Environmental Art: Activism, Aesthetics and Transformation

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Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signature of Candidate

__________________________
Mr. John Dahlsen

Date: 13 January 2017
Abstract

During a time when damage to the ecology and economic choices by government continue to challenge the ideals of environmentalism, this work reflects on the role of the environmental artist and art practice in the second decade of the 21st century. The body of work submitted in an installation exhibition of sculpture, printmaking and painting was stimulated as a response by the artist to the aesthetics of beauty, the role of art as an activist platform and transformation of both a personal nature and of objects in the creative process.

The exegesis is reflexive and dialogical, drawing on various philosophical and environmental thinkers and artists, to find symbolic and practical connections with ideas generated by this practice-led research. The art protests against the human condition - stuck in the cycle of consumerism, while building an aesthetic appreciation of the artwork produced, contributing to new ways of seeing and responding to the environment. At the same time, this work originates as the result of re-entering academia and undertaking a PhD, and being driven by these events, a personal transformation has manifested itself in a renewed creative output. This artistic output reflects more accurately a deepening personal sense of the possibility of transcendence.

This project provides insight about the practice of making art that is both an aesthetic response to the materials used as well as an activist statement about contemporary society. Through the creation of this body of work and analysis of the process, a nexus is identified, between social comment, beauty and transformation within the creative process and of the individual.
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- Professor Martin Jarvis OAM: Associate Supervisor, Director Confucius Institute Charles Darwin University.
- Professor Wayne Cristaudo: Associate Supervisor, Professor of Politics Charles Darwin University.

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Environmental art is a burgeoning sector in the creative field. There are a number of reasons for escalating interest in environmental art; foremost among them are: (a) Political conditions have seen ecological awareness among citizens of myriad countries around the world grow from the beginning of the twenty-first century, as global ecological challenges intensify and social pressures on governments increase; and (b) The consequent explosion of interest in environmental art among young people, and artists, for whom conservation of nature is urgent and a priority. As a result, this form of art enjoys cross-pollination status in the arts industry. It is a sector that has been growing in popularity among practitioners and investors.

One of the primary questions within this research is how can an environmental artist who is committed to transformative elements in his work and in his life, maintain an aesthetic appreciation and commitment to form while also sharing a didactic activist notion about our ecology. This new body of artwork is reflexive and dialogical. The exegesis draws upon philosophical discourse on aesthetics and beauty and considers environmental philosophers and other prominent thinkers. Analysing the practice of other environmental artists, supports symbolic and practical connections with ideas generated by this research. The creative practice component of this research contains essential elements of reflection on humankind and the ecology, while aiming for artistic subtlety in the process. The practice also seeks to build an aesthetic appreciation of the artwork produced while incorporating political statements about creative ways in which we might individually and collectively view contemporary ecological issues.

The hypothesis of this work is that the environmental artist can have a pivotal role to play in highlighting societal attitudes towards consumerism, raising awareness about
the ecological havoc inflicted by human ignorance and feigned 'forgetfulness' about the consequences of their actions. This capacity to communicate carries with it an obligation for the art to be done at a high standard, that is both aesthetically pleasing and transformational, both provocative and confronting. There must also be a concrete focus on particular conservational problems that need to be solved. The scourge of plastics in our global oceans is an example of environmental vandalism that is a direct result of consumer-focussed modern industrial economies. These economies do not have enough stringent ecologically friendly regulations to adequately stop the proliferation of these plastics in the global oceans and beaches, (though it is true that modernisation creates more waste products and that socialist economies were not very consumer friendly, but their ecological record was horrendous). This has assisted in today’s policy makers conveniently forgetting the end product and what the ramifications might be should this plastic find its way into our waterways. From there, it begins the process of breaking down, to be then consumed by sea life and ultimately ending up in the greater planetary food chain as potentially carcinogenic. This research is reflective about this 'forgetfulness', while at the same time carrying aesthetic sensibilities that entrust the works to carry their individual and conjoined expressions of beauty. In addition, the work expresses through the use of ocean litter the issue of global ecological vandalism caused by the spread of ocean litter plastics.

This enquiry is a blending of the elements in the title of the exegesis: Activism, aesthetics and transformation. These are explored under the banner of environmental art. The body of work is an installation of sculpture, painting and prints which reveal a personal sense of aesthetics, joined with an activist agenda through the use of recycled materials that express a social statement about the ecology. It highlights the current plight with global ocean litter. These together make way for both a transformation of the objects in the process of making the work, from beach-found ocean litter to
integrated artworks. It also has transformed the artist through the time of this creativity and has enabled him to experience deep insights and enjoy the beauty of meditative states through immersion with this art. The significant body of artwork created as the foundation of this project includes sculpture, painting and printmaking. There is a fusion of contemporary use of plastics for sculpture, alongside digital and traditional Japanese woodblock methods, as well as digital prints combined with painting on canvas. There is a synthesis of the digital age with painting and traditional printing methods in these artworks, which became a happy marriage of techniques.

One of the most significant challenges as an artist and researcher in writing about the practice for this research has been to position its place within the environmental art genre, with reflection upon the body of work that has been created for this PhD. It has presented unique challenges largely as a result of this new body of work being an entirely new direction, which has required rigorous research to explain both it and its significance within current practice. Each chapter highlights an aspect of the research and the practical work as it has developed over three and a half years. Through the chapters that follow, the aim is to demonstrate that 'outsiders' are vital to the evolution of the arts generally, and to environmental art specifically, given its political foundations and associations. The exegesis introduces contemporary industry 'outsiders', including the Northern Territory's 'rubbish warrior' Trevor Jenkins, whose work and himself are either loved or loathed by the citizenry of Darwin. It will also offer an overview of the personal explorations of an environmental artist creating a new body of work within academia, and documents this journey, which became renewal in a capricious industry, and hence it offers the experience of a 'transformation' on one level.

Although it is not the intention to go into detail about the history of plastics in this exegesis, it is important to complete the account of the environmental significance of
this work by stating that plastics have been increasing in production over the past fifty years as a petroleum based product, which has been entering the marine environment proportionally to its production. An in-depth description of this can be found by Moore, who states that in the last two decades of the 20th Century, the deposition rate accelerated past the rate of production, and plastics are now one of the most common and persistent pollutants in ocean waters and beaches worldwide (Moore 2008 p.1). In this article he gives a complete history of plastics and the problem they pose to our environment.

Chapter 1: *The Contemporary Environmental Artist* documents influential ecological and other philosophy and how these ideas are iterated into the practical work. It explores how some ideas are coupled with inspiration from the wholistic beliefs of Eastern philosophers. These views are the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings that have had a deep effect and guidance upon this work. To provide insights into development of the current practice, there is a brief reflection on my experience as an Australian environmental artist, creating a new body of work within the umbrella of the academy. Insights are provided into events that helped to guide a career, from being a painter to becoming an environmental artist. In this chapter it is explained how the intention of the work exists on a number of levels, which include the ecological statement with the found objects shown as a direct result of ecological degradation in the form of ocean litter. The work is also presented in a mantle of aesthetics, which has its own effect of attracting the viewer into the artistic *aesthetic* dialogue, with the overall intention to express the need for a balance in communication.

Chapter 2: *Environmental Art Practice and Practitioners (Activism)* outlines definitions of environmental art and various ecological art practices. It summarises contributions of various artists and provides definitions of the genre by both artists and academics.
The artists selected for inclusion in this exegesis are mostly environmental artists who have, and are, influencing various contemporary ecological art activism and politics around the world, beginning with the land art movement. Thus there is an acknowledgement of the broad shoulders upon which I stand as an art practitioner who has been fortunate to enjoy sustained periods of professional activity within the arts industry. A selection of these artists examined include Andy Goldsworthy, Janet Lawrence, Fiona Hall, Mike Brown, Michael Heizer, Arman, Tony Cragg, Alan Sonfist, Robert Smithson, James Turrell, Rosalie Gascoigne, Lynda Benglis and Roxy Payne. Chapter Two also explores some connections between ecological sustainability and sustainable art practices, and summarises various interviews with contemporary artists completed during the PhD candidature. These interviews provide valuable insight into the investigations and research.

Chapter 3: *Envisioning the Art (Aesthetics)* moves to highlight the art practice and documents key elements of the new series, which include the themes and modalities. The chapter investigates the work practices, which were comprised of assemblage, sculpture, painting, printmaking and installation. It explains why particular art forms were selected, their relevance personally and as public statements. The challenges and surprises inherent in their creation are explored as a means to show the confluence of environmental art and aesthetic questions. The chapter highlights the relevance of core elements of the art practice in the works presented for examination: geometric universal shapes, specific mixed media, and attention to aesthetics and beauty.

Chapter 4: *Creating the Art (Transformation)* delivers insight into the making of the body of work that explores the ideas of personal and artistic change that has occurred through the creative process. It forms the creative component as the foundation of the exegesis. This chapter examines the practical realities of producing an ambitious body
of work that hopes to have not only a strong transformative element, but also a cutting edge high quality standard. It introduces the sculptural work and details the experiences in Japan whilst working with a master woodblock printer to create a series of woodblock/digital fusion prints, which then led to the creation of the new paintings. It was during this time that through having been especially affected by the Japanese Mystic Basho's poetry, a springboard towards a more refined sense of aesthetics was established. In Japan, a demanding methodology developed in the work that was to later continue into the paintings and this provided a prospect of finding a further unexpected level of depth in the work, through including the visual technique of glowing edges to central shapes. This was to heighten the experience for the artist, and potentially for the viewer, of a meditative state whilst engaging with the work.

