



## Marian Drew *rock, fruit, flower* 21 April - 27 May 2023



Marian Drew lives in Brisbane Australia, and is currently Adjunct Associate Professor at Queensland College of Art, Griffith University and PhD candidate at the Canberra School of Art and Design, Australian National University. Her art work is held in collections that include the John Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Museum of Photographic Art, San Diego, National Gallery of Australia, Fonds National D'Art Contemporain (FNAC), Paris, France, Art Gallery of South Australia and the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Monash Gallery of Art, Queensland University Art Museum, Murdoch University and Artbank.

She represented Australia in the First Asia Pacific Triennial 1993, Dubai Photo, 2016, Musée du Quai Branly, PhotoQuai, Paris 2011, and the Pingyao International Photography Festival, China 2010. She completed a Bachelor of Visual Art in 1984 at the Canberra School of Art, Australian National University, and was awarded a German Government Scholarship from the German government DAAD to study Experimental Photography, at Kassel University, Germany. The Dyason Bequest administered by the NSW Art Gallery assisted her studies in the major art collections of Europe.

She has received several commissions that include the National Portrait Gallery of Australia, Brisbane Magistrates Court, Museum of Brisbane, Brisbane River Festival, and Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Great Walks, and completed Australia Council international residencies in New York 1989, 2011 and Los Angeles, 1994.

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**Cover:** Marian Drew, *There is no garden of eden*, 2023, dye sublimation on aluminium, 30 x 40cm. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

**Above:** Marian Drew, 2022. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

In this context, her shift from photographic media to sculpture – her most radical departure from the past to date – the works for *rock, fruit, flower* are also informed by the shifting tenor of human existence. Drew's interests in geology were furthered during a trip to Uluru and Central Australia in 2022, when she gathered more rocks, 'collected' using the camera. 'I kept thinking about these geological scales and a different way of inhabiting the space-time continuum so visible there. I see the camera as a basket for collecting. The single perspective of the camera hangs the rocks, a vast landscape, all within a frame. It is an historical and perspectival armature.'

Drew returned to the studio with her images of Central Australian rocks and worked to photographically 'lock' them into new contexts. With flashes of colour in their detail, rocks hover in an ambiguous space, as though arrested at some stage in their uplift by the earth since formation some 400 million years ago. Backgrounds are also built using photographic images, blurred, collaged and painted to convey a deeper space. Within these indistinct elements the eye wanders, looking for recognisable shapes, trying to make meaning from an opaque assembly. The entire image is fused onto aluminium, its fine texture more painterly than a photograph but distinctively fresh. The three-dimensional forms are created by folding flat aluminium sheets, using a vice, recreating this imagery as a freestanding space, with the rocks floating within their containment – like fish in an aquarium – requiring the viewer to move into and around each to engage fully with their directional changes. Drew plans the sculptural details, but said, 'In the end you have to respond to that individual image, and it changes, every time you make a fold'.

Their at times neon tones have a non-naturalistic character, yet I find myself interpreting potential references, engaging with their dance of abstraction to meet it with imagined narratives. In *Common Ground* (2022), the multiple folds, across which two rocks hover, have a silver background with green and other colours forming a grounded landscape of sorts. Once bent, this image becomes a sculptural ripple through which the viewer negotiates the image. Others reverse this hierarchy, with the colours or 'ground' in the top half and brightness below. Others, like *Marie's garden* (2022), remove the sense of horizontality in favour of blurry vertical lines and determinedly indistinct shapes.

The rocks in sharp focus are lit, highlighting their jewel-like but craggy, sharply defined matter, the central concern carried forward in this series. Early in her career it was Drew herself performing in nature, lighting lakes and experimenting in the landscape in such a way as to record otherworldly presences, or staging layered scenarios within the camera frame. With *rock, fruit, flower* she turns the tables on her audience, inspiring and engaging our movement to read their many facets, beyond the two dimensional perspectival armature.

