



Thresholds

Julia Davis and Lisa Jones
in collaboration

Curated by Claire Taylor

There is another world that lies beneath the pulsing heart of Sydney's city centre. It quietly sits in a state of stillness and silence, forgotten by the furious and frenetic crowds that walk the pavement, only a few metres above. These are the abandoned tunnels of St James station. Flooded, overgrown, and unseen by the sun, these tunnels sit behind an innocuous green door that hides in plain sight at the train station. Thresholds opens this door and invites the viewer to step through.

Through a series of moving images, drawings and photographs, Jones and Davis map the contours of this unknowable, subterranean space.

Tai Mitsuji, 2020



SCRATCHING THE SURFACE

Every year, humans move more earth, and more rock. More than what rivers carry with them as they rush to oceans and lakes. More than what is eroded by wind, or rain, or seasonal frictions. More than what is hurled out as lava by volcanos. More, in fact, than all planetary forces combined. And faster too—a few decades of human activity have displaced more materials than the planet could over millennia. This is what it means to say that humans have become a geological force.¹

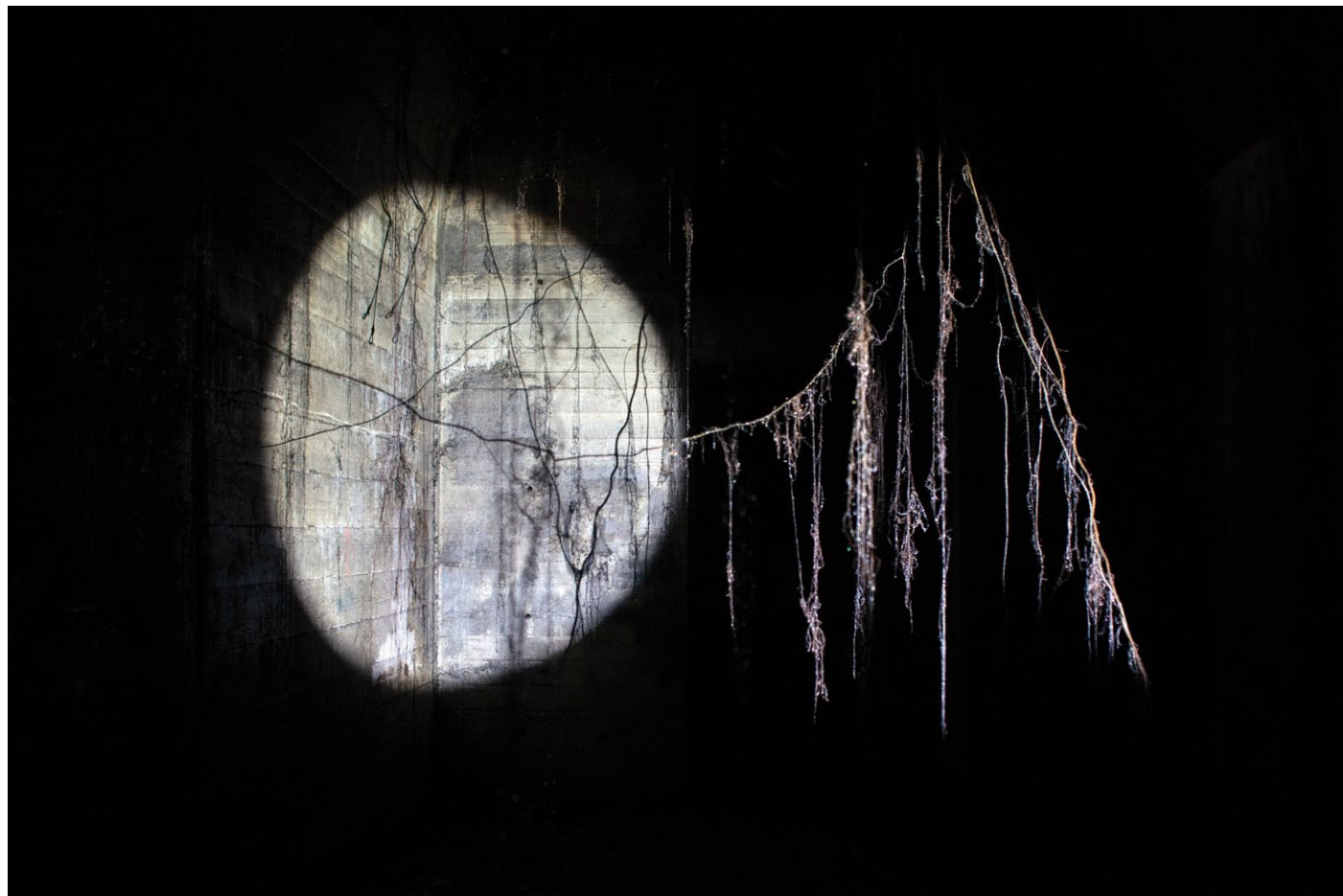
Julia Davis and Lisa Jones' recent body of work titled *Thresholds* invites viewers to reimagine layers of the built environment beneath the surface. The sites explored in the *Thresholds* body of work are disused tunnels and chambers under Sydney's city centre, connected to St. James Station. *Thresholds* conveys a sense of what these underground sites—designed as transitional spaces—feel like to remain in, inhabit, rather than travel through.