Conclusion: The conclusion outlines what was created with this body of work and also proposes solutions to outstanding and until now academically unexplored questions about the importance of environmental activist artists to Australian society. It raises further questions vital to artists and the arts industry; and proposes timely themes for further research in this area. The final part of the exegesis reinforces the deeper insight into tensions between making art that is not only an aesthetic statement showing that there is beauty in wasted objects when presented creatively as artworks, but also an activist statement about contemporary society. In essence, the new body of work is dedicated to the cycle of return on a personal and environmental level. The installation that forms the practice-based component of this research has been created as a statement about a response to, and a reflection of, personal experiences and the wish to use art as a vehicle for reflection about the environment.
Chapter 1

The Contemporary Environmental Artist

When one hears the cry of birds and animals, one will have compassion, because the Jen (humanity and ultimately 'love') is one with the birds and animals. If one says that animals have senses, then one will have compassion when one sees the grasses and the trees faded and broken, because the Jen is one with the grasses and the animals. If you say that grasses and trees are animated beings, then one will regret when one sees tile-stones collapse: this is because the Jen is one with tile stones. (Wang Yang-Ming (1472-1578) cited in Palmer 2001, p. 57).

1.1 Introduction

Environmental art is increasing in popularity as an art form. This is due to a range of factors including the fact that artists are responding to climate change and the world’s citizenry are collectively recognising that it is okay to express concern for the state of the ecology. The contemporary environmental artist is influenced by a mixture of philosophical, political and practical considerations in defining their work and their role as a creative being, aiming to stay true to what they believe and make a living from what they do.

This chapter explores the philosophical and political influences on this particular contemporary artist, in the hope it will inform the reader about this artist's practice as the main focus of the research. By considering the background influences linked to a personal art history, the chapter provides an orientation to aesthetics and the aims of
the current work, drawing on a discussion of the tensions between meditative aspects and didacticism about environmental issues. Providing this background will assist in positioning a personal vision of activism, aesthetics and the artist’s transformative experiences before explaining the methodology used in the creation of the work and the writing of this document.

1.2 Theoretical underpinnings: Environmental and wholistic philosophy and the artist

The global shift in attitude in the West, to issues like conservation of the ecology, has been aided by a deepening understanding of the wholistic viewpoints of Eastern philosophers. This is exemplified in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, by Wang Yang-Ming (1472-1578) cited in Palmer 2001, p. 57. Such efforts to link to the natural world as seen in selected Western philosophers, thinkers, poets and enlightened mystics have also become progressively popular. The contemporary Canadian academic David Suzuki exemplifies how eastern beliefs are applied in conservation activities, his work is instrumental in building acceptance of Western/Eastern nexus in thinking in conservation. He states: ‘Each of us is quite literally created by air, water, soil and sunlight, and what cleanses and renews these fundamental elements of life is the web of living things on the planet’ (Suzuki 2008, p. 9). The ideal of ‘compassion for all things’ is increasingly finding an audience in global contemporary consciousness, strengthened through the widespread influence of contemporary culture as seen in both popular and social media (Chalaby 2005). Wholistic thought and compassion are central to my work.

An overview of the philosophical perspectives explored includes the environmental philosophy of Abram (1997), Seaton (2013) and Plumwood (2002), which have been chosen for this exegesis to exist alongside Heidegger (1977) and Kant (2003) and their
analysis of aesthetics and beauty. They are equally important in my premise that art can communicate ecological action while simultaneously be an aesthetic inspiration for those viewing it. It is here that I wish to clarify why someone witnessing the beauty of what I have done with the objects in these artworks, may have a second step with the work, by having inspiration that they can also dispose of waste in another way that is creative. I have aimed to reveal that there is beauty in wasted objects, which seems to take the viewer to this next step, which may not be necessary, but nonetheless occurs due to the use of the plastic materials. The ultimate intention is take the viewer into a third phase, which, through the use of the geometric shapes that have been introduced into the art helps to evoke in the viewer a transcendent state. In doing so, this may elevate the experience beyond being an aesthetic one, or a didactic lesson about the need to take care of the environment.

An aesthetic value exists in this work, which is based on being able to differentiate between certain objects chosen for the artworks. Martin Heidegger stated: The distinction of matter and form is the conceptual schema which is used, in the greatest variety of ways quite generally for all art theory and aesthetics’ (Heidegger 1977, p. 153). Although Heidegger then proceeded to reveal inadequacies in what he described as the incontestable fact in the above quote, I describe the materials used in my work, the discarded plastics as my ‘matter and form’. Potentially ugly, they are transformed under the artist’s eye into constructions of beauty and even power. By altering this rubbish through an artistic alchemical process in the studio into art and thereby giving it a new aesthetic, apart from extending the brain’s perceptual capabilities, it also is a way of distinguishing and differentiating the matter and form of these objects. Without this distinction the alchemy would not exist. Aesthetics refers to form the way that things appear in the arrangement of lines and colours according to Kant (2003) and modernist traditions.
This work is essentially making things visible to the viewer that were possibly invisible prior to them seeing the work, including the issue of global plastic waste paired with a sense of aesthetics. This has been referred to by Semir (2001), who proposed ‘Visual art contributes to our understanding of the visual brain because it explores and reveals the brain’s perceptual capabilities. As Paul Klee wrote, “Art does not reproduce the visible; it makes things visible.” (Semir 2001, pp. 51, 2).

The hypothesis is that this installation has such a potential to reach people with its impact of deeper layers of meaning. I suggest that any superficial compromises in the choice of some of the materials in the making of the work are more of a lingering presence in the background, not creating an overriding disturbance to the positive messaging that the work otherwise conveys. The crossover and combination of ethics and aesthetics has been the subject of study for Sartwell (2010), who believed that it is very complex to look at the aesthetic and ethical relationship to spheres of value in Kant’s Critique of Judgment, and that in some ways, the detachment of these spheres of value and aesthetics began with that work. However, it is much more directly connected in his earlier work: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime (Sartwell 2010, pp. 63, 5).

Expanding on this quality of aesthetics being intricately connected with ethical and moral principles, Kant (2003) included the embodiment of what could be termed meditation and transcendence. Kant stated that true virtue relies on principles that need to remain general to be all the more sublime. These are not principles about anything speculative, but those that have consciousness of compassion and the beauty and dignity of human kind. ‘Only when one subordinates his own inclination to one so expanded can our charitable impulses be used proportionately and bring about the noble bearing that is the beauty of virtue’ (Kant 2003, p. 60). The relevance of this
point is that I want my work to have ethical as well as aesthetic appeal and, as such, I find that as an artist this balance is a challenge.

Turning from beauty and aesthetics to consider practical environmental dilemmas related to the human condition, phenomenological thinkers such as Abram (1997), address the change in attitude and consciousness towards the ecology amongst human beings, especially in Western countries, as a state of being and relationship to place. There is a focus on this aspect because this is the audience to whom this work is directed. Abram suggested that, rather than softening our stance on ecological issues, because of localised climate-change burnout causing diminishing responses to ecologically stimulating discourses, the conditions we confront as a race are, in fact, engaging and dramatic and require our attention:

For the largest part of our species’ existence, humans have negotiated relationships with every aspect of the sensuous surroundings. Today we participate almost exclusively with other humans and with our own human made technologies. It is a precarious situation, given our age-old reciprocity with the many-voiced landscape. We still need that which is other than ourselves and our own creations (Abram 1997, p. ix).

Elements of the current work in relation to this quote, can be seen with the immersion in the space within the image - as in nature - with the focus on technology as a landscape. In addition, Palmer (2001) reinforced the philosophical standpoint with her enquiry into the key thinkers on the environment as she detailed the evolution of conscious environmental philosophy over the centuries.

Australian environmental philosopher, Val Plumwood (2002) proposes that rationality is essentially an economic egoistic force whereby self-interest designates humans to be
the most rational form of life, dominating all, and as such they are the arbiters of all non-human life forms: 'Prudential-egoist virtues and goals are sharply opposed to 'ethical' altruist ones and only the former conform to these concepts and ideals of rationality' (Plumwood 2002, p. 33). In arguing this, Plumwood advocated the stark difference between egoistic and altruistic approaches to life. She believed rationalist thought borne out of egoistic goals can be seen as being responsible for much of the ecological degradation to ecosystems the planet is now experiencing on a global level. There is a lot of degradation, which may be caused by egoistic goals or perhaps for example, may also be caused, by insufficient attention, or inadequate legislation. In contrast to Plumwood and Abram, Seaton (2013) argued that people are so busy looking at pretty aesthetic things that they are essentially being distracted by forgetting to look at the bigger picture and what's really happening with the ecology. He stated:

> While environmental philosophers have suggested that an aesthetic experience of nature can foster an ethical reciprocity with non-human life (Leopold 2000), writers such as William Cronon (1996: 85) and Scott Hess (2010: 85) also argue that the models of Romantic imaginative escapism and autonomous individualism that underscore such experiences can lead us to neglect the ecological impact of our own everyday lives (Seaton 2013, p. 75).

The creation of this new work and the research associated with it helps me to understand what has brought humanity to the point of living with such contradictions. There is a current trend of some contemporary environmental philosophers including Plumwood (2002), who propose that the present ecological crisis is a result of economic rationalism. She asserted: 'We are dealing here with a set of systematic, self-reinforcing distortions to which the distortions of economic rationality are central, especially at present, but which are not simply reducible to a single factor or 'driver', and combine and
collaborate to produce the ecological crisis (Plumwood 2002, p. 45).

The problem is however more deeply rooted. I refer to the statement by Foltz (1985) who mentioned the philosophy of Heidegger and his assessment of the state of the human condition in regards the environment with the following:

It is Heidegger's merit to have shown that the problem is far deeper (involving the very texture of Western thinking) and more crucial (concerning not only the survival of the earth but what it is to be if it does survive), its resolution more radical (requiring nothing less than an "overcoming of metaphysics"), yet much nearer and simpler (resting upon our relation to things and our learning to dwell) than has so far been suspected (Foltz 1985, p. 23).

This depth of philosophical analysis by Heidegger (1967), is further developed in his book, What is a Thing, with the following statement: 'The question concerning our basic relation to nature, our knowledge of nature as such, our domination of nature, is not a question of natural science but stands in question itself in the question of how we are still addressed by what is as such and as a whole' (Heidegger 1967, p. 39).

