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Essay

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Essay

The Last Cool Skies: An Artist Project by Lyndell Brown and Charles Green

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Abstract

Linking art and ecology can mean two significantly different things. First, it may suggest art that takes the objects of ecology as its theme. This, most frequently, means art that is about ecological health, including climate warming. Second, and less often, it may suggest that art can be imagined from the methodologies of ecology rather than from the approaches of art history. The first two parts of this article are deliberately selective literature reviews of each approach, followed by a third part that traces the three-decade trajectory of an artistic collaboration that embodies both. (In full disclosure, I am one of the two artists.) What might such a self-consciously ecological art practice look like? These sections aim to provide the background and critical context for a response to this question, and that response is the final section of the article, an original artist project: *The Last Cool Skies* (2026) by artists Lyndell Brown and Charles Green. These artist pages are intended to be the principal focus of this article and are presented as research in the form of visual art across this journal's pages, as original research contributions in themselves and not as ancillary or as simply illustrations to this article's text.

Keywords: ecology; memory; contemporary art; war art; Warburg; Smithson; Atlas; artist project; Lyndell Brown and Charles Green

1. Introduction

Linking art and ecology can mean two significantly different things. First, it may suggest art that takes the objects of ecology as its theme. This, most frequently, means art that is about ecological health, including climate warming. Second, and less often, it may suggest that art can be imagined from the methodologies of ecology rather than from the approaches of art history. The first two parts of this article are deliberately selective literature reviews of each approach, followed by a third part that traces the three-decade trajectory of an artistic collaboration that embodies both. (In full disclosure, I am one of the two artists.) What would such a self-consciously ecological art practice look like? The three sections aim to provide the background and critical context for a response to these questions: the final part of the article, which is an original artist project, *The Last Cool Skies* (2026) by artists Lyndell Brown and Charles Green. These artist pages are intended to be the principal focus of this article and are presented as research in the form of visual art across this journal's pages, as original research contributions in themselves and not as ancillary or as simply illustrations to this article's text.



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2. Part 1: Art About Ecology

Ecology is always entangled with political, cultural, and scientific changes, and it is now inextricably linked to changes in ecological health. Contemporary artists and writers have continually delved beneath the turbulent waters of the contemporary condition, seeking fundamental links between traditional artistic subjects (like landscape, still life and portraiture) with traditionally distant but emerging disciplines like ecology, ethology and forensic architecture. When and how did this happen? Since the advent of the widespread awareness of climate warming, artists and filmmakers substantially re-focused from representing environmental challenges such as pollution or forest-clearing to depicting climate warming. Many articles and books list the artists (Fowkes and Fowkes 2022) but did not notice the shift. In 2024, I wrote, with media theorist Sean Cubitt and cinema historian Belinda Smaill, a short history of contemporary art (Green et al. 2024) that imagined climate warming, observing how contemporary artists drew on the methods of documentary media, including news reports. I point the interested reader to that history. We found that an iconography of awe in appreciating nature during the 1960s was gradually but substantially superseded by a new iconography, that of climate warming, by the 2010s. We found that artists began to appropriate and retrofit visual and technological methods that preceding environmentalists had invented. Drawing on the scientific and emotional heritage of environmentalism, more recent artists focused on human and non-human species' displacement, mourning environmental destruction in a grief-driven displacement aesthetics that derived from 19th-century Romanticism, with elegiac visions of nature alongside images of dystopic extinction (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, *Lost Highway*, 2026. Inkjet digital photographic panorama on Hahnemuhle rag paper, 110 × 110 cm (44 × 44 inches). This is the first part and a detail of *The Last Cool Skies* (2026), an eight-panel panorama.

What impact did this ecological art have? Was it successful in communicating climate warming's impact? What were its blind spots? The questions became more pressing with the rise of movements to decolonise the art world. Displaced peoples and refugees questioned both the ethics and the efficacy of imagining how displacement was depicted

by contemporary artists, no matter what the immersive impact or aesthetic quality of the emergent climate warming art that linked the environmental catastrophe to refugee displacement. Many First Nations peoples, and also refugees across the world, were profoundly sceptical (Bell 2007; Langton 2024, p. 24) about the industrial ecology of contemporary art that largely excluded them from modern and contemporary art history and from art museums.

In short, ecological art, like climate change, has been culturally shaped. It is a strand of the period of globalised contemporaneity in art that Terry Smith has eloquently mapped (Smith 2009). And in the 2020s, ecological art has taken a political, activist turn (Demos 2016), though this, too, has its antecedents (Green 2001). The justly celebrated British collective Forensic Architecture's investigative approach—its archaeological reconstructions of corporate and state crimes using internet footage and digital mappings—echoes Helen and Newton Mayer Harrison's environmental projects from the 1970s, which also involved interviews, community consultations and carefully plotted, geographic revisualisations of threatened sites. But as we showed in *Displacement Aesthetics* (Carden-Coyne et al. 2026), artistic activism involves its own limits and myopic blinkers compared with actual, on-the-ground humanitarian or environmental work. And in *Displacement Aesthetics*, we described how such good work has been recently questioned for its ethnocentric presumptions and ideological blind spots by the recipients of aid themselves.