When Davis and Jones first started working on this project the abandoned sites were a stark contrast to the brightly-lit, bustling station just metres away. Deserted tunnels lie dormant next to live tunnels where the darkness is torn through by the lights and screeching noise of trains every couple of minutes, carrying thousands of passengers through the city. Davis and Jones' emerging artworks seemed to speak to the otherness of how this environment feels—how you can essentially step through a doorway and be in a space that feels completely removed from the busyness of the city and yet so close to it. Since the artworks were made, we have been confronted by imagery of our cities empty of all but essential

workers: public places eerily quiet, entire transport networks temporarily suspended, buildings left empty, businesses closed. The idea of a city devoid of people, major infrastructure lying disused and abandoned, has become not quite so unimaginable. How to slow down from the seemingly relentless pace of the city has been (briefly?) more feasible.

Davis and Jones' major work in this exhibition is the multichannel video installation *Thresholds: a chorus*. In this exhibition it is presented as a large-scale three-channel video projection with the three screens side by side and surround sound. This artwork draws the viewer into an enveloping darkness from which details of the St. James tunnels emerge, glimpsed in torchlight. The imagery explores liminal spaces that exist just underneath the surface of the familiar city. They appear in a state of suspended animation, as if patiently awaiting the inevitability of change and the encroachment of development, testament to changing social and political priorities. It is a portrait of a city in transition, explored through sites superseded by other plans. Some of these sites were once vital infrastructure, others were never used for the purposes for which they were built, others still have been successively repurposed and now abandoned again.

The soundscape of *Thresholds: a chorus*, like all the video footage, is engineered from site recordings. We hear the familiar sound of a train's motion recorded from inside it, accompanying a horizontal video slice that shows glimpses of a prosaic journey through the city, into and back out of the main tunnels. At times we hear the sounds of the city filtered through the bedrock, the rumbling of trains passing, and some of the rhythms of nature that meter time underground, all recorded from within the abandoned tunnels. Other sections have overlaid audio traces of hundreds of commuters passing through



the electronic barriers at the station, discretely chirping away. Occasionally there is a pulse that Lisa Jones likens to a heart beat.

In her individual practice, Lisa Jones has had a long-standing interest in traces and accumulations, inviting consideration of what lies unseen beneath the surface of the city. Some earlier works by Jones utilise rubbings of cracks in the pavement, layered over maps of the streets and buildings in the area from different periods in time, which in turn overlay diagrams of some of the networks that lie under the surface—underground transport systems and diverted waterways. Through drawing processes of mark-making and erasure Jones speaks to the city as palimpsest, revealing traces of the creation and removal of previous buildings, transport routes, roads, infrastructure. Her works explore her lived experience and memories of the city as well as the material histories of the built environment written in its surfaces and cracks.

