



# Joan Ross

# Off Script

Words by  
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**Name:** Joan Ross.

**Lives:** Sydney.

**Reading:** *BANKS* by Grantlee Kieza and the *The Butterfly Thief* by Walter Marsh.

**Just back from:** Aotearoa Art Fair in Auckland.

**Working on:** a solo exhibition with N.Smith Gallery, Sydney, opening in September.

**Known for:** culture-hacking colonial era paintings and prints to draw attention to the ongoing legacies of colonialism.

I visit Joan Ross during her two-year residency at Artspace, Woolloomooloo, down by the harbour. Woolloomooloo has always been a place of contradictions. The old shipping pier may long ago have traded its sheds and bales for hatted restaurants and celebrity haunts, but it still shares a neighbourhood with public tenements and those sleeping rough under the Cathedral Street overpass.

Next-door lie the grey warships of Garden Island Navy base and the colonial prison of Fort Denison. It used to be possible here to have a midnight pie with peas, but now even the famous Café de Wheels has gone upmarket.

Things can go many ways from here. It's a short walk to the Art Gallery of New South Wales and through the Botanic Gardens to the Opera House. The opposite direction takes you to the nightlife of Kings Cross and William Street.

Woolloomooloo is a place of fog horns and sirens, of late-night revels, of the clink of opening-night flutes, the racket of slammed doors and noisy TVs, the rustle of fireworks and burn barrels.

It is also a place where history runs deep. Its name may derive from the Gadigal word Wallamullah, meaning 'place of plenty'. Sure, for some.



This is fertile ground for Ross, for whom the contradictions of history lie in her wheelhouse. In painting and sculpture, digital media and video, she has built her career pursuing hard truths about the legacies of colonialism whether they be social, economic or environmental. She looks back at the past as a layered timeline rather than a single narrative, set in stone.

First, we look together at a framed print of one of Eugene von Guérard's views of a waterfall at Glen Osmond, South Australia. On the glass, Ross has painted a vignette of party balloons on strings, inside which float the engorged heads of colonial dandies. Ross describes the work as 'almost a step from a video' and I can see why – the way that the dreaminess of the balloons is superimposed reminds me a bit of a Disney animation cell.

It's also a work in progress. She has scraped away a figure who was originally holding the balloon-heads, and now Ross is waiting to uncover who is pulling the strings. In the meantime, what are the colonial heads doing? It's a party, of course. It's a familiar motif for Ross, this idea of people gorging themselves on the landscape.

We look next at a new series that she is putting the final touches on. They are still-life paintings of flowers in vases, except that some of the petals are actually colonial heads. Ross notes that 'they are always watching'. The title of the series is *They are even in your flowers*. This continual resurfacing of

imagery from Australia's colonial past points to the 'pervasive' nature of its ongoing legacy. 'It is in how we talk, how we're treated, our major structures,' says Ross.

In the moment, Ross thinks the purple background of one painting is too opaque, too deadening. We cock our heads for a bit and go look at something else. She turns back now and knows, *absolutely knows*, that the colour is wrong in this light. This movement, the bouncing from one surface to another, the frenetic energy, the constant revision – this is what it means to inhabit Ross's world.

More heads, this time of birds, which are a constant presence in her work. She shows me a favourite – a lyrebird which she has decapitated. 'It has the most beautiful eyes', Ross enthuses, 'so for me to take its head off, it means that I'm serious.' I don't disagree. It is jarring, to kill your darlings. 'I'll miss you copying things', the text deadpans.

'I started taking the heads off without being able to fully articulate what that was about,' she explains. We are now getting to the heart of Ross's practice which, setting aside the frocks and frills and heads in balloons, is built on a foundation of deep convictions. I can see how she intuits things beyond herself. 'It's a warning,' she says, 'if we continue the way we are, we won't have any birds.'

For a moment we dive from sky to sea. She has made some amendments to a colonial print of

'If you don't draw it out meticulously like a formal academic painting, you are giving yourself the license to take it where it goes.'



Top left: Joan Ross *I give you a mountain* 2018 (video still), single channel digital animation, Art Gallery of New South Wales, gift of the artist 2019 through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program © Joan Ross



a British ship and retitled it *The beginning of greed*. The ship's small longboat now draws two large nets behind it, hoovering up a cornucopia of sea life as it goes. The resulting Pythonesque hodgepodge brings to mind the charming jumble of fish in John William Lewin's *Fish catch and Dawes Point, Sydney Harbour* 1813 – the first oil painting produced in the colony of Sydney, by Lewin, its first professional artist. But there is something sinister in Ross's vision of where harbour life ends up, with two centuries' distance. It is stripped, mined, thieved.