3. Part 2: Art from an Ecological Perspective

The origins of the Western discipline of ecology included 19th-century explorer Alexander von Humboldt's "holistic perception of the universe as one interacting entity" (Walls 2009). This was an influential ecological perspective that was both scientific and cultural, and it has recently attracted much literature reassessing its significance. Humboldt's holistic vision was powerfully echoed in art historian Aby Warburg's famous, early-20th-century invention of iconology (Gombrich 1970; Forster 1999). In that new discipline, Warburg created an ecological vision of the European classical tradition from assembled archives of works of art, culminating in his *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1927–29), a vision that went far beyond and was profoundly different to iconographic image tracking and semiotic tracing. Until the 2000s, only a handful of artists thought about Warburg's *Atlas* even though the concepts of an archival impulse (which included making atlases and timelines, which are ways of ordering an archive) and of an ecological approach to art (by this, I do not mean taking up ecological subject matter in art) were widely taken up by conceptualist artists, as I explained in *The Third Hand* (Green 2001). French installation artists Anne and Patrick Poirier, who first came to prominence in the 1960s, were a powerful exception. After the 2000s, and thanks to a few influential art historians, including Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Georges Didi-Huberman, this changed.

Warburg's ecological approach in his last project was completely different to iconographers' traditional (at least up until the early years of the 21st century) interest in how and where artistic and stylistic influence was transmitted. Instead, Warburg was not just inventing the academic discipline of iconology, ascribing to art a deep ecological character far beyond the Establishment art history of his time, mapping a geography of the visual language of affect and, specifically, of pathos (Forster 1996). He even extended his study into a wider cultural field, including photojournalism and scientific illustration, more or less inventing cultural studies. The places along the routes in his geographies were encoded and then transmitted visual signs, abstracted from the gestures of figures or figure-groups frozen at an instant of maximum intensity and excitement, as opposed to moments of ethos, or contemplation.

For the most typical panels in *Mnemosyne Atlas*, he attached a collection of black and white photographs of Old Master paintings and prints on a large canvas so that the viewer would be cued to try to identify the mutations and adaptations from artist to artist. They were then photographed using large-format glass negatives and contact-printed to produce separate pages for the *Atlas*. As has often been explained, including by me (Green 2008), well over sixty panels comprised his *Atlas*, each panel arranged into surprisingly elegant, asymmetrical compositions, making virtuoso use of repetition, geometric inversion, lateral extension and arching shapes (Green 2008). By collecting images and arranging the resulting archive into an ecological system, Warburg was trying to show the universal memory and the deep, seeding systems underlying the temporal and spatial breadth of European art history. In other words, its ecology.

The uneasy tension in Warburg's indeterminate, unprovable but charismatic ecology was due to the ineffability and apparent arbitrariness of his morphological affinities and recurring gestural motifs. His categorisations according to allegories—the death of Orpheus, for example—were governed, he postulated, by sublimations surviving within image to image in frozen, intense gestures and poses, in a typology of unusual types of outstretched arms and contorted legs. Explanations of these have oscillated between, first, attributing to them something of the syntactical nature of a legible sign language or, second and by contrast, the collective nature of an archetypal psyche, as cinema historian Michaud (2004) eloquently explained in *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*.

Michaud toyed with the former idea, that this atlas of gestures would together constitute a communication system, proposing that Warburg's notoriously cryptic concept of dynamograms, or archetypal gestures, and elements in an archetypal sign language. Against this and in favour of the latter explanation, the charismatic theorist Didi-Huberman (2004, p. 16) insisted that dynamograms are symptoms, that Warburg understood that symptoms are not signs but frozen fossils, by which the great iconologist meant powerfully moving anachronisms surviving from the past.

Didi-Huberman argued that Warburg distinguished between analogical pseudo-morphisms, between conflated mythifications and survivals. In this, he pointed out, Warburg was profoundly indebted to anthropology and, in particular, to the great 19th-century ecological ethnologist Edward Tylor. In any case, the two explanations—sign language or symptom encoded as a dynamogram—are far from incompatible and exist at the same time, much like insignia on a coat of arms, as aesthetician Burns Coleman (2001) explains. The individual artwork in this sense was an indexical, performative trace of the insignia-sign, which is to say the template or the dynamogram.

So, it was anthropology that was the crucial catalyst. In favour of this explanation, we know that Warburg rarely mentioned the psychological theories of archetypes emerging in his time, not Carl Jung nor Sigmund Freud (Gombrich 1970, p. 242). This might seem at first surprising, and there were genuine alternative intellectual routes by which Warburg also arrived at his famous pathos formula; Forster (1999, p. 49) thought that Nietzsche was the key to the *Mnemosyne Atlas* via the German philosopher's theories about the resurrection of Greek tragedy. Rampley (1997) established that link. But for all that, the catalysing experience was beyond Europe. Warburg was indebted to yet another pioneering ethnologist, the famous, modernising anthropologist Franz Boas, who in 1895 recapitulated Swedish archaeologist Gustav Nordenskiöld's 1891 expedition to Arizona and New Mexico. Warburg's understanding of his experiences there, as Farago (2006) demonstrated in her own forensic dissection of Warburg in New Mexico, was oblivious to its own imperial, colonising politics, unable to see that evolutionary perspectives enabled the colonisation and brutalisation of First Nations peoples. Other cultures, including those of East and South Asia or what we now call the Global South, were not included in Warburg's ecology.