Over the past 12 years, Julia Davis' site-based practice has increasingly engaged with the landscape in flux. She describes her individual practice as exploring the invisible forces and traces of human endeavour that underpin how we inhabit place and how it inhabits us. Her work speaks to “the idea that landscape is a cultural space and the psychology of place underpins our sense of self.” She has engaged with sites as diverse as underground salt mines in Poland, the volcanic landscapes of Italy, the salt lakes of WA and Cockatoo Island in Sydney. These projects reveal intangible aspects of site, using different mediums not to document the unseen but convey a sense of how a site feels and find a kind of essential truth of material and place. Like Lisa Jones, Julia Davis comes from a sculptural background and has approached this project, *Thresholds*, through considerations of temporal, spatial as well as material

aspects of site.

In *Thresholds: a chorus* material histories are revealed in footage of torchlight tracking across tunnel surfaces and finishes: decades of graffiti; jagged and twisted metal formwork; dynamite blasted rubble; concrete walls bearing the woodgrain castmarks of their construction; chisel marks in excavated sandstone. *Thresholds* reveals remnants of the landscape the city was built on and a deeper ecology under the skin of the built environment. Colonies of mycelia grow on ceilings. Roots penetrate through cavities, cling to walls, reach down to seek out water, their growth slowly opening up new cracks. This is a layer of the city being reclaimed by its waterways and latent geology. Ceilings of cavernous chambers glisten with crystallizing mineralization from constant seepage. Pooled storm water is thick with sediment. Walls are caked with heavy layers of grime. Some tunnels are completely flooded to form artificial lakes.

The imagery of these details, and the editing of these segments, is paced to give viewers an opportunity to slow down and be drawn into a subterranean landscape where there is a very different sense of time. The split-screen with the horizontal slice of a journey propels the artwork, building and pulling back in intensity with the accelerations and decelerations of the motion. But it is the depth of the stillness, silence and enveloping darkness in the tunnels that the artwork starts and ends with. This feels close to death, the most poignant threshold suggested in the work and its underlying theme. The artwork here crosses over into a deeply personal portrait of memory and mourning. The trains periodically racing through the tunnels push massive columns of air, carrying with them dust and dirt that then accumulates. Segments of the video installation simply follow the illuminated swirling dust. This turbulence is poetic and



evocative. Like the refracted light thrown around chambers from torchlight on the water, the imagery is ethereal and otherworldly. In these passages, the artwork is a meditation on transience and the passing of time. These themes recur through much of Julia Davis' individual practice, considered in both human and geological time scales.

The imagery of the rubble, piles of blasted concrete and labyrinthine tunnels that recede into the blackness speak to a scale of material from which the city is built that we rarely have the opportunity to consider. In this subterranean landscape, we can't escape the sense of the volume of not only excavated material but also the material required to build the city, and it forces us to think about that impact rather than just how we use and inhabit our built environment. The fact that these tunnels as infrastructure had such a limited useful lifespan speaks to the relative ephemerality of even some of the largest building projects. These are hidden ruins of our city, in our city, while it is still evolving.

The large-scale drawings in this exhibition have a raw materiality and are both created by and imbued with turbulence. They are process-drawings Julia Davis and Lisa Jones made by immersing oversized paper in some of the floodwaters in the chambers. The artists disturbed the water surrounding the paper to lift up the particulate suspended in it, which then settled on the paper. After being left overnight, the paper was then removed, left to dry out and fixed so that each drawing held the residue that had been deposited on the paper in that time underwater. They register the actions of the artists and capture the materiality of a particular time and place—a hidden layer of the city actively registering immense human impact—accretions of rock dust, city pollution, and traces of