Heidegger's philosophy and deep reasoning that may help to explain what is behind our current ecological predicament included his notion on the danger of calculative thinking. This philosophy crossed scientific, economic and technological reasoning. Heidegger (1998) stated: 'Calculative thinking compels itself into a compulsion to master everything on the basis of the consequential correctness of its procedure' (Heidegger 1998, p. 235).

This philosophy is discussed further by Horrocks (2005) who argues:

For Heidegger, what he calls the calculative relationship to the world is goal
directed; it has a specific intention in mind; it wants definite results; and it serves a specific purpose in that it selects for attention only those ‘features’ of experience which are relevant to ‘its’ ends, and thus it does not gain a full sense of the experience under scrutiny. He argues: “Calculation refuses to let anything appear except what is countable” (Horrocks 2005, p. 6).

Herein lies the problem that environmental artists may face in communicating their vision of the world. Frequently environmentalists are seen as romantics, and artists are known as romantics, but they also seek to act in a positive way in the world. To create a picture of these apparent inconsistencies is a significant part of the new work. For example, through the use of plastic ocean litter in the work, a degradation of the ecology is exposed as a secondary repercussion of calculative thinking, which has in turn led to the current phenomenon of widespread consumerism.

In the creative expression where this new work has the opportunity of highlighting some of the injustice to the natural world, alluded to by environmental philosophers (Palmer 2001), there is an inclusion of a threefold approach in its execution. Firstly, actual objects are shown as a direct result of ecological degradation in the form of ocean litter as an activist statement. Secondly, it is also presented in a cloak of aesthetics, which attempt to hook the viewer into the artistic aesthetic dialogue, with the overall intention to express the need for a balance in communication. Finally, by presenting these apparent dualities, it is possible to explore a further opportunity that the work offers. This aim is to coax the viewer into a state of reflection, leading them back to questioning their own stance in environmental, aesthetic and transformative perspectives. The issues about the over-proliferation of plastic production and the problem of how a significant amount of it ends up in the ocean as ‘Ocean Litter’, is a reflection of the way people think about the environment or ignore their impact on it. A global problem was considered in the journal *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* by Murray Gregory (2009), as he
argued that for the past fifty years or so there has been an increasing pollution of our oceans by marine debris in the form of non-biodegradable plastics, whose source is varied as is the degree of pollution and consequence to our collective ecosystems. With this invisible and visible effect, an environmental art project needs to aim to communicate for action. Action in the form of creating activist art is a way to highlight ecological issues and is where this work takes root alongside the expressed aesthetics of why someone witnessing the beauty of what I have done with the objects should think they should dispose of waste in another way, and here, hopefully, the work finds its voice. The environmental philosophers quoted highlight some essential philosophical questions that reinforce this practice, with the artwork consistently containing in its layers intrinsic protests about neo liberal policies made by governments in Australia and around the world that allow such degradation to occur. While these policies may appear political, they are grounded in an approach to the world that contains an inherent obliviousness about the flow-on effects of economic externalities. This is compounded to foster a denial about the impact that “going about our daily lives” has on our ecosystems. The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) was a time when underpinning fears for economic survival were used to justify returning to the status quo on environmental issues in most countries, the US being an example where the government bailed out the banks leaving a system in place that was not adequately transformed, with some Scandinavian areas being an exception (Martin 2012).

The unfortunate, convenient, contemporary solution of forgetfulness to the perilous state of global ecological problems is exacerbated by ‘an economy of forgetting’, brought about largely by political decision-making policies. However, it is partly through inattentiveness, that it took time for people to protest on mass against the ecological issues such as the expanding ‘Garbage Patch’ in the Pacific Ocean building up and therefore needing more time to respond to it. Plus, the cost involved of actually
physically doing something about it, and then the fight over who or which government pays the cost. Essentially the reasons behind it are complex, and the solutions to it are complex. Neo-liberalism has passed itself off as 'rational' and creating a Modernity that is 'apparently impersonal' as it works through "bureaucratic mechanisms and institutions expressive of the general machinery of hegemonic processes that 'appear as impartial and thus 'rational'" (Plumwood 2002, p. 32).

The current work has the intention of bringing the viewer in beyond the 'rational' through aesthetic attraction. By using recognisable forms, such as three simple geometric shapes, alongside the equally familiar plastic objects, which are shown as assemblage images, the incongruity acts as a distortion in itself while at the same time has the desired effect of securing the viewers' attention. This brings us to another aspect of how the artist communicates about the world with this work, emphasizing concurrently the imperative for humans as a species to acknowledge how we must turn our attention to the plight of the planet.

1.3 Meditation or didacticism?

Whatever is to be made to fall first must be raised.

If you want to become whole, let yourself become broken.

If you want to become straight, let yourself become twisted.

If you want to become full, let yourself become empty

(LaoTzu 6th century BC. Cited in Tao Te Ching 1997).

This LaoTzu (6th century BC) quote poetically describes what has constituted my journey as an artist and as a person. These occurrences have helped to pave the way for an understanding of Lao-tzu’s reference to emptiness in the last line of the above quote. The emptiness he talked of is not meant in a negative manner or in a way that implies
loss, but is derived from falling into a ‘non-chattering’ mind or a state of emptiness and through this becoming full with a state of presence. His words are pointing towards meditation, and this is where the art produced in this research pursues an aspect of its overall focus and intent.

The activism and the aesthetics are the two elements that point towards this third one: no-mind and emptiness, or in other words, meditation. It is only through being full of so many ideas and experiences, and then moving through them, that there has been the possibility of falling into the emptiness that was behind it all. This has led to the point where expression of a particular kind of emptiness is possible in the work, which in turn ironically creates a fullness of presence. Philosophers such as Carl Jung can support the introduction of the geometrical shapes into the work in relation to symbology and as a balance to the more didactic elements in the work, which seek to share an ecological message. In analysing the symbology of the square and its relationship to the earth Jung drew on the following:

The square (and often the rectangle) is a symbol of earthbound matter, of the body and reality. The square or groups of rectangles and squares have appeared in modern art just as often as circles. The frequency with which the square and circle appear must not be overlooked. There seems to be an uninterrupted psychic urge to bring into consciousness the basic factors of life that they symbolize (Jung 1964, p. 249).

A further reference by Jung to the significance of the triangular shape in Eastern traditions is also relevant, as it has also been a direct influence on the current work through the symbolism described here:

A great many of the Eastern meditation figures are purely geometrical in design; these are called Yantras. Aside from the circle, a very common Yantra motif is formed by two interpenetrating triangles, one point
upward, and the other point downward. Traditionally this shape symbolises the union of Shiva and Shakti, the male and female divinities. In terms of psychological symbolism, it expresses the union of opposites - the union of the personal, temporal world of the ego with the non-personal, timeless world of the non-ego. Ultimately this is the union of the soul with God (Jung 1964, p. 240).

Jung offered a psychological understanding of this representation that is important to comprehend in terms of the use of these recurring images in this current series. Although Carl Jung is one among many who have described their insights pertaining to these shapes, it is significant to mention his reference to meditation and the timeless world of non-ego, which also links to Lao-tzu’s evocation of the fullness (God) coming directly from emptiness; again pointing to meditation as part of this artistic practice.

There is another side to this meditative space within art. It is important to discuss some of the problems with didactic expression of ecological issues, not only in a general sense, but also more specifically in art. Didactic art can be criticized for being a ‘turn off’ or authoritarian and political. As Ghosh (2013) noted, the links to Soviet propaganda created a problem with promoting a particular worldview in the past. Similarly, Sturken (2009) questioned the use of didactic images in promoting political views in the USA. Nevertheless, this aspect is inherent in the new work produced for this research. In this case it has been constantly and finely balanced to draw attention to the creation of beauty, which highlights potential subtlety in the message depicted, as is the aim in this practice. This is not an apologetic gesture for the didacticism or agit-prop in the work; rather, the expression of contemporary social and ecological issues in the art that is an important articulation of myself as the creator. So the work is not apologetic
in using agit-prop as an underlining theme since this is in itself a political statement. Didacticism seeks to be tempered by the aesthetic outcomes.

Sartwell (2010) made the observation:

The question of whether all art is political picks out a central dilemma in political aesthetics. I think the question is too general as it stands: certainly there is no style that may not reveal political implications, and certainly all art reflects the experience and social resources of its maker, which are partly fixed by political factors. Modes of artistic production, such as handcraft or industrial manufacturing, have political as well as aesthetic entailments (Sartwell 2010, p. 63).

This statement has the potential to imply that all art is political, unfortunately conflating the social and the political, which are different. It does include my work, not only through the didactic use of rubbish as the prime material and medium of expression, but also further through it being a reflection of my own social resources having been influenced by things political. Sartwell (2010) contended:

The very withdrawal of art from political or economic power is itself a political decision, one that could be made only under a certain specific set of social circumstances, institutions, economy, and political practices. Refusal to participate politically, or to use one’s art politically, or to allow one’s art to be used politically, is a political decision. So the question of whether “all art is political” is an ambiguous one (Sartwell 2010, p 64).

Didactic art at its worst can have the effect of alienating itself entirely. People often turn off when they are reminded how bad the world is. It may be argued that environmental philosophers are looking at an unreachable ideal, however they have
helped to define what some of the underlying issues are, and to articulate who and what is responsible for bringing humanity to the ecological state that it finds itself in now. This clarity of definition in turn equips and empowers us to take action from a place of being informed. Likewise, it may also be contended that environmental artists are merely presenting an aesthetic placebo to core ecological issues, which essentially can be argued as having nothing to do with art. These philosophical and political issues impact on my personal practice as an environmental artist.

1.4 Background: Influences on contemporary environmental artist

By introducing myself as an artist I hope to explain the path that has developed over the years, which now has my work positioned to direct a clear multi-layered message. The philosophical and political self cannot be separated from life experiences and the actions related to that. As an artist I am able to use this information, which is based on researched knowledge through the art. This is further highlighted by the artistic practice offering the value of a meditative aesthetic that has also developed over time and has become heightened during the course of this research.