And his vision had long been preceded by First Nations examinations of the cosmos, in their ecological expositions of coexistence and the encodings of cosmic force.

This leads us back to contemporary artists' understanding of ecology and necessarily, in turn, to the demand, familiar from the politics around persons with disabilities, that there appear "nothing about us without us." The phrase was popularised by US author [Charlton \(2000\)](#), who wrote a book with the same title, adamant that people with disabilities know what is best for themselves. First Nations Australian peoples have known this for over 200 years since the British Invasion of 1788. In other words, we must remember that a long list of discursive identities all busily co-create narratives of art, including ecological art and climate emergency art, guided by apparently benevolent compasses. The list includes ecologically aware curators, collectors, artists, witnesses, and activist artists. The problem that is immediately apparent from the list, of course, is that it tends to consist of sympathetic commentators and committed observers. The well-intentioned groups that make up this list often passionately identify with the idea of ecology and the natural world, but they are identifying with the struggle against ecological tragedy rather than directly participating in its remedies, and they often do so without the necessary, co-equal participation and permission of their subjects.

These conflicting narratives continue to be at war with each other, but that never stopped contemporary artists, including ourselves, from straying into art history, anthropology and the social sciences, either seeking methodologies or motifs, gathering their research into artist projects, proceeding from the proposition that artistic practice is and has been a communicating tool and research method in imagining the movements of humans embedded in turbulent, historic, ecological change.

From the late 1960s onwards, the art world's journal of record, *Artforum*, published artist project pages, most famously Robert Smithson's so-called essays, which were anthropological travelogues and lists of quasi-scientific ideas. It does Smithson a disservice to say that they posed as these for he was deadly serious, not satirising academia. Readers were taken for careful walks across culture and into suburbia and wastelands. In his instructional, deliberately didactic *The Monuments of Passaic* ([Smithson 1967](#)), six black and white photographs of suburban-edge details became myths or legends: an outfall pipe became a waterfall; a sandpit became a desert. *The Monuments of Passaic* appeared in the December 1967 issue of *Artforum*, titled "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey." Smithson repeated the method in *Hotel Palenque* (1969), a deadpan slide-lecture that he delivered at a university seminar ([Sobieszek 1993](#), p. 31). *Hotel Palenque* was originally delivered in front of art students in Utah the year before his great work, *Spiral Jetty* (1970), was excavated. The lecture was accompanied by a riffing, mumbling narration in which he explained that the decrepit, decaying Mexican hotel where he had rented a room during his Yucatán working vacation was really an archaeological excavation of a lost, ancient temple complex ([Wakefield 1999](#)). His audience was invited to participate in a fiction, in an imaginary travelogue documentary narrated by a detached time-traveller. The obvious slippage between Smithson's impeccably judged, road-movie gags (the Salt Lake City student audience laughed on cue), his History Channel monologue and the sequence of blank, generic slides of a Mexican hotel teetering on the verge of both archaeological ruin and contemporary construction site was disorienting, a bit like being lightly stoned in a graduate seminar, which is to say that this disorientation was not necessarily alienating, nor did it hinder aesthetic appreciation of Smithson's slides. The full force of his spaced-out, incanted narration is fully apparent when *Hotel Palenque* is exhibited. Smithson's audio-taped voice is best heard rather than the words read.

As is so widely known as to not need citations, Smithson was not an environmentalist and fiercely resisted the imputation that he was, and environmentalists registered com-

plaints about his public projects. Land art like Smithson's is not necessarily or even often ecological art. Smithson was, however, fascinated by disciplines that involved ecological methodologies analysing and explaining systems, like anthropology. So *Hotel Palenque* was a knowing emulation and transfiguration of 19th-century anthropologist John Lloyd Stephens's travels in the Yucatán, as Smithson well knew. And *Hotel Palenque* inevitably recalls Warburg's extraordinarily amateurish but life-changing 1895-96 journey to Pueblo reservations in the wake of ethnologist Gustav Nordenskiöld's 1891 expedition to Arizona and New Mexico. Smithson relied on his mumbling but charismatic incantation of the *Hotel Palenque* lecture to convince the Utah audience and, later, us, just as Warburg had earlier dazzled his own lecture audiences with obscure, complex erudition as they tried to futilely decipher from a distance the details of the small photographic reproductions splayed across the *Mnemosyne Atlas* panels.