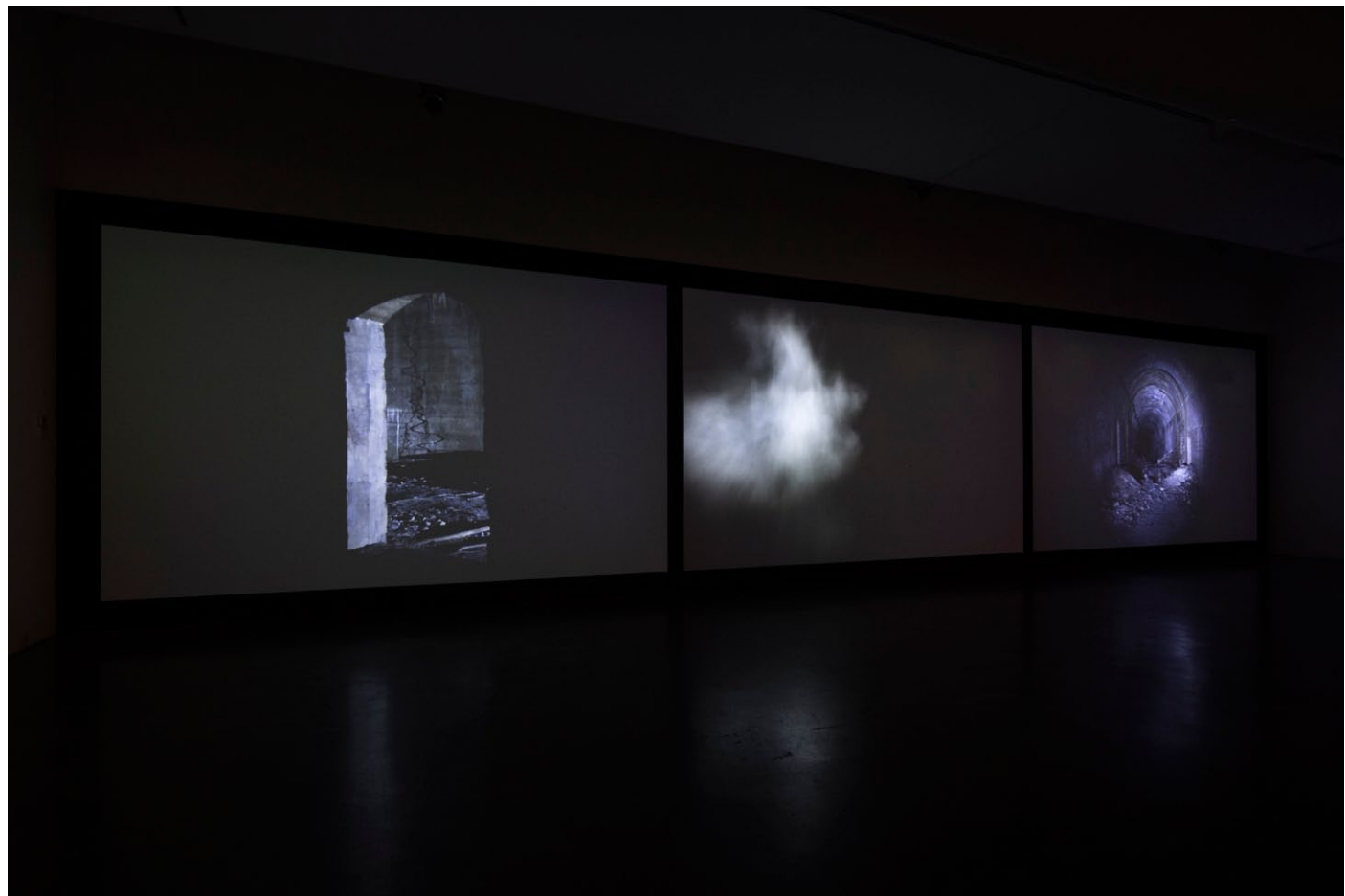
thousands of journeys in the brake dust and dirt from the passing trains so close by. Each artwork has the date of its making as part of its title. The drawings speak to Heraclitus' notion that the nature of existence is change. His famous adage that we do not step into the same river twice, since the water, the course of the river and we are changed at a later time, is borne out in the stark differences between each of the drawings. Made in the same place at different times, the drawings are a concrete product of the flux of the city. Created by the water that seeps through the built environment and all the particulate that it carries, each is a city self-portrait. They capture a sense of how the city is in a constant state of change—through erasure, use and construction. These drawings remind us that we never return to a place in the city to find it as it previously was in as much as we are never again the same person when we return.

The photographic and installation works in this exhibition were created over an extended period of time by Julia Davis and Lisa Jones between 2016 and 2019, and the drawings were made in mid-to-late 2019. They mark the approach to 2020, the year recognised as the crossing point where the overall mass of human-made materials—production of concrete, metal, plastic, bricks and asphalt—exceeded the combined mass of all living things on our planet.² This body of work by Davis and Jones' prefigures that threshold and invites us to contemplate both the materiality and temporality of our built environment, as well as our place within it.