For eighteen years I have made a primary living as an artist in the field of environmental art after being a fine arts painter trained at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA), graduating 1979 who then specialised for over fifteen years in various modalities, including figuration and abstraction. The career as an environmental artist was launched in the mid 1990s with an epiphany. Whilst combing various beaches along the southern Australian coastline collecting driftwood with the idea of making furniture, as done previously whilst a student at the VCA, the unexpected occurred. During these excursions to remote beaches, and after stumbling again and again upon vast mounds of plastic debris washed up on the shoreline, I developed a compulsion to collect the rubbish, for
nothing more than vaguely altruistic reasons: to rid the beach of this human blight. Large garbage bags were filled with rubbish, which were to be dumped at the local recycling depot. The more that was collected, however, the more intriguing it became in an artistic sense because of the myriad forms: shapes and colours and textures, fusions of light and shadow, the primary colours leaping bold from the mess, leaving more muted hues shining softly in the darkness beneath them. The ugliness of the litter was transformed in the artist's mind. There was rope and string lost overboard from ships at sea, Styrofoam polished by the rocks and blanched by the sun, plastic drinking bottles swept to shore by the ocean currents, hundreds of single thongs in all the colours of our world and, of course, chipped plastics, rounded by the grinding sand and unrecognisable as the consumer items they were originally.

There was a thin veil of intentional altruism in the original activity of collecting plastics, no real outwardly noble motive; it was all mostly accidental. To start with, there was no horror at observing the rubbish, rather a view was held that its presence on the beaches was a misguided social contemporary phenomenon. An attraction to working with these objects simply began with the colours and textures of the plastics along with the weathering of the driftwood that resulted in so much enjoyment through gathering it all from the beach. There was no overtly direct intention of cleaning our ecology, just a spontaneous need to clear the shoreline as the precious wood and plastics were found. This rapidly proceeded to initiate a new career as the found objects were worked with in the studio and before long the work became ‘Environmental Art’. The artist’s eye initially had become aware of the beauty of these plastics as they were seen on the beaches, and so then began the transformation of waste into art. From there, an ensuing interest in the protection of the ecology and environmental philosophy was extended. This initial lack of judgment about the phenomenon may help to explain how humankind arrived at the point in time where ocean litter began to wash up on beaches
globally and ‘garbage patches’ form in our collective oceans. As an artist the necessity to formulate a methodology in expression that addressed these issues has continued to be refined and expanded in this current research.

Working with found plastics, creating works containing activist statements about the issue of ocean litter whilst including a strong sense of aesthetics and beauty was not necessarily an easy path to embark upon. In fact it was quite the opposite. Initially a professional difficulty was experienced in this niche market, which at the time was only beginning to become recognised in the mainstream art world as an area of art practice; and was in some cases marginalised, sidelined and in certain instances even ridiculed or ignored. Despite the proliferation of work in this genre in the decades leading up to my own transformation as an artist - from being a painter to working with found objects, almost all others’ work was foreign to me in the 1990s, when I was first beginning to experiment with found objects, which included plastics and driftwood.

1.5 Methodology of the practice and research

The methodology used in this work evolved from seeking a balance between aesthetics that is presented in the art, and activism to communicate the ideas around which the art is based. Repetition is intrinsic in the images and themes and can be seen in the following: the description of collecting as a repetitive process, meditation being repetitive, as well as the printmaking process. Making statements within the work about ecological issues requires repetition in various forms as well; with this core dual component - As we consume we inevitably have an excess of undesirable material: rubbish - what this work does is deploy it benignly and aesthetically. By taking the unwanted and the ugly and revealing it to be beautiful and even ‘useful’ in a non-utilitarian way. This has been integrated throughout the work.
Furthermore, in terms of the ‘big picture’ methodology, the actual procedure of how to balance aesthetic, didactic and meditative/transformative processes was, slowly, worked through the practice. This is intrinsic to the work, which eventually gave it a unique individual voice as artworks. The need to balance the modes of expression acted as a constant reminder to keep the practice refined, and this always kept the whole procedure existing on an edge, due to what these contrasting essential components contained as fundamental elements of expression; all of which appear to be outwardly conflicting - activism, aesthetics and transformation.

During the development of the studio-based work, the transformative element emerged as an overall counterbalance in the art, once I found a suitable simultaneous marriage and contrast of the aesthetic and activist qualities. Through this, the real essence of the work became exposed, the third element, which I call meditative. This follows the initial ecological agit-prop layer, moving past the aesthetic hook, which attracts the viewer into the core of the intended expression, which is an invitation to a potentially meditative space of inner reflection upon being in the presence of the work. It is important to note here that I discovered through the process of this particular methodology, that without balancing the first two aspects, the third most intrinsic element would not have been possible.

In regards to other means of methodology undertaken for this exegesis project, I reference visual art practice led research, which had been carried out using qualitative practice research (Barret & Bolt 2010; Sullivan 2010). This approach was coupled with reflection based on feedback from progressive viewing as I invited people into the studio to comment on the work and interviewed other artists to have direct information about how others considered some of the issues I was dealing with in environmental art.
Interaction through conference presentations during the course of the research was also productive. These include five domestic and four international presentations, which resulted in peer reviewed journal papers; (Dahlsen 2015a, 2015b) and a peer reviewed book chapter being accepted for publication (Dahlsen 2016). Two art-related books were also published during the course of this research (Dahlsen 2013, 2014).

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter introduced Heidegger (1998) and some of his thoughts on the deeper reasoning behind our current ecological predicament and this also includes his philosophy on the danger of calculative thinking, which crosses scientific, economic and technological reasoning. It also introduced environmental philosophers work such as Plumwood (2002), Abram (1997) and Seaton (2013), with analysis of perspectives regarding the present global ecology and how they believe our policy makers have essentially mismanaged conservation issues.

My path travelled in the art world was briefly discussed. It also described a personal meditative philosophy, which has been introduced into the art and the tensions within the work that can be considered didactic. The chapter highlighted the philosophical and practical aims of this work that involve simultaneously making aesthetic and activist statements about the plastic ‘Ocean Litter’ that is a global phenomenon. The personal reflection introduced the reader to the artist within the environmental artist genre before providing a brief overview of the methodology applied in finalising this work.

Chapter 2 gives a clear overview of this practice and practitioners and provides a greater insight into where this current work is situated.
Chapter 2

Environmental Art Practice and Practitioners (Activism)

What I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the World (Thoreau 1817-1862, p. 112 (reprinted in 1980)).

2.1 Introduction

Environmental art is a broad term that includes most art forms and myriad artistic expressions. It has originated from an equally diverse range of influences. Environmentalists such as Thoreau, with his expressions of passion for the preservation of the ecosystem, have been key in the movement towards an ethos of contemporary artists wishing to do the same through their art (Palmer 2001, p. 106). His words and the expressions of others like him have helped to ignite others, including artists, in a call to action. This art form lends itself to a cross-section of definitions as a genre, by both artists in the field of environmental art and by academics. The genre organically invites exploration of a foundation concept: sustainability. It explores such elements as the connections between ecological sustainability and sustainable art or art practices. It can also question art as a sustainable profession. For the purpose of this chapter, this art form is viewed through the lens of selected artists, in order to examine streams of art that have or continue to be informed by and have influence on, various contemporary environmental art.

The artists selected in this chapter are by no means the only ones of note in this field. Rather, they have been chosen for their relevance to this exegesis and their ability to inform an overview of the sector. Artists include: Andy Goldsworthy, Janet Lawrence, Fiona Hall, Mike Brown, Michael Heizer, Shelley Parriott, Ken and Julia Yonetani, Arman,
Tony Cragg, Alan Sonfist, Robert Smithson, James Turrell, Rosalie Gascoigne, Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro, Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons, Lynda Benglis, Roxy Paine, Chris Jordan, Jan Rae, Danie Mellor. Nadine Lee and Trevor Jenkins have been included as representing some of the Darwin influences in the location of completing this research.

There is an increasing trend for artists to include strong statements addressing environmental issues in their work. A broad selection of international and Australian artists is examined here which enquires into the balance and the relevant connections between ecological concerns and the art that reflects these issues. Interviews of contemporary practitioners help to provide insight into this art practice in Australia, focussing on two artists working in the Darwin region.

Chapter Two outlines environmental art and its practices beginning with Land Art. It summarises contributions of various artists and establishes definitions of environmental art by artists and academics. The artists presented are mostly significant environmental artists, influencing various contemporary ecological art activism and environmental art aesthetics. Chapter Two also explores some connections between ecological sustainability and sustainable art practices, and summarises some interviews with contemporary artists completed during the PhD candidature. These interviews provide valuable insight into the investigations and research.

2.2 Activism and altruism

The political statement present in this new work incorporates, among other things, an artistic overt stand against waste, in particular that which is seen globally floating around in our oceans and breaking down into carcinogenic microcosms that end up in the food chain.
Another artist who works in a similar way with ocean litter, the British environmental artist, Longobardi (2014) observes that these plastics are unpredictable when set loose on the ecosystem. She is interested in what these plastics show us about our oceans as a cultural space and also what they reveal to us about our global economy. She states:

As a product of human consumer culture that exhibits visibly the attempts of nature to reabsorb and regurgitate it, ocean plastic has profound stories to tell us about the interconnectedness of the fate of the planet and our impact on it (Longobardi 2014 Chapter 3).

By no means do I assume to stand-alone with artists like Longobardi with social statements about rubbish. Artists worldwide are highlighting trash in art. I see a similarity in what motivates my work, what it does, how it is made, linking up to other environmental artists like Longobardi. Her statement regarding the interconnectedness of humankind determining the fate of the planet is also in close correlation to a multitude of other artists’ and non-artists’ views.