Now, archives are commonly taken to be storehouses of memory, but photographic archives in particular decay into fantastic narratives under the entropic pressure of cultural processes like reproduction in books or display in lecture presentations, as both of these "artist projects", Smithson's and Warburg's, showed. As Sobieszek (1993, p. 31) observed, Smithson understood this, rejecting the conventional understanding of photography: that the shutter captured and encapsulated a decisive moment in accurate form. Smithson understood that photographs snapshot the failure embodied by entropic process, and this explained his acceptance of discursive fluidity and his predilection for geological and ecological metaphors. A photograph represented a stop along an archival process, in which things were sifted, sorted, reassembled and jumbled before they gradually came to rest in a geological formation. Each photograph or work of art was an arrested, not a decisive, moment in which the circulation and dissipation of meaning towards entropy was suspended. From this point of view, Aby Warburg's *Atlas* was frozen, was a point in entropic collapse. Both Warburg and Smithson separately organised evidence and information according to archival systems, but this also subjected their archival material to such sedimentary pressures (the immense pressures of ecology weighing on mere mute signs, for example, in the actual inadequacy of reproduction of the hazy distance of a lecture theatre) that the results of their research survived as unbounded, porous structures. Smithson used the word "mannerist" to describe this. It is part of their charismatic fascination.

Mnemosyne Atlas was a system that was stressed—a crumbling Tower of Babel—but it was at the same time the product of Warburg's search for syntropy, the inverse of entropy. Here we have finally come to the similarity between Warburg and Smithson: images of a search for syntropy and a portrayal of entropy, both of which can appear at the same time arbitrary but deeply compelling.

4. Part 3: The Art of Lyndell Brown and Charles Green

Lyndell Brown and the author of this article, Charles Green, have made paintings and photographs together as one artist since 1989. This section of the article introduces key works of art from the start of our collaboration, referring to writing that appeared around our works to assist in explaining them. We made assemblages drawn from the archive of our twinned lives over many decades, from the history of art, and from the turbulence of world history. These were organised to be memory palaces, about which there is a long history stretching back to Classical Antiquity, to show the past surviving into the present, to pin history in place.

At the start of our collaboration, in the early 1990s, the French duo Anne and Patrick Poirier, who had come to prominence in the 1960s making dioramas of imaginary archaeological sites, introduced us to three closely linked bodies of thought about memory palaces and archives: Aby Warburg's last great work, *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1927); the Classical

and Medieval practice of memorisation by memory theatres (collections of images used to remember or recollect); and Georges Didi-Huberman lectures during the 1990s at the Collège de France, lectures that we would then attend and which became *L'image survivante* (Didi-Huberman 2002).

Across the decades, we depicted the violence of globalisation upon both the natural and cultural worlds, showing where and when conflict shapes culture but also how and why events and places are linked together by syntropy—the natural tendency of systems to gravitate toward order, complexity, and growth—in tension against the opposite, entropy, the movement from order to disorder over time. We were investigating the interplay of old visual symbols and contemporary images in the stresses caused by globalisation.

In the mid 1990s, we developed large paintings that placed fragmented images from art history within aerial views of contemporary cities, ports and airports—scenes of globalisation—in fastidiously painted trompe-l'oeil (hyper-illusionistic, highly skilled photographic realism), painting the moral and ethical limitations of then-dominant post-modernism (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, *Paysage*, 1994. Oil on linen. 155 × 155 cms (60 × 60 inches). Collection Ballarat Art Gallery. Photograph by Charles Green.

We were developing in art the now widely accepted understanding that White Australia bears responsibility for the violence of colonisation, an understanding that I had explored in my first book, *Peripheral Vision* (1996), the first history of Australian postmodern art. We were searching for visual limits of the proliferating globalisation of Western culture, inventing “occidental” images (Figure 3) from the method of the body tattoo and superimposing images of journeying on top of images taken from the history of oil painting (Figure 4). After an 1997-98 artist residency in New Delhi, we drew on Indian understandings of decolonised modernity to create portraits of figures from modern history in which images migrated across cultures and times. It was a double vision, as commentators on art observed. Back in the 1990s, as Swedish critic Runefelt (1998) wrote in Stockholm’s *Svenska Dagbladet*, our “works with double worlds, double vision”, our refashioned, postcolonial Old Master paintings, were very different to prevailing currents in art making but were, as renowned Australian novelist Miller (2002) also explained, the postcolonial reimagining of an Australian artist’s place in European culture. In the large exhibition *Tales of the Unexpected* (2002), National Gallery of Australia curator Hart (2002) argued, “The notion of specific imagery overlapping and unfolding not only within each work but from one work to another—the concept of the dynamogram that the artists have located in iconologist Aby Warburg’s late writing—suggests the profound continuity of experience implicit in Brown’s and Green’s art”. Conrad (2003), in the culmination of his book, *At Home in Australia*, wrote

of our art as “glimpses of Australia’s unconsciousness and possibly previews of the society that is in the process of becoming.”



Figure 3. Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, *Lux Europae*, 1994. Oil on linen. 155 × 155 cms (60 × 60 inches). Collection Ballarat Art Gallery. Photograph by Charles Green.



Figure 4. Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, *The Nervous System*, 1994. Oil on linen. 155 × 155 cms (60 × 60 inches). Private collection. Photograph by Charles Green.