Claire Taylor, exhibition curator, 2020

1. Hannah le Roux and Gabrielle Hecht, *Bad Earth*, published in e-flux Architecture's "Accumulation" series, 1 Sept 2020. <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/accumulation/345106/bad-earth/>
2. Elhacham, E., Ben-Uri, L., Grozovski, J. et al. *Global human-made mass exceeds all living biomass*. Nature (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-3010-5>













IMAGES

Cover: Julia Davis and Lisa Jones, *Thresholds - a chorus*, 2016, production still. Photograph: Richard Glover.

2. Julia Davis and Lisa Jones, *Thresholds - a chorus*, #13/11/17, 2017. Unique print on archival paper. Photograph: Richard Glover.

4. Julia Davis and Lisa Jones, *Thresholds - a chorus*, #28/01/17.2, 2017. Unique print on archival paper. Photograph: Richard Glover.

6. Julia Davis and Lisa Jones, *Thresholds - a chorus*, #19/01/19, 2019. Unique print on archival paper. Photograph: Richard Glover.

8. Julia Davis and Lisa Jones, *Thresholds - a chorus*, #06/12/18, 2018. Unique print on archival paper. Photograph: Richard Glover.

9. Julia Davis and Lisa Jones, *Thresholds - a chorus*, #07/03/17, 2017. Unique print on archival paper. Photograph: Richard Glover.

10. Installation view of Julia Davis and Lisa Jones, *Thresholds: a chorus*, 2019. Three-channel HD video installation with surround sound, duration 10:29 mins. Camera: Richard Glover. Editing and post-production: Blue Lucine. Additional editing: Elise Harmsen. Sound design: Derek Allan, Zig Zag Lane. Producer: Claire Taylor.

11. Installation view of three-channel installation and photographs in *Thresholds* exhibition at Tin Sheds Gallery, Sydney, 2021. Photograph: Richard Glover.

12. Installation view of photographs and drawings in *Thresholds* exhibition at Tin Sheds Gallery, Sydney, 2021. Photograph: Richard Glover.

13. Installation view of photographs and drawings in *Thresholds* exhibition at Tin Sheds Gallery, Sydney, 2021. Photograph: Claire Taylor.

14. Installation view of drawings in *Thresholds* exhibition at Tin Sheds Gallery, Sydney, 2021. Photograph: Richard Glover.

15. Julia Davis and Lisa Jones, *Thresholds – a chorus* #04/07/19, 2019. Site-accreted residue on Heritage rag 320 gsm paper, 160x240cm.

16. Julia Davis and Lisa Jones, *Thresholds – a chorus* #19/07/19, 2019. Site-accreted residue on Heritage rag 320 gsm paper, 160x240cm.

Finalist in the MPRG National Works on Paper 5 December 2020 - 21 February 2021.

17. Julia Davis and Lisa Jones, *Thresholds – a chorus* #18/07/19, 2019. Site-accreted residue on Heritage rag 320 gsm paper, 160x240cm.

18-19. Documentation of work-in-progress on site, carrying the drawings through the city, the drawings drying out in one of the disused St. James platforms (photographs: Richard Glover), Julia Davis and Lisa Jones in St James on the first visit to the disused tunnels (photograph: Claire Taylor).

Exhibition partner: Tin Sheds Gallery, School of Architecture, Design and Planning, the University of Sydney. The artworks in this exhibition were created with the support of the Copyright Agency's Cultural Fund, Sydney Trains and GREYSPACE. Exhibition documentation and catalogue partner: this project was supported by the NSW Government through Create NSW. Many thanks to Derek Allan (Zig Zag Lane), Iakovos Amperidis, Eddy Daher, Richard Glover, Paul Greedy, Gretta Logue, Blue Lucine, and Garry Massoud for their invaluable assistance during the development of the artworks and exhibition. The exhibition team acknowledges the Gadigal of the Eora Nation as the traditional custodians of the land upon which these artworks were made and exhibited. All images © Julia Davis and Lisa Jones. *Introduction* © Tai Matsui. *Scratching the Surface* © Claire Taylor. Catalogue designed by GREYSPACE. No materials may be reproduced without prior written permission. For more information about the artists and curator see juliadavis.com.au | lisajones.net | davis-jones.net | greyspace.net.au

21 January - 19 February 2021

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