A U.S. example is the artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who has focussed her work on the idea of ‘hygienist as hero’. She is famous for the Maintenance Project in the 1970s and more recently in Manhattan for her Freshskills project, focussing on sanitation and the workers connected to this industry. Laporte (2000) states: ‘The hygienist is a hero. He overcomes the most visceral repugnance, rolls up his short sleeves and takes on the cloaca. He faces the foul unnameable and speaks of that thing of which no one else will speak’ (Laporte 2000, p. 124).

In further discussing the artist/activist role, Karvellas (2015) interviewed both Bill Fox from the Centre of Art and the Environment in Nevada and David Buckland, the U.K. artist. She asked them if there was a fine line between creating art out of climate
change science and the issues they and others were concerned about, and propaganda based on overtly political films or artworks. She asked whether that was a problem. Buckland believed it was an extraordinarily fine line between making art and activism considering that they had an unstated rule that if the work stopped being an artwork, they stopped working on it and abandoned it.

Buckland said:

> It is a huge argument and debate in the art-world. When we should be taking on issues, Shakespeare was writing about complex societies. This is what art is doing. But you have to somehow embrace a really complex conversation, which is what art does... Again being very aware that you are not preaching, so that if you start preaching, stop it (Karvellas 2015).

Fox said artists would play a large role in offering solutions for ecological issues. Large-scale action art would essentially be another step in Land Art and perhaps herald the beginning of another genre.

A good example of this increased scale of art can be seen with the monumental works of one of the U.S. pioneers of land art, Michael Heizer. Fox states: ‘But they’re working on an increasingly larger scale, so they are not just working any longer on a garden in their front yard, but entire farms, pretty soon they are going to be working with entire agricultures’ (Karvellas 2015). Although this area is a field of environmental art activity that is not closely related to my own work, the correlations and conclusions are especially interesting, and may even have future impact on vast tracts of the ocean with artists harvesting the plastic waste that can be found currently swirling around and slowly breaking down there.

Ecological investigations in art following global trends are also on the rise in Australia.
Artists are helping to address ecological issues and raise ecological awareness in Australia argues Wildy (2013). This form of activist art is not a reaction but a positive action on the part of these artists who are using their skills to communicate proactive ways to address such issues through their artwork.

The notion that beauty is used to hook a political idea with the audience and the fact that it can be done aesthetically with resonance as they walk out of the gallery is a great strength of artists such as Fiona Hall. Through having exhibitions, it has been observed the effect that seduction can have on the viewer is strong, and the strength of the message that can be shared through art using the subtleness of this technique can be powerful and where also the dimension of the transcendent can elevate the viewer above the political into another region of aesthetic experience.

2.3 Selected environmental art practitioners

*Land art (precursor to environmental art)*

Given the breadth of the environmental art genre, and its essential political nature, categorising aspects of the sector is inherently difficult. The definitions presented here are not exclusive. In this way it is possible to show the shoulders I stand on since the inception of environmental art, which was initiated with land art, together with the arms that I am linked with now in the field. This forms the nexus of my positioning in this field.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the term ‘environmental art’ has come of age as a genre in the arts industry. Definitions are distinct and varied. Fowler-Smith (2013) suggested in a conference presentation: ‘In a general sense it is art that helps
improve our relationship with the natural world and proposes new ways for us to co-exist with our environment’ (Fowler-Smith 2013).

Wildy (2011) argues that environmental art is both small and intimate or grand, with no specific stylistic approach nor limited to a group of artists or any region: ‘The term generally (is) used broadly to describe an artistic process or artwork where the artist actively engages with the ecosystem, and covers a diverse range of interactions, styles, approaches, methodologies and philosophies’ (Wildy 2011).

I centre on the term 'Environmental Art' after the inception of 'Land Art', when it expanded to include 'Activist Art', which commonly used recycled materials. I also include 'Outsider Art', which signals work created by artists with psychological issues; and 'environmental art aesthetics', referring to applied appreciation of nature to art. For example, it explores the elegance, eloquence and beauty inherent in trash, in particular when that trash has undergone the alchemy of being transformed into art. The term ecological art can also be defined as spiritual, especially when it has the potential of coaxing or transporting its viewer into a state of transcendence. A ready example of this is Indigenous art with expressive links to spirits in and of the land.

Environmental art is that which has strong, direct connections to the world of nature, using imagery and/or objects from the ecosystem to create reminders of the greatness and beauty to be found there. This art can also emphasise the destruction of nature by humankind, and my response to this can be found in the use of found and squandered predominantly plastic materials, or ocean litter in my art.

Environmental art germinated as a definable classification in the arts industry with the 'land art' movement that developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United
States. It was at this time that the term was first used within the art world and soon expanded to include assemblage art and other art forms. Land art is also referred to as earth art, and two artists in particular are credited with pioneering this emerging art form in the United States. While they were surrounded by contemporaries and built on the work of forerunners, Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer are the best-known names in the land art movement. Smithson and Heizer created works in remote areas of the US. Their land-based artworks were a statement against commodification of the natural ecosystem. Works such as Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* and Heizer’s *City* required the viewer to visit the site in order to experience the work.

Michael Heizer’s works, such as *City* in (Figure 2.1), are of such a large scale that satellites from beyond our atmosphere can view them. These artists were largely responsible for the defining time during the 1960s and 1970s when environmental art is commonly thought and recognised to have originated.

![City Michael Heizer 1972 Land art 1972 - © Michael Heizer](image)

*Figure 2.1 City Michael Heizer 1972 Land art 1972 - © Michael Heizer*

*City* is regarded as Heizer’s life’s work and, at more than one kilometre in length and begun in 1972 it is a monumental piece of land art.
Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, (Figure 2.2), was designed for walking upon by the visiting public. The spiral shape of the jetty reflects the Golden Ratio/Fibonacci Spiral, a mathematical pattern commonly found in nature. Smithson was also interested in the theory of entropy, and he expected that over time the ‘jetty’ would disintegrate into the water. Some land art projects begun during the 1960s and 70s are still under construction today. One such project is the *Roden Crater*, an extinct volcano in the Arizona desert, which James Turrell has been sculpting. Turrell’s intention has been to create places where visitors directly experience being in the Earth’s atmosphere. He is deeply interested in how we understand our place in the world and is also fascinated by the potential in the qualities of light in his work. His work involves explorations in light and space that speak to viewers without words, creating a transcendent experience, which he characterizes as having a ‘straightforward, strict presentation of the sublime’. Turrell’s art attempts to prompt greater self-awareness through the discipline of silent contemplation, patience, and meditation (Turrell 2015).
Turrell’s work with light, exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia in an exhibition based on light in 2015, included a number of pieces that, using colour, light and space, challenged the viewer’s perception of the environment. Although this work of James Turrell, (Figure 2.4), is not from the Land Art genre, having had a personal experience with these works has been transformational, where they encouraged an entry into a space that could be termed ‘no-mind’, or meditation. Immersion in these works was experienced as deep and inspirational.

Although artists such as Heizer, Smithson and Turrell would not have categorised themselves as environmental artists at the time they began work on their massive scale land art projects, they are often assigned to this genre today.
**Assemblage and recycled art**

Another, less interactive, less predominant movement in the world of environmental art is ‘assemblage’. Whiteley (2010) suggested that strong signs of social, political and ecological statements began to intensify with assemblage art that was being produced in the US in the early 1960s. This was heralded at the ‘Art of Assemblage’ exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1961. Whiteley concluded:

> The Art of Assemblage highlighted notions of collective and participatory art forms and generated pedagogical approaches to alternative forms of creativity. It looked forward to a postmodern engagement with the ephemeral; the everyday and the banal embraced by contemporary artists (Whiteley 2010, p. 52).

Another form of assemblage art sprang up in Australia with the ‘Annandale Imitation Realists’. Mike Brown, an Australian artist famous for his involvement with this group, created art that was largely an activist statement, routinely using trash and recycled objects in art that was irreverent and challenged social norms of the time. A sample of Brown’s work is shown in Figure 2.5. Brown exhibited in the first assemblage and junk art show at the Museum of Modern Art in Melbourne in 1962, along with Colin Lanceley and Ross Crothall.

Whiteley (2010) observed that Brown’s art was subversive, which detested elitism in art, as he wanted to dissolve his art practice into daily life. She proposed: ‘He was an artist who as Barry Pearce noted ‘maintained the rage of provocation until his death in 1997 but was largely marginalized by the establishment (McDonald 1997, as cited in Whiteley 2010, p. 127). For Brown, ‘trash’ was both medium and ethos (Whiteley 2010, p. 142).
Figure 2.5: *The Little King* Mike Brown 1961
Mixed media on wood panel Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne
Charles Nodrum Gallery © Mike Brown Estate.

Arman (1928–2005), a French-born American artist, is considered one of the early pioneers of assemblage art. A personal interest developed in Arman’s work after accessing other artists who had practiced in the medium of assemblage and found object art. In the words of Arman (cited by Pope 2013): ‘In 1960, Arman filled the Galerie Iris Clert in Paris with garbage, creating his piece *Fullness*. He said: “I have a very simple theory. I have always pretended that objects themselves formed a self-composition”’ (Pope 2013, p. 1).
Arman’s response to Yves Klein’s famous exhibition, 'The Void' is *Fullness*, (Figure 2.6). Klein had radically emptied out the same gallery space a year previously, presenting the absence as art. As a direct result of this show, Arman became notorious for his provocative gestures and for the smells that emanated from the gallery. In 1961, after his participation in the Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition 'The Art of the Assemblage', Pope (2013) argued that Arman said at the time of the exhibition: ‘There is no difference between accumulating objects or smashing an object.’

This influence by Arman was also extended to Yoko Ono’s 'destruction' performances. Pope made an observation regarding Arman and the influences and its affects on his own practice. He stated: ‘Arman often claimed that when he saw other artists making artworks that were influenced by him, he knew he had to reinvent his work’ (Pope 2013, p. 1). This is something I also find parallels with in the sense that reinvention has been a cornerstone of my visual language, especially since working with recycled objects. Thus the pioneering art form of assemblage made the first known observable
statements about growing consumerism in the 1960s in the United States. This trend rapidly became popular in other countries worldwide, including Australia. Other leading assemblage and recycled art artists included the New Yorker Alan Sonfist, a predecessor of the Andy Goldsworthy style of environmental art, and the U.K. environmental artist Tony Cragg, (Figure 2.7), who worked with installations of plastics from the early eighties.