She writes that, 'cultural works may contribute to the shifts necessary to assist individuals to rethink their impact and place in the world – the cultural life of a society ... frames people's perceptions and experience of the world'.<sup>2</sup> In these works we see Drew confronting the vested interests of the Anthropocene, using seductive imagery with significant conceptual strength to argue for a more equitable future. It is an ambitious project representing an increasingly urgent paean for change. The aesthetic with which these works present is beautiful, respectful, a homage; their engagement with the awe found in nature drives their compulsive force.

### Dr. Louise Martin-Chew

Over forty years, Marian Drew has created photographs which weave elaborate fictions within the touchstone of felt realities, with photography and her performative method used to expose these otherwise hidden narratives. During her career, the slipperiness of the photograph has become only more marked with the ubiquitous smartphone capturing everyday realities. Yet these are inevitably constructed. Questions about how and what photography represents in an increasingly precarious world has stimulated Drew's deep dive back through her own practice, and into a new three-dimensional way of working with photographic imagery. In some ways, the sculptural interventions in *rock fruit flower*, which engage the viewer within their captured space, cleave to themes that have always been central to her practice. As an artist she has always walked gently on the earth, sensitive both to nature and the cultural and personal histories that precede her presence in this time and place. In these works, the existential crisis facing humanity sees her reach out of the picture frame – seeking audience response.

Drew believes that 'pervasive and constant photographic representation is shaping the way we think about the world. Perhaps it is holding us back in terms of seeing the world as we now understand it. My new works are about photography and geology, and really thinking about what photography is today: how does it represent the world? Can we change course, reimagine our place on an increasingly precarious planet?'<sup>1</sup> This shift in direction is in the zeitgeist; the sciences, humanities and in the law. In 2019 Bangladesh granted its rivers equivalent legal status to humans. In Australia, Indigenous-led initiatives are promoting change, advocating for nature – and a level of environmental personhood – which may also assist mitigation of both climate change and environmental damage. These concepts of non-human agency and rights to thrive are central to Drew's shifting artistic endeavours.

In 2017 her experience of travel in the Kimberley (WA), climbing and walking through its rugged wilderness, stimulated a new series of photographic works titled *Devonian Flesh* (shown at Turner Gallery, Perth 2018). In these dramatic still lives, rocks are presented on tablecloths – like fleshy objects of consumption, yet it is humanity, in comparison, that is ephemeral, temporary. The rocks in this area date from the Devonian geological period when sea creatures were the only animals on earth. 'This was an incredible time for sea life, which has been preserved as fossils, ending up with these rich patinas. You can see all the forms in them, from crustaceans to bones.'

In recent years Drew has also revisited her personal archives, tearing up photographs and reforming the images as collections of collage over simplified backdrops of draped and gently patterned fabric. 'Working with photography for forty years, so many thin pieces of paper, and thousands of student works, I have thought so much about capitalism and the degradation of the earth. Photography, as a medium, is complicit in the selling of consumables and objects, and giving us an image of ourselves – all the time.' Accordingly, in *Strata* (shown in 2020 at Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane and This is no Fantasy, Melbourne), she excavated her own imagery to build landscapes from human detritus – tablecloths, textiles and domestic objects. These are beautiful images built with detail, the odd rock, sometimes pears, yet with mountains formed from draped textiles and native flowers introduced as torn fragments, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that they speak to humanity's corruption of the natural environment. At the base of the mountain in *Strata Downfall* (2020), a rock suggests the endurance of the earth's geological fabric, rendering humanity fleeting. These familiar forms function like an imaginative portal to a whole other reality; imbued with a sombre solemnity, their grey tones are emotional, mourning.

<sup>1</sup>Marian Drew, Interview with the author, 21 February 2023. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from this interview.

<sup>2</sup>Figgis, P., Mackey, B., Fitzsimons, J., Irving, J., Clark, P. (eds). *Valuing Nature: Protected Areas and Ecosystem Services*. Section 2, *Nature as Inspiration: Valuing Aesthetic and Cultural Landscapes*, author Marian Drew (Australian Committee for IUCN, Sydney, 2015), 50-53