Our glimpses of what the reimagining that all these authors refer to were drawn from a rich archive of global visual history: of the Apollo 11 moon landing gathered from NASA documentation, of meetings with other artists around the world, of family photographs, of a grandparent gravely injured at the Western Front and an uncle fighting in Palestine in 1940, from repeated walks across remote valleys in the Himalayas and the Grampians, an ancient mountain range in western Victoria, Australia, over many decades, to copies of paintings in European art museums. We reorganised and sifted all of this, adding our Australian family histories that directly touched the edges of the panorama of world history during both World Wars, as would our own War Artist deployment of 2007. We layered, modified and copied found images, drawings and the documentary photographs that we were gathering in fieldwork around the world, which were selected intuitively according to visual charge and historical depth. This emerged as world-making, a concept explored by Terry Smith across a long series of influential books that commenced in 2002 with *What Is Contemporary Art: Contemporary Art, Contemporaneity and Art to Come* (Smith 2002). And in his later publication, *The Contemporary Condition: The Contemporary Composition* (2016), he described our painting, *Sanctuary* (2001), which centres upon an astronaut floating in space (Figure 5), commenting:

A floating world, seen like this, implies the incoherence of pure difference, as if differentiation had ceased, and all that exists are remainders destined to drift into endless entropy. It is as if there were no subjectile, as if composition had never begun, as if these three images, items from an infinite set, have somehow fallen into a temporary conjunction, which we have chanced to see, frozen before us as if they were the result of an accidental screen shot. (Smith 2016, p. 40)



Figure 5. Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, *Sanctuary*, 2002. Oil on linen. 121 × 121 cms (48 × 48 inches). Collection Ballarat Art Gallery. Private collection. Photograph by Charles Green.

After 2001, with the arrival of the War on Terror, we wanted to explore and communicate the significance of the migration of displaced peoples, explaining that events like MV Tampa and Children Overboard were not isolated news events but rather the culmination of histories stretching back to the Enlightenment; hence, with a solo project show at the Art Gallery of New South Wales that later toured to New York, curator French (2005) wrote that we contributed a long perspective (Figure 6) in “small theatres of suspended reality, hallucinations and dreams [that] are not conditions of escape but urgent performative undertakings through which history, society and the self fleetingly come into focus.”



Figure 6. Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, *Island*, 2002. Oil on linen. 155 × 155 cms (60 × 60 inches). Private collection. Photograph by Charles Green.

In 2007, we were deployed as Australia's Official War Artists in 2007 to Afghanistan and Iraq into war zones at the height of the so-called War on Terror (Figure 7). The trajectory of our world-making exploration into war art had been inevitable, as I had explained in *Framing Conflict* (Green 2014). Curiosity leads first into libraries and then into wild places. Our aim was to re-invent Australian war art. We were deployed for 2 months in combat zones and remote military bases and then completed a 33-painting commission and 14 mural-size photographs for the Australian War Memorial.



Figure 7. Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, *View from Chinook, Helmand Province, Afghanistan, 2007*. 111.5 × 151.5 cms (44 × 60 inches). Digital colour photograph, inkjet print on rag paper. Collection Australian War Memorial.

Our aim was to replace the depictions of heroic action that previously dominated Australian war art. Instead, we hypothesised that the bleak objectivity in our apparently neutral, very large photographs of stillness, and paintings of dust and emptiness, would communicate an experience of being in contemporary war, which is a distinct lack of emotion except for short, sharp moments of great alertness. Douglas (2009) explained: “These are images about how the past figures in the present, and how it might be accessed and remembered. They are about the realization and reconstitution of events. As such, they constitute a deeply political project.” The apparent objectivity deliberately constructed a sense of clarity amidst chaotic ruination (Figure 8). The contribution was meant to lead the viewer to understand the vast but masked intersections of force that distinguish contemporary war and the so-called War on Terror.



Figure 8. Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, *Afghan National Army Perimeter Post with Chair, Tarin Kowt, Uruzgan Province, Afghanistan, 2007*. 111.5 × 151.5 cms (44 × 60 inches). Digital colour photograph, inkjet print on rag paper. Collection National Gallery of Victoria.

From the completion of this commission in 2010, the tensions and the ethics of collecting, documenting and representing in live conflict zones, not forgetting Australia with its own layers of wars waged continually at home against Aboriginal peoples by White invaders, added another weighty understanding again. We recorded and interpreted (Green et al. 2018) the aftermath of conflicts in which Australia had been involved as a participant and as a peacekeeper, from Vietnam to Iraq, depicting massacre sites (Figure 9), battlefields and places of grief, loss and sacrifice as they appear now, depicting entropy and ghosts. As critic Rule (2014) commented, “The lasting resonance of this work, which is rich in personal and historical references, is that of the sheer historical, social, spiritual, political and infrastructural complexity and repercussions of conflict on us all.”



Figure 9. Lyndell Brown, Charles Green and Jon Cattapan. *Spook Country (Maliana)*, 2014, oil on linen, 185 × 250 cm (73 × 99 inches). Private collection. Photograph by Charles Green.