![Figure 2.7: Britain Seen from the North Tony Cragg 1981](image)

**Figure 2.7: Britain Seen from the North** Tony Cragg 1981
Materials: Plastic, wood, rubber, paper and other materials
Size: 440 cm x 800 cm x 10 cm Tate Gallery Collection. © Tony Cragg

In (Figure 2.7), Cragg employed sculptural elements in the assemblage using found objects. Cragg (Lisson 2015 Lisson citing Cragg 1992) claimed that he sees objects and materials as having balloons of information around them, and that he has worked with the information ‘aura’ by pummelling it across two bodies of work.
The *Early Forms* explore the possibilities of distorting everyday vessels such as vases or plastic bottles, morphing into and around themselves.

The *Rational Beings* sculptures take the outline of a human gesture or profile as starting point for exuberant improvisations on natural processes (Lisson 2015).

Lisson (2015) elaborated that Cragg is one of the world's best-known sculptors, consistently finding ways to connect people with the world around them by working with a variety of objects, including found objects, from plastics to street rubbish: ‘His early works present a taxonomical understanding of the world; he has said that he sees manmade objects as “fossilized keys to a past time which is our present”’ (Lisson 2015).

Figure 2.8: *Stack* Tony Cragg 1975
Materials: Wood, concrete, brick, metal, plastic, textile, cardboard and paper
Size: 200 cm x 200 cm x 200 cm Tate Gallery Collection © Tony Cragg
The artwork in (Figure 2.8) may have been an inspiration for contemporary Australian artists such as the collaborative pair Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro (Figure 2.9). In this work they are commenting on the pointlessness of accumulation in death.

Figure 2.9: *Deceased Estate* Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro 2004
Materials: Household items and rope
Photo: Christian Schnur
Collection of Newcastle Art Gallery © Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro

Pope (2013) stated that the influence of assemblage art pioneer Arman is unmistakable in contemporary art practice, which can be observed in Damien Hirst’s pharmacy assemblages seen in (Figure 2.10), and evidenced with his sliced animals presented as assemblage.
Figure 2.10: Pharmacy Damien Hirst 1992
Overall display dimensions and materials variable.
Tate Gallery Collection

Damien Hirst’s exhibitions of the shelves of various coloured pills highlighted society’s growing reliance on drug taking and pharmaceuticals. These shelves have filled galleries, inviting the viewer closer with their order and sense of cold precision, while making contemporary social commentary.

Hirst’s work has the remarkable ability to lure the viewer with seductiveness and hit back with comment on consumerism, as seen in the well-known diamond encrusted skull work seen in Figure 2.11.
The influence of Arman can also be seen on the work of Jeff Koons’ cleaners, via the commentary on consumerism in the form of contemporary excessiveness. Similar activist art consumerist comment is seen in Figure 2.12 with the trend towards the adulation of consumerist products such as the common Shelton vacuum cleaner.
Arman created his first monumental sculpture in France in 1982. *Long-Term Parking*, (Figure 2.13), is a thirty-metre-high column of five-dozen vehicles bound together by over eighteen thousand kilograms of concrete. 'It's an impressive work that makes evident the undeniable mass of objects and our relationship to them by underlining the proportions of the cars and of the column they composed with that of a human being' (Pope 2013, p. 1). This particular monumental public artwork highlighted the mass production of the automobile industry in one of the art world’s first grand scale monumental statements about consumerism. By the time this work was commissioned in 1982, mass consumerism was rife worldwide.
It is worth noting that the use of rubbish in art dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century, with artists such as Kurt Schwitters advocating its use in art as early as 1927. Whiteley (2010) referred to Schwitters:

> Kurt Schwitters is one of the most influential figures in the development of assemblage, using collage techniques, with discarded objects, materials and found sound’. "I don't see why one shouldn't use in a picture, just as one uses colours made by the paint merchants, things like old tram and train tickets, scraps of driftwood". From Schwitters’ Merz 20 (1927) in Browness, Alan (intr.), Kurt Schwitters Lords Gallery London, October-November 1958. (Whiteley 2010, p. 37).

The medium of plastic rubbish as a recycled object suitable for artworks, represented in a liquid state, could be viewed as an extension of assemblage. Roxy Paine's Schumak Series, (Figure 2.14), falls into this category, which delivers an extra element in its
statement about ecology. Seen in its near raw state, prior to being injected into moulds for consumerist mass produced items, Paine's series proclaims its uniqueness by adding artistic complexity and beauty to this most basic of commodities.

Figure 2.14: Schumak Series Roxy Paine 1998
Melted plastic with pigments extruded from an auto sculpture maker © Roxy Paine

Rosalie Gascoigne is a renowned Australian assemblage artist who began her artistic career in her mid-fifties. Gascoigne's work is noted as making an important contribution to Australian art and she became the first Australian female artist to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale in 1982. She is largely regarded as having had a broad influence upon artists and students. Gascoigne sourced most of her objects from tip sites, beaches and recycle depots:

Gascoigne used mostly found materials: wood, iron, wire, feathers, and reflective road signs. These objects represent the world around her: the landscape and textures of rural life. She would cut up and rearrange the faded, lettering found on these items. However in later years she began to create meditative, elegiac compositions of white or earth-brown panels (cited by MCA Gascoigne 2015).
Approaches to the creation of assemblage art by other artists has influenced my work in the way of redoubling efforts of reinvention, with the introduction of painting and woodblock printing on digital reproductions of collected plastic and driftwood assemblages. Recognition of similarities between forerunners and my work can be seen in both working practice and in the use of some materials, particularly with the Australian artist Rosalie Gascoigne. However, with the exception of the driftwood assemblages, Gascoigne’s work was of an altogether different art form to my practice. These driftwood artworks did draw correlations with some of Gascoigne’s wooden assemblage works, however they differed from her work in the design, even though both referenced a semi-abstracted Australian landscape and the type of recycled materials from which they were constructed. The first experiments with driftwood led to the creation of the initial four-paneled work *Driftwood Relief* artwork in 1998 (Figure 2.15), after which a curator pointed out Gascoigne.

![Driftwood Relief 1998 John Dahlsen](image)

*Figure 2.15. Driftwood Relief 1998 John Dahlsen
Found driftwood objects on plywood
124 cm x 64 cm x 20 cm each (4 panels)*
Gascoigne’s work in timber assemblages held an aesthetic easy to relate to, especially with her use of recycled objects, (Figure 2.16).

![Image of Clouds I by Rosalie Gascoigne](image)

**Figure 2.16: Clouds I Rosalie Gascoigne 1992**  
Hardboard on plywood  
124.5 cm x 390 cm Art Gallery of NSW

The recycled plastic assemblages of Roxy Paine and his contemporary Lynda Benglis have been inspirational, though it was a surprise to discover Benglis and Paine were creating sculptures from that medium. The ‘Purge’ series had direct similarities to their work. The reality of similar art forms being created simultaneously on opposite sides of the globe is often common.

The ‘Purge’ series involved multiple sequences of work: paintings and installations of sculptures that used plastic fabricator machine end-waste. Forerunners to the current work, the use of plastic materials and their place in the evolutionary motions of recycling were important messages infused into the construction of these artworks (Figure 2.17).
Artists such as Schwitters paved the way for a degree of acceptance, however minimal and marginal, in the art world for the use of unusual materials, such as rubbish. This was invaluably helpful as an emerging assemblage artist. It enabled an ability to make quality artworks that contained provocative statements using rubbish, without having to break entirely new ground. Schwitters and others did the hard work that resulted in a degree of validation for the generations that followed.

An example of an early work using rubbish is the assemblage series seen in (Figure 2.18). Created in 2000, it appeared in the US-published, globally released Environmental Art Calendar of 2013.
The work in Figure 2.18 still informs current practice. The use of the almost identical beach-found plastics today are similar to how they were used in the 1990s, when the first collected plastics from beaches took place, and the display of these plastics behind Perspex resonates through the years to the body of work that has been developed as the creative practice component of this PhD. The new work is distinctive, in that the creations are now sculptures, which are free standing and not suspended wall-works. An in-depth discussion about the difference that occurs by making sculpture is presented in Chapter Four.
Outsider art

Outsider art as an identifiable category of art first emerged in the mid and late nineteenth century, where it was observed that psychiatric patients were spontaneously producing artworks of unusual quality. Paul Klee, Max Ernst and Jean Dubuffet were fascinated and inspired by this art, which was produced without influences from the modern art world yet appeared to be highly original and contemporary. (Raw Visions Definitions 2015) proposed that Dubuffet realised that the spontaneous and original creations were not just the realm of the mentally ill. He and André Breton formed the Compagnie de l'Art Brut in 1948, which was dedicated to discovering and collecting unique works by creators who were untrained artists, and had no concept of an art gallery or other forms of art.

'Art Brut', by this Dubuffet meant art that was at its most pure. It was an art produced entirely for individual satisfaction and inner need with no regard to exhibition, fame or monetary reward. Roger Cardinal, appearing in 1972, presented the term 'Outsider Art' (Raw Visions Definitions 2015).

Early appreciation, and philosophical observations, of 'junk culture' created fertile ground for the later development and even acceptability of unusual art materials. This included making art from rubbish. Whiteley (2010) described the chiffonier in Paris in the 1900s, the rag picker, highlighting everyday practices that inspired and intrigued artists and writers.

Strasser (1999) pointed out that poet and philosopher Charles Baudelaire was essentially a rag picker: 'An archivist, a cataloguer who sorted through everything that the big city has cast off and distained' (Strasser 1999, p. 18). Whitely stated that the city poems of Baudelaire feature marginal figures that live on the edges of society, including
scavengers and prostitutes: ‘For Baudelaire, the chiffonier, ‘stumbling like a poet lost in dreams, sifts through the everyday debris and discards of the city, searching for objects and material to sell’ (Whiteley 2010, p. 17).

