

Rainforest (2016)

Mike Leggett



The image of a rainforest within contemporary affairs is potent. The stories of the destruction of the world's forests and the affect this is having on the health of the planet is oppressive. This image of the Australian rainforest is also a statement about a post-colonial condition, a biosphere challenged by exploitation and the arrival of non-indigenous plants which have flourished in the previously pristine environment. The indigenous eucalypts can be seen – the grey gum, the spotted gum, the stringy bark – and there are also the so-called exotics, brought in by the settlers; the jacaranda and the lantana from América do Sul, the camphor laurel from China, and the plumbago, a plant brought from the northern hemisphere, its name derived from the Latin words *plumbum* ("lead") and *agere* ("to resemble").

The resemblance between these living plants and this image, a historical image, is through a means of structured representation. From a fixed position, over a twelve-month period, the camera documents a section of the Australian rainforest. Short durations are recorded throughout this time; a few seconds each or single frames throughout a day, between one or several, days or weeks.

The projection is presented in the sequence of shooting and selected from the archive of material, making interventions that are sometimes abrupt, sometimes tranquil. The rapidity with which the viewer encounters the changes on the screen is in contradiction to our memories of the experience of being amongst a forest of trees; the flickering images are an abstracted rendition of a memory of these living plants. Notwithstanding, we rapidly decode what is available to be seen: it is daytime, the colour hue indicates a morning light, in a winter season confirmed by observing that the canopy has thinned. A single frame, an instant is sufficient for us to gather this information. Moments later we have more data and

can determine the wind is blowing and it is raining; later the insects of high summer patrol the space before the camera.

The information accumulates in memory. There is now anticipation of what is to come as the durations extend, as the subtlety of the semi-tropical seasons change over the weeks, passing in the minutes of real time, our time, projected time. The chiaroscuro of the scene, an interplay of light and movement, makes abstract what moments before was so tangible. Sound, vibrations in the visual space, hovers between being the white noise of rain and the rush of air through the trees, modulated by the direction from where the wind is seen to blow. Other sounds indicate the unseen presence of the residents of the forest, the bees and flies, the parrots, parakeets, the lyre bird and others, including humans; and the seasonal inhabitants, the fruit bats, and the cicadas.

We respond to what is seen and what is heard, a process of reflecting on emergent associations moving between the abstract image, the aesthetic image, the image as material, part or unseen image, the image as provocateur. The image is of historical time, each tree and plant becoming an indexical marker of a point in the past of a beginning. The oldest, a grey gum to the right of picture, was present before the colonisers invaded the land of the indigenous peoples who used the rainforest as a home, a food store and as a resource for the tools and materials of an ancient survival, a time period elongated back to the emergence of modern mankind.

The trees are growing on a steep slope, part of a gorge, which descends to a small flood plain bordering a creek. We are suspended in vision, above the ground and beneath the canopy. The shelter of the trees is augmented by caves and rock overhangs where indigenous families would have visited on a regular basis prior to colonisation. With fish in the river, a wealth of plants and fruits on its banks, and meat from the animals and birds moving between the creek and the flat lands above, the viewpoint coincides with that of generations of peoples who have previously passed by this scene.

Then time is compressed, time-lapsed; the trees as metaphor seem to vibrate with an energy otherwise invisible. Recent research has found the *mycorrhizal fungi* networks enable nutrition and communication to be shared between individual trees, who are capable within their biological systems of synthesising chemicals to resist attacks to their roots, bark, trunks, branches and leaves by other living organisms, most of these entities being invisible to the unaided eye – here the camera has a role to play, becoming a part of the complex system, not only a biodiversity operating in the forest but one extended by the presence of an audience into the viewing space of the gallery.

Diversity of meaning is further extended by reflecting on ones presence in this place, as

the time spans overlay; the audience time of viewing of the recorded image, an index to the time of recording, a record of passages of recorded time over the period of the year, records of plants that are themselves indexically linked to the stages of their growth. Such reflections occur in the space of the gallery but through reflexively transpose into the place of the forest, or as it is colloquially known, the bush. The bush (as has observed) is for the migrant to Australia, a place to be wary of, a place of strange plants and dangerous animals. Most urban residents will avoid entering the bush, except in well-marked and levelled pathways. They move through what is to many, a scrub of bent and awkward vegetation that hides snakes and spiders. The fact that few have seen these fearsome creatures does not quell the unease, that so distracts them as they walk that little attention is given to the richness of the flora, with a flowering season that is continuous throughout the year for each of the succeeding species. ++

We seek a collective resolution to the crisis in the natural world but refuse to accept or understand the need for rapid action. We realise we have lost our connection with the forest which for centuries was essential to our survival as individuals, and which became the energy store for human development across a range of races and cultures, a progress that has now reached a tipping point.

END

A story develops, about the imaginations of those who view the rainforest; their own direct connections with what they see. Somewhere within the trees viewed here there will be a plant of similar age to the viewer. There will also be some, the jacaranda on the left, approximating to when audiences first started joining together at precise times in cinemas to look at motion pictures on a screen. A few trees date back to the time when photographs were first made, when our great (great etc) grandparents were born; cameras at that time were made with wood gathered from tropical rainforests. The explorers, and the colonists that followed, moved into rainforests such as these in search of red cedar, red gold as it was known at the time. Cut and stripped, slid down the slope to the creek at the bottom, strapped into rafts for floating down to the main river, loaded onto waiting three-masters, before disembarking the ship and its load out into the ocean for the sail up the coast to Sydney Town where furniture makers and timber merchants would move the wood into the complexities of trade and domestic usefulness. Cedar would have been present in this view; now long gone, and quite rare in the remaining forests of the coastal strip.

The colour green – where does this lead? A wash of sunlight across the scene is reflected as different colours and hues according to the physical structure of the electromagnetic

spectrum colliding with the biological properties of each physical element seen here.

The plants

The eye

Sight as a complexity of the brain