Ross's strength lies in drawing together seemingly disparate threads into something that has purpose. This must be how she arrives at works such as her video *I give you a mountain* 2018 (currently showing at the Art Gallery in the exhibition *Super Nature*), which is really what I'm here to talk to her about. It is a dense, baffling work, full of metaphor, in which we are taken on a kind of funhouse ride through a flooded museum.

To make her video works Ross doesn't follow the usual script. There are no prescriptive storyboards with binding concept art, dolly movements, cutaways – none of that guff. Sometimes she will allow herself a single tiny thumbnail drawing. The only thing she dictates to her animator is when the work starts and finishes, and they work it out as they go.

This spontaneity is characteristic of the way Ross makes art. When she first graduated from art school, she felt that naturalistic drawing was holding her back. Her epiphany came midway through a life-drawing class, when she realised she just couldn't do it anymore. She got into her car, drove to a friend's house, and didn't draw again for 17 years. It was liberating. 'If you don't draw it out meticulously like a formal academic painting,' she says, 'you are giving yourself the license to take it where it goes.'

*I give you a mountain* goes to some pretty strange places. It is surreal, frenetic, but once you understand Ross, it has a firmly rooted logic. The starting point is inspired by the chambers of British antiquarian Sir Ashton Lever's Holophusikon, an 18th-century private museum of natural history in London's Leicester Square. Lever's collection was particularly famous for including objects from the second and third Australian voyages of James Cook (a friend of Lever's).

The popular image of Lever's museum is remembered in 40 commissioned watercolour paintings by the artist Sarah Stone. She would later also illustrate First Fleet Surgeon General John White's *Journal of a Voyage to New South Wales* 1790 on her way to making some of the most important natural history illustrations of the 18th and 19th centuries.



Stone's Holophusikon paintings, which Ross has now referenced in several videos, lend us their arched portals, cabinets of curiosity and the museum's system of knowledge. But the reference to Stone also brings the role of the artist into purview. What does it mean to take part in, and benefit from, the economies of collectors and museums?

Let us then take a walk through the portals of this video work to see what we can see, together. As we enter, giant ants crawl over eerily pulsating, mossy walls. An out-of-scale anemone husk bobs up and down in water. The scene is inflected with Ross's signature yellow-green fluorescence, which signals commodification but here, too, bioluminescence.

We pass through to the second chamber, where Lever's cabinets of curiosity lie. A luxury handbag sits partially submerged. A monkey plays the harp on a cabinet top before it is smashed to pieces by a fleeing sea eagle which loses its head in the process. An anemone drops from a shelf. Something else weeps green goo.

Things are rapidly falling apart. We move into a clinical space, watched not only by a security camera, but by rows of colonial heads in jars. A wiggled gentleman lectures us: 'Aquatic birds are often seen in large flocks but are universally so shy that it is found difficult to shoot them ...'

Our anxiety grows with each step. Here now is a slowly rotating galaxy trapped in a glass box as if collectors could own the stars. A TV plays. The scene changes and here comes the sell: 'DITCH YOUR MORNING COFFEE!', an ad featuring romping canines barks at us. 'TRY DOG HAPPINESS INSTEAD!' It's a new pharmaceutical for human consumption, a pill to reconnect us with nature.

Out the back of the museum we go, through the looking glass, to a scarred landscape with some pet mountains. One is graffitied with the infinity symbol and 'GREED'. Here are the colonists again, two of them, masters in their domain. But the twist comes late as the mountains dissolve into nothingness, one by one. So too the colonials, melting down to their feet, leaving only their heads in testimony.

*I give you a mountain* asks, is this our legacy? What do we have left, if what we preserve is dictated by our greed? There are some things that cannot be owned, but which we can destroy. It seems like this carnival ride is a rite of passage, a rollercoaster of our own making. *Sic transit gloria mundi*. Thus passes the glory of the world.

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Andrew Yip is an art historian and artist



Joan Ross *I cannot give you a mountain* 2026, hand-coloured pigment print created from *I give you a mountain* 2018, single channel digital animation, Art Gallery of New South Wales, gift of the artist 2019 through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program © Joan Ross

*Super Nature*, Naala Nura building, lower level 2, until February 2027, free