In the 'Flowers of Evil', Baudelaire speaks of his observations of people and their obsessions for rubbish and junk. Finding poetic beauty in what he sees, he generates his own form of early examples of environmental art through the creation of poetry. ‘Plagued by household cares, bruised by hard work, tormented by their years, each bent double by the junk he carries, the jumbled vomit of enormous Paris’ (Baudelaire, Charles. 1857, pp. P.136,7 Reprinted 1989). In ‘Walter Benjamin’, Whiteley (2010) noted, Baudelaire adopts the rag picker as a metaphor for poetry, placing him at the end of the cycle of production and consumerism, disposal and collection of objects. Whiteley (2010) observed that Benjamin's collections and assemblages in the ‘Arcades Project’, a large unfinished work full of quotes and random pieces of text, were themselves similar to the French rag pickers or chiffoniers. In Benjamin's words: 'Not the great men and celebrated events of traditional historiography but rather the ‘refuse’ and ‘detritus’ of history, the half-concealed, variegated traces of the daily life of the ‘collective’ (Benjamin 1982, p. 1x).

How unusual materials, such as detritus, are being used in art has been considered by Arnheim (1971), who proposes:

An evenly stained canvas, a nest of squares, a shiny egg, a set of stripes, or an assortment of refuse may stir up powerful feelings. If a drug could stimulate in somebody's mind the invention of a great work of art, would we credit it to the drug or to its user? A work of art does not ask for meaning; it contains it (Arnheim 1971, pp. 54, 5).
At another level, the outsider art-worker deserves support and the public needs re-education about non-conformist art practices. Bruce Barber (2009) addresses the darker side of this and the possible ramifications. He stated:

There are many other film and book narratives populated with frustrated and tortured artists, who struggle to realize their identity and mission as artists but who fail in their pursuit of success and the good life, turning their frustrations into self-hating, murderous or suicidal behavior that ultimately affects their families, those with whom they work and the community at large (as cited in Buckley & Conomos 2009, p. 58).

Artists who do not conform to art industry norms, as defined by expectations among the dominant elite, invariably face inherent sociological and psychological difficulties in sustaining their practice. The history of art is a parade of non-conformists, including one of the most celebrated artists of all time, Vincent van Gogh, who famously stated ‘Normality is a paved road: it’s comfortable to walk, but no flowers grow there’. He lived and worked outside accepted industry criteria. Louis van Tilborgh (2006) stated that an example of this non-conformism with van Gogh was the fact that he, at the time, was one of the first of the French Post-Impressionists to be significantly influenced by Japanese wood block printing. The art of van Gogh and his positioning as an outsider artist has influences on my work.

The discussion of this influence is positioned alongside the work of a Darwin outsider artist, Trevor Jenkins. There is a contradiction present in putting these two names together, with van Gogh now being globally famous and Jenkins still living in relative obscurity except in Darwin and the Northern Territory. I choose Jenkins as the most interesting contemporary example of the Northern Territory outsider artist whose work has strong ecological art themes.
Based in Darwin, this artist is either loved or loathed by the local public and is best known as 'The Rubbish Warrior'. Jenkins creates art that is not driven in any way by economic motive or imperative. He does not sell his work. Jenkins’s work is almost exclusively ephemeral and has a lifespan of no more than two to three days, depending on the elements. Jenkins’ work is affected directly by ongoing self-imposed limitations, which could then be seen as restrictions. For example, Jenkins is homeless and living off the streets. His work makes a substantive point about environmental art conjoined with outsider art and the extent that some artists are prepared to go to with the creation of work that is not widely accepted by the mainstream.

![Figure 2.19: Rubbish Art #1 Trevor Jenkins 'The Rubbish Warrior'
Photo: John Dahlsen](image)

Extensive interviews were conducted with Jenkins after gaining ethics approval, and through these interactions, awareness developed of his ongoing frustrations, and in many cases anger and resentment towards society about his situation. Even though, ironically, Jenkins’ ‘situation’ is in no small part intentional, his frustration is present on a daily basis and can be observed in our ongoing correspondence.
Jenkins is widely debated among the Darwin populace for his controversial creations, which are made from organic and inorganic rubbish found by him on the side of the road, which pop up randomly on Darwin's footpaths and nature strips to as far afield as the outlying village of Berry Springs, almost fifty kilometres from Darwin. He constructs his works from litter, small spontaneous gestures that are a response to what he observes on his daily walks. Jenkins mentioned that he was trained in a Newcastle art school during his younger years, but was eventually asked to leave because of his explorations into making art from trash, which were apparently unacceptable to the staff at the time. He stated that he never thought of the works he creates on the streets of Darwin as being 'art' until his works ignited controversy.

As part of an initial animated discussion, he expressed his concern about individual artists receiving significant funding in the form of grants or financial handouts, and that they could be compromised, diluting their underlying artistic message for the sake of money. He had previously observed artists becoming lazy and complacent with the intent of their message after coming into money. In his eyes, they had lost their edge. Regardless of his views on various motivations and the resulting impacts on an artist's work, the actual point in that particular discussion with him was related to questions that were raised about sociological and psychological disturbances experienced by certain artists throughout history. Jenkins has been involved in many instances of public disturbance over the years in Darwin, resulting in media portrayals such as the incident in which he spray painted graffiti on the exterior walls of the Darwin courthouse to make a statement. It was described as follows in the Northern Territory News: ‘He was arrested outside court yesterday. Known for voluntarily picking up trash around town, he was planning on contesting charges he disturbed religious worship and behaved offensively in a public place’ (‘Trash Man Canned’ 2012, p. 3). (See full transcript of the interviews with the ‘Rubbish Warrior’ in Appendix 5).
Outsider art: Vincent van Gogh and Japanese woodblock printing

Vincent van Gogh is included in this exegesis for three reasons: 1) he is a fine example of the outsider artist, even though the term was yet to be coined during his lifetime; 2) early personal works draw parallels with his (although clumsy in comparison), as evidenced below; and 3) his immersion into traditional Japanese woodblock printing and its influence on his artwork may be considered tangential to my own path, with the fusion of traditional Japanese woodblock printing with contemporary digital technology. This is a strong component of the creative practice that forms the basis of this exegesis.

Figure 2.20: Boots by the Fireplace
Oil on board John Dahlsen 1978

In van Gogh's early paintings we can observe the recurring theme of peasant boots, (Figure 2.21). Peasant Boots were also a recurring theme in my early paintings.
Although careful not to attempt to speak for van Gogh, there has been a personal attraction to things connected to the earth, especially in rudimentary forms such as recyclable objects, or, as evidenced in some of the earlier works, paintings of workers' shoes (Figure 2.20). It is the expression of presence in the ordinary that is important for me as an artist working with mundane objects such as plastic trash. Painting workers boots, items that also can be seen as dull or forgettable, had meaning for me through bringing a sense of presence to them, where a story or history is revealed. Seeing van Gogh’s *Peasant Boots* were an inspiration for me to paint worker’s boots in formative years. This is seen as a precursor to being inspired to work with found objects, seeing the immediate layers of depth and presence in them. It is also apparent in juxtaposing these images that my boots are ‘tidier’ than van Gogh’s, which is also a reflection of the way I produce work.

![Shoes Paris, September - November 1886](image-url)

*Figure 2.21: Shoes Paris, September - November 1886*

Vincent van Gogh (1853 - 1890) Oil on canvas, 38.1 cm x 45.3 cm

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)
Heidegger mentions this painting by van Gogh in the essay ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ in ‘Basic Writings’:

But what is there to see here? Everyone knows what shoes consist of. If they are not wooden or bast shoes, there will be leather soles and uppers, joined together by thread and nails. Such gear serves to clothe the feet. Depending on the use to which the shoes are to be put, whether for work in the field or for dancing, matter and form will differ... From van Gogh's painting we cannot even tell where these shoes stand. There is nothing surrounding these pair of peasant shoes in or to which they might belong – only an undefined space. There are not even clods of soil or the field path sticking to them, which would at least hint at their use. A pair of peasant shoes and nothing more. And yet... (Heidegger 1977, pp. 162, 3).

Figure 2.22: Vincent van Gogh (1853 - 1890)
Bridge in the Rain (after Hiroshige) Paris, October - November 1887
Oil on canvas, 73.3 cm x 53.8 cm
There is an uncorroborated story that van Gogh discovered the existence of Japanese woodblock prints while unwrapping objects wrapped in Japanese woodblock print paper when working at a Paris gallery owned by his brother. However this happened the results are still apparent in his work. Figures 2.22 and 2.23 show examples of van Gogh’s painting practice being directly influenced by his being exposed to Japanese culture and wood block printing in particular.


![Figure 2.23: Vincent van Gogh (1853 - 1890) Courtesan (after Eisen) Paris, October - November 1887 Oil on canvas, 100.7 cm x 60.7 cm Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation) s116V1962. F373.](image)

Japanese art and culture had a significant impact on van Gogh’s art and practice, as it has had on mine, which has been influenced by artists such as Sengai Gibbon, Hiroshige
and Hokusai, all of whom used the woodblock printing method originating from the Edo period. As well, other Japanese influences have also had a great impact, including the study of Zen meditation techniques and Japanese martial arts practices such as Zen Archery and Aikido. A meditative infusion into the work was a significant influence during my time in Japan. The Japanese Mystic and poet Basho had a deep connection with the environment and his influence is evident in the way that the work created during this time has a certain radiance repeatedly used in the imagery, a radiance usually seen in Buddhist imagery. Palmer (2001) stated that it is the sense of compassion with all life that permeates Basho's writing.

The ancient Poet

Who pitied monkeys for their cries,

What would he say, if he saw

This child crying in the Autumn wind.

(From - The Narrow Road to the Deep North and other travel Sketches P. 52.