Let's explore that shift. Beginning with the European wars of ethnic cleansing in the 1990s and then especially after 11 September 2001, the ethical dimensions of artmaking were widely reassessed. This involved revisiting the concepts of trauma so familiar after World War Two and so agonising after the Holocaust. Visual artists like Gerhard Richter, composers like Stockhausen and writers like Don DeLillo had arguably and covertly envied terrorism's power to defamiliarise and destabilise, just as cinema scholars Lentricchia and McAuliffe (2003) traced the pairing of literary creativity with political terror. The threat of terrorism, as distinct from terror, now once again incited a public and artistic discourse in the West on the nature of evil, pointing to Nazi atrocities during World War Two, reawakening the Enlightenment ambivalences that underlie Western consciousness

of how global inequality produces political terrorism, and probing the chaotic, moral connection between memory and identity.

Artists would try to lead the way out of that impasse, as did video artist Arthur Jafa with his great film-montage, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death* (2016). By the 2010s, cultural studies' horror-centred approach to terror, to media and cinematic images of terror and terrorism, now appeared strikingly literal and dated, lacking the great iconologist Aby Warburg's understanding of charged image survival which had shaken us from an early 1990s moment when Anne and Patrick Poirier had introduced us to the *Mnemosyne Atlas* and to the history of memory theatres.

Reflecting on our epic 2007 experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, we began in the 2010s to carefully retrace our footsteps to the three works we mentioned at the start of this section, to *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1927), to memory theatres, and to *L'image survivante*, with Sen's (2000) profound argument in mind, against the idea that one's identity is a matter of "discovery," not choice. He had turned to Sandel (1998, p. 37), who had outlined several competing conceptions of community as follows: "Community describes not just what they have as fellow citizens but also what they are, not a relationship they choose (as in a voluntary association) but an attachment they discover, not merely an attribute but a constituent of their identity." Sen was fiercely arguing against the view that a person's identity is something detected rather than determined. Relying on shared memory to underpin identity would have been strongly resisted, Sen approvingly wrote, by the great, tolerant Indian emperor Akbar on the ground, that a choice about behaviour, associations, and attitudes is available. Responsibility for what is actually chosen must be taken. Sen concluded that the notion that we discover our identity is epistemologically limiting and has disastrous consequences. He was referring to Partition India, when tolerant people on both sides became genocidal killers, for "the carnage that followed had much to do with the alleged 'discovery' of one's 'True Identity,' unhampered by reasoned humanity."

This would become increasingly true. The archive of art and the turbulence of history churn into a postnational geology of cultures, not into an art history ruled by evolutionary, arboreal imperatives (along with covert nationalist stories). In a blunt reassessment of postcolonial theory's cooption and capture, Araeen (2000) insisted that attention should be paid to artists in peripheral and colonial societies in terms of their contributions to mainstream art and its modernisms, rather than in terms of their identities, perversions and subversions of those terms. He wrote,

The main problem here is not about the inclusion or exclusion of the other artists from the contemporary art scene, but of the prevailing institutional structures of the dominant culture which not only deny the historical achievements of others in modern art but have been able to suppress them. These structures have been involved in predetermining, controlling and containing the artistic practice of those who may be a threat to these structures, and this is now being achieved with the help of some of the ideas of postcolonial cultural theory. (Araeen 2000, p. 9)

In other words, not just tinkering with expanding the canon, but remaking global art history.

These were the years when the word decolonisation almost completely replaced postcolonialism in critical discourse, and in that mix, I was a small part of two groups that tried to define new concepts—postnational art history (McLean and Green 2023) and displacement aesthetics (Carden-Coyne et al. 2026)—in order to put the presumptions of both North Atlantic-dominated art history and humanitarianism in their place.

And so, picturing an ecological vision of both syntropy and entropy, with no single event or place to rest on, we commenced a series of tableaux, first in 2015 with giant collages fixed across studio walls, which we made into paintings and a 17-metre-long

printed panorama, *100 Years of Turbulence* (2018) (Figures 10 and 11). We merged painting, photography and text to photographically “fix” overpainted and overlapping memories on large prints in a type of hand-painted photography. This was our own family histories twinned with world events, pinned in place across a panorama. It was both contemporary world-making and a memory palace. This, in turn, was transformed into the 2026 series *The Last Cool Skies*, hand-painted photographs in eight parts presented across the following pages.



Figure 10. Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, *100 Years of Turbulence Part 1*, 2018, inkjet digital photographic panorama on Hahnemuhle rag paper, 110 × 430 cm (44 × 170 inches). The total dimension of *100 Years of Turbulence* is 110 × 1761 cm (44 × 693 inches).



Figure 11. Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, *100 Years of Turbulence Part 2*, 2018, inkjet digital photographic panorama on Hahnemuhle rag paper, 110 × 406 cm (44 × 160 inches). The total dimension of *100 Years of Turbulence* is 110 × 1761 cm (44 × 693 inches).

5. Part 4: The Last Cool Skies

The next series of prints—*The Last Cool Skies* (Figure 12) were our new, contemporary version of handcoloured photography: a painstakingly precise and intricate digital adaptation of traditional 19th century handcoloured photography, a genre we had always admired and often made into paintings.



