my parents' home in Bathurst, I felt at the time it was not where I wanted to be, yet creatively that point in my story led me to connect strongly to this region again; its landscape, ecology and history. Short trips into the landscape around my home in the Central West nurtured me both emotionally and physically; I felt better when I was surrounded by nature. These personally familiar landscapes and their vast horizons drew me out of myself, with the forests, rivers and gorges connecting me back to existence. This new sense of connectedness has led me to view these environments in the context of historical and contemporary narratives. My practice has evolved into an investigation and exploration of these places, and aims to reveal the multidimensional aspect of place when viewed through the historical, cultural, personal and ecological lens.

**Apart from this connection you feel with the natural world, who or what inspires you?**

I draw a lot of inspiration from wilderness photographers who use the elements to evoke an emotional response to a location. For example Peter Dombrovskis' iconic photograph *Morning mist, Rock Island Bend, Franklin River, Tasmania*, through its epic and ancient beauty, was instrumental in saving the wild Franklin River from being dammed and lost in the late '70s. I employ the same natural phenomena – fog, mist, emotive light and idealised scenery – within my work to evoke a connection to place. More recently I've used sounds collected from sites to layer the sensory experience in my installations.

I'm also influenced by historical objects. As the daughter of an antiques dealer, I spent my childhood surrounded by antiques. I often start a series with historical references – this could be an historical object, paintings, illustrations or etchings. The colonial nature of these references also represent a dark part of Australia's cultural and ecological history, as well as my own.

**ArtState Bathurst was a strong celebration of the arts in regional NSW. In your opinion and experience, what are some challenges faced by regional artists today?**

There is a growing conversation now about arts in regional Australia, and that in itself is a major change from my experience on returning to Bathurst in 2004. I think this is influenced by the increasing number of metropolitan artists and arts workers moving here, now that cities have become unaffordable. They're bringing their resources and connections with them, and that is valuable. I see the benefits are starting to outweigh the challenges. For example, regional areas offer affordable living are rich in subject matter, and the growing creative communities are strong and connected. Like everywhere, more funding and opportunities are needed to help artists thrive. It would be good to see funding that supports the logistics of living and working regionally, such as grants to help with transport of artwork for those living remotely, or to support extended periods of time undertaking residencies in Metro centres for research or collaboration.

**What will you be working on next?**

Right now I'm finalising the exhibition of *TRANSFORMATION* at MAY SPACE in Black Box Projects space, where it will be presented on a more intimate scale than the installation at ArtState, inviting the viewer into the scene.

I'm also developing work for my next series 'W I L D', which continues my exploration of the two main themes in my practice: body and land. Manly Art Gallery & Museum have invited me to make new work for the 'Manly Dam Project', alongside eight other artists with the Water Research Laboratory in response to the Manly Dam site. I'm flipping ideas in my head and working on mental sketches as I plan this new sequence of installation and performance works.

#### EXHIBITION

Nicole Welch | Transformation

27 February – 17 March, 2019

MAY SPACE, Sydney