Figure 12. Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, *The Last Cool Skies*, 2026, inkjet digital photographic panorama on Hahnemuhle rag paper, 110 × 880 cms (44 × 352 inches). The panorama is made up of 8 parts, each 110 × 110 cms (44 × 44 inches).

The idea went back to our photographs printed on transparent duraclear film of the early 2000s. In 2015 we contributed several of these duraclear prints to *Colour My World*, a beautiful exhibition of handcoloured Australian photographs from the 1970s to now, curated by Shaune Lakin at the National Gallery of Australia in 2015). He wrote:

The hand colouring of images has a long history in photography. During the infancy of the medium in the mid-nineteenth century, the practice of applying paint, dye or other media to a photograph added both lifelike colour to black-and-white pictures and longevity to images that faded quickly. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, hand colouring added economic value and artistic sensibility or corrected photographic mistakes. But, by the middle of the twentieth century, the practice had gone into decline, as photographers sought to maintain and fortify the virtuosity and technical purity of the modernist photographic print. (Lakin 2015)

We worked with a great master printer, Chris Pennings at Fini Frames in Abbotsford, in inner-city Melbourne, who had printed our mural-sized Afghanistan and Iraq War Artist photographs (Figures 7 and 8) back in 2008. We arrived at another method of handcolouring and copying photographs. The print became a panoramic recollection of events unfolding in time composed of still, ceremonial images that we had repeated from work to work (Figures 13 and 14). The effect was exactly as curator Deborah Hart wrote of our earlier transformations of paintings into prints:

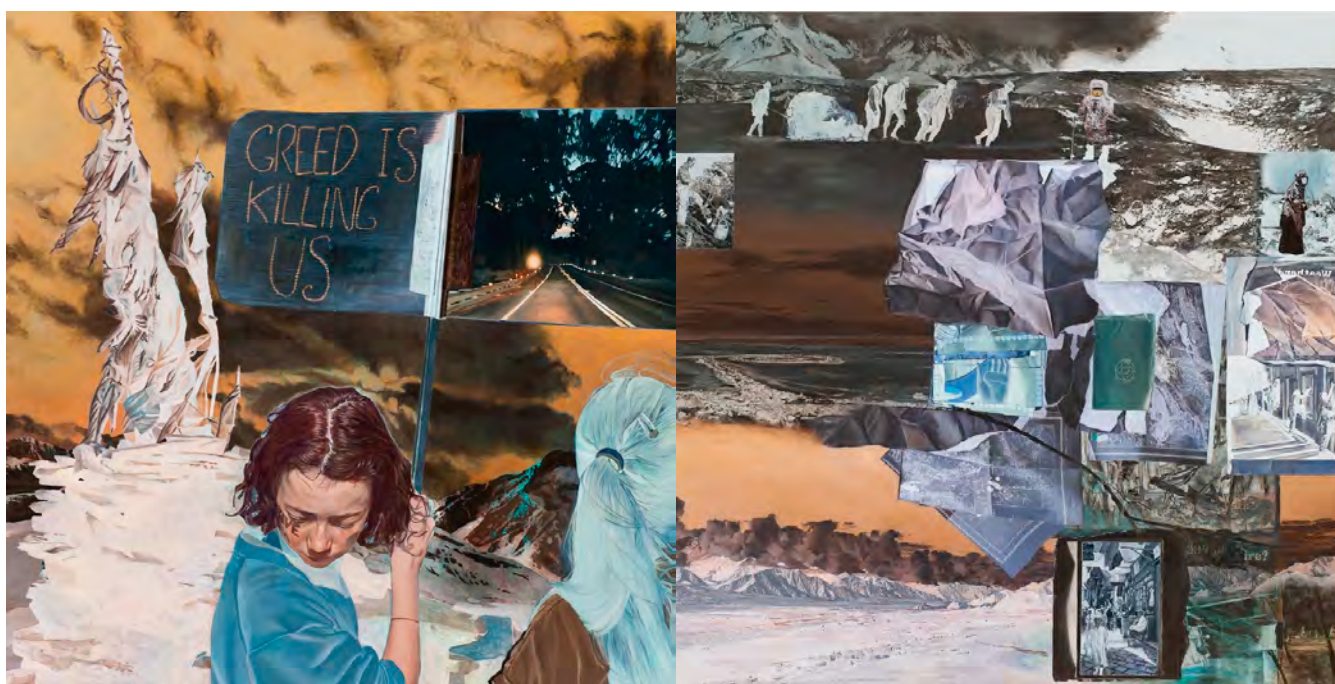


Figure 13. Detail of Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, *The Last Cool Skies*, 2026, inkjet digital photographic panorama on Hahnemuhle rag paper, 110 × 880 cms (44 × 352 inches). The panorama is made up of 8 parts, each 110 × 110 cms (44 × 44 inches).

The initial painting process involves subtle shifts in the interpretation or the archival sources, and this enables the intimacy of a sensual connection . . . The process of photographing the paintings brings an additional unifying effect, accentuating an entrancing, theatrical otherworldliness. (Hart 2002, p. 11)

Converting a painting of a photograph into a new photograph defamiliarized the images, rendering them at once both luminous and ghostly. Converting parts of the prints into negative (Figures 15 and 16) defamiliarized the images even further, an even stranger and more intense effect.



Figure 14. Detail of Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, *The Last Cool Skies*, 2026, inkjet digital photographic panorama on Hahnemuhle rag paper, 110 × 880 cms (44 × 352 inches). The panorama is made up of 8 parts, each 110 × 110 cms (44 × 44 inches).



Figure 15. Detail of Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, *The Last Cool Skies*, 2026, inkjet digital photographic panorama on Hahnemuhle rag paper, 110 × 880 cms (44 × 352 inches). The panorama is made up of 8 parts, each 110 × 110 cms (44 × 44 inches).

The idea for *The Last Cool Skies* came from a memory: a BBC television documentary screened in grainy black and white in the early 1960s that walked the viewer up the Kulu Valley in the Indian Himalayas and a young boy, the author, watched, astounded and alert with the fierce desire to go there. A decade later I was reading science-fiction: Frank

Herbert's *Dune* series—overblown and operatic in its later iterations—in tandem with Carlos Castaneda's great ficto-documentary books that purported to be anthropological (and therefore ecological) memoirs of fieldwork in the mountains of Mexico. Under the latter's influence I was rather foolishly walking in pitch blackness across sandstone bluffs in Australian mountains, in the Grampians and the Flinders Ranges at night, waiting for hours in such places as performance works of Land Art that remained undocumented and which were not to be told to anyone, to remain secret. A few years further on again, in 1984, I walked for most of the year in the Himalayas, hauling two of Castaneda's recently published books across Ladakh in my pack as I ascended and descended high mountain passes, encountering one afternoon a seer who predicted that a year later I would meet Lyndell Brown and that we would work closely together for the rest of our lives. For many of our generation, the veracity of Castaneda's astonishing stories is irrelevant. It was clear that he intended them as a disguise that posited imaginative power and extravagance as true, as navigational cocktails. It is with this method that *The Last Cool Skies* unfolds across the following pages.

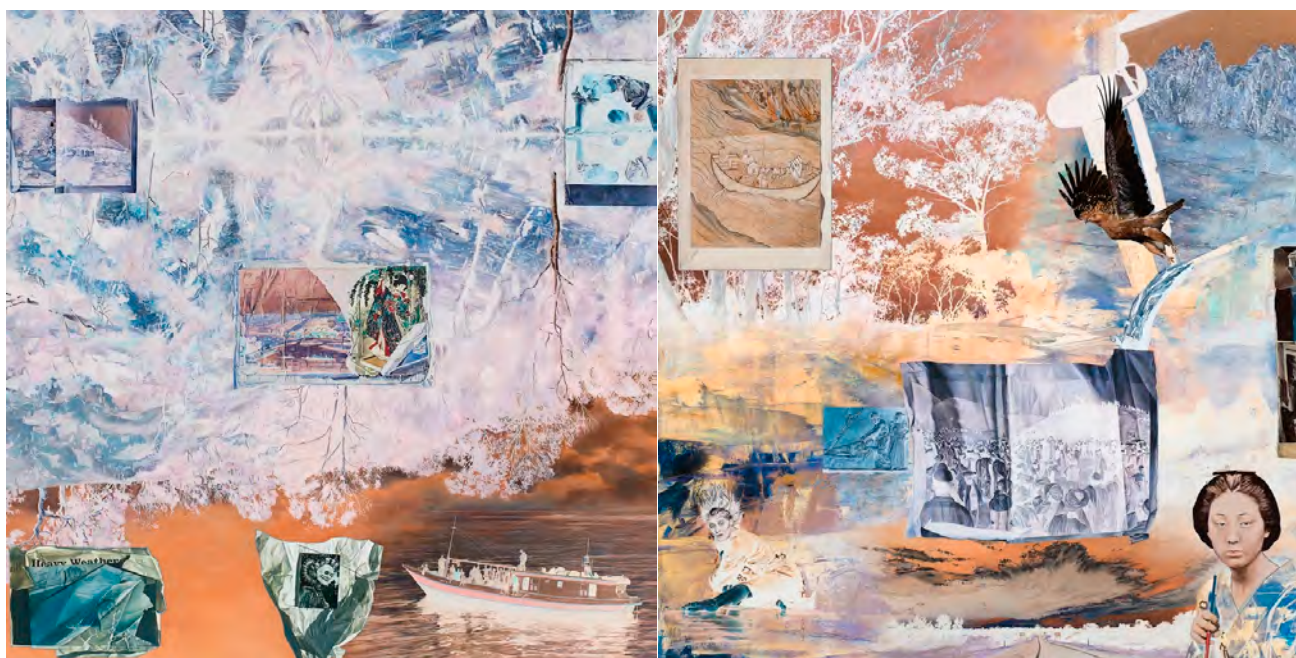


Figure 16. Detail of Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, *The Last Cool Skies*, 2026, inkjet digital photographic panorama on Hahnemuhle rag paper, 110 × 880 cms (44 × 352 inches). The panorama is made up of 8 parts, each 110 × 110 cms (44 × 44 inches).

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