He attempts the impossible for us, to lead us to an unmediated glimpse of the real world of natural things in which blossom is glorious and beautiful and then fades and dies, to return the next year, each flower new and unique. It is only through reaching a state of enlightenment that such a state could be perfected, for only then would we be aware of the connectedness of all living beings and true Buddha-mind (Palmer 2001, p. 55).

Japanese influences further extend to a personal appreciation of Japanese food and design. Van Gogh has influenced my artwork in myriad ways, not just through his affinity with all things ‘Japonaise’. His style of painting with its depths of expression encapsulating both joy and despair have been an ongoing trigger in the work, and there has been a constant reminder of an encouragement found through viewing his work to break boundaries with my creativity.
2.4 Balancing art and activism: (Practical applications and tensions for the environmental artist)

The arts are positioned to play a positive role in influencing a global shift in ecological awareness and sensibilities among people all around the world. Different artists place different values on the components that contextualize environmental art, specifically when balancing activism within the field of artistic expression. For example, Englishman Andy Goldsworthy, in one of his works, covers boulders with wet autumn leaves displaying variations of tone, leaving them to blow away after they dry. Figure 2.24 is an example of a work still in the wet stage of the creative process. This work evidences environmental art that appeals to a beautiful aesthetic.

Figure 2.24: Rock covered with elm leaves held with water Andy Goldsworthy 1979 Bentham, Yorkshire September 1979 © Andy Goldsworthy
Weintraub (2007) argued that some environmentalists believe a beautiful aesthetic inspires conservation and protection of the ecology, and that for others the vibrancy of beauty unleashes hidden knowledge, which is beyond rational discourse. Weintraub described Goldsworthy’s work as fitting into this aesthetic with the following definition: ‘Perhaps Goldsworthy’s art is best appreciated within the context of noted naturalists and environmentalists who address the concept of beauty’ (Weintraub 2007, p. P.181). Weintraub claimed another group of environmental artists considers that aesthetic pleasures are unnecessary distractions during difficult times of ecological issues, believing that care for the ecology is more urgent than aesthetic appreciation. In my work, a beautiful aesthetic is essential. As a painter prior to the infusion of plastics and other found and recycled objects and conservational themes into the work, being acutely attentive to aesthetics in the use of composition, colour, line and form in this creative work has always been important in the process of the work.

There will be tensions between the aesthetic sensibilities of the environmental artist and their inevitable role as environmental activist and spokesperson. Blunt activist statements made by artists who dump piles of rubbish on gallery floors and call it art can be an avoidance of the process of making worthy art. It might be activism; it is not necessarily art. It is possibly this type of lazy practice that has the potential to destroy the reputation of environmental art as an ongoing emerging respected genre among critics, galleries and the general public. A co-curated show at the Samuel Dorsky Museum New York State in 2004 illustrated such tensions in this art field.

The work in Figure 2.25 demonstrates a lack of essential elements of a completed artwork and places too much emphasis on the idea of ‘shocking’ the audience, at the expense of the quality of the work presented for exhibition.
As Gadamer (1986) expressed in his description about the qualities of an artwork, there is a certain requirement:

It seems to me, therefore, that it would be more accurate to call it (an artwork) a creation (Gebilde) than a work. For the word ‘Gebilde’ implies that the manifestation in question has in a strange way transcended the process in which it originated, or has relegated that process to the periphery. It is set forth in its own appearance as a self-sufficient creation (Gadamer 1986, p. 126).

There are standards of excellence necessary for an artwork to be included in a reputable exhibition. The work must show that it has been tested by the rigours of transformation and alchemy to earn the label ‘art’. The example in Figure 2.25 could be compared to Figure 2.6, with Arman's response to the Yves Klein exhibition ‘The Void’. The context and statement of Arman’s work *Fullness*, were significantly different, as were the times. He reveals the ability to find a perfect balance of aesthetics in having the rubbish ‘contained’ as an assemblage by the gallery space itself while using the exhibition to make an activist statement.
Aesthetics vs. activism occurred by using a dead tree for an installation in a park, highlighting both the spread of the camphor laurel tree in the Northern Rivers of New South Wales (activism) and its hidden beauty (aesthetics) (Figures 2.26a and 2.26b).

Figure 2.26a: Monumental Environmental Artwork (front view) Dahlsen 2008 – 2010
On semi-permanent loan to Byron Shire Council and the Byron Community
Camphor Laurel, Tung oil and concrete plinths

The Camphor Laurel tree is commonly viewed as a pest, responsible for the widespread destruction of native flora in the region. Whilst revealing the intrinsic beauty of the dead tree itself after chain sawing, water blasting, sanding, polishing, oiling and placing the trunk and root ball on two concrete plinths, it was possible to make ecological statements without compromising my appreciation for aesthetics.
The intention was to create something of beauty from something that might have been considered quite ugly, and, by electing to place it on the concrete plinths, away from the soil that could nurture its growth (if it were living), an emphasis was made on its separation from the natural state of Australian flora. This work represents the environmental artist’s dilemma; the tensions between balancing current political issues, or activism, with a fine sense of aesthetics. It is only through cultivated sensibilities for aesthetics that transformation can be achieved.

Another example of the tension between aesthetics and activism happened in the exhibition titled ‘Gyre, The Plastic Ocean’ and was testament to the world’s focus on the oceanic pollution, particularly the Pacific Ocean’s ‘Garbage Patch’. I was invited to exhibit assemblage prints on canvas and paper, highlighting the problem of ocean litter (activism) while correspondingly making a contemporary aesthetic statement about beauty (aesthetics).
Environmental art photographer Chris Jordan was exhibiting alongside my work in this exhibition. His work is another example of an artist using the activist/aesthetic approach, in his case with detailed beautifully constructed photos of plastic waste. Pereira and Gallagher (2014) refer to Jordan as an artist who compiles rubbish from various places to create assemblages, and that he is an activist wanting to make the world a better place: 'Using his photographs, he is able to reach people and make them active in bettering our world' (Pereira & Gallagher 2014, p. 1).

Jordan’s work (Figures 2.27 and 2.28) provides examples of environmental art that rests on the fine line between aesthetics and activism, containing both elements of expression. He attracts the viewer with semi-abstract designs, only to reveal with progressively more-detailed photos from the same print, the stark reality of the objects being used in the photo and the effects that the mass-consumerism of these objects are having on our planet. Jordan’s work depicts one million plastic cups, the number used on airline flights in the US every six hours.

Figure 2.27: Plastic Cups Chris Jordan 2008
Dimensions: 152 x 228 cm (Depicts one million plastic cups, the number used on airline flights in the US every six hours). © Chris Jordan
Artists such as Jordan and myself focus much of our creativity on aesthetics that aim to build ecological awareness.

Drozdek (2005) highlighted the contribution of environmental science to these discussions. He observed that it has been said that the Pre-Socratic system of Anaxagoras is, by common consent, one of the most brilliant products of the great age of Greek speculation. He argued the following about this system:

Anaxagoras’ system certainly is brilliant and his vision of double infinity - the infinity that has no upper or lower limits - is unmatched in ancient thought. But arguably the most puzzling part of the system is his claim that everything has a portion of everything else, which can be termed the everything in everything principle (Drozdek 2005, p. P.2).
In this sense the Anaxagoras’ system provides a basis for the argument that everything is connected, and as such the artwork developed as the creative component to this exegesis is reflective of this statement that nothing is separate. It exposes, and invites the viewer to reflect upon, the intrinsic beauty of nature and its juxtaposition with the perilous state in which our society has placed the natural world on a global scale.

The trend to address climate change and the ecology through art is a growth phenomenon affecting a full spectrum of art practices and can be witnessed in contemporary exhibitions focusing on ecological issues across Australia and internationally currently each year.
The Australian environmental artist Janet Lawrence examines the interconnection of life forms and ecologies in her work Figure 2.29. Lawrence observes the impact that humans have on the threatened natural world and addresses our relationship to nature, via various artistic media. She is well known for her works using organic and entirely recyclable materials in the process of creating immersive environments that invite the viewer to navigate the interconnections between all living forms.

For many years Lawrence has produced art with strong conservational messages as she works in her studio, which often resembles a science laboratory as she distills essential elements from plants to include in her artworks. Artists such as Fiona Hall are also using this approach in their work, with increasing success. Sheikh (2009) argues the validity of feminist art historian Lucy Lippard’s argument:

Like the Trojan Horse, activist art enters hallowed halls where it does not properly belong by way of a disguise—by being an alluring aesthetic object; it pushes into the institution of art, both concretely and metaphorically. But unlike the Trojan horse, activist art is not instrumental in the violent overthrow of a regime, but works rather by subverting the very idea of an aesthetic object (Sheikh 2009, p. 1).

The balance of ‘didactic activism’ and aesthetics can be observed in the work of Fiona Hall. ABC Classic FM (2015) posed the question: "Which is more important to you, is it what you say or how you say it? Hall responded:

I think I'm known for making work, which on the surface of it is sort of very highly aesthetic, you know very beautiful. For me, I see that as being the seductive aspect of the work, to suck people in, to think about what perhaps I have to say (ABC Classic FM 2015).
The ABC interviewer, Margaret Throsby, continued:

So you like to seduce your viewer, in the viewer might say, 'God, isn't that beautiful' and then looking more closely might realize that that little nest is made from tiny shredded dollar notes... and then get the message? (ABC Classic FM 2015).

This concept is similar to the seductive familiar geometric shapes that I use to lure in the viewer into the art and experience the social activist messages about plastics in the environment. The artwork in (Figure 2.30) illustrates Hall's dual ability of to entice the viewer whilst simultaneously sending a social message. Hall has the ability to deliberately transform everyday objects into ecological and social commentary on contemporary issues, including globalisation and consumerism.
There are ways to address the issue of environmental artists making a living in an increasingly changing world and economy. Complications for these artists are increasing because of globalization and its impact on the economy. Scholte (2005) highlights the complex definitions and impacts of how globalization may be viewed by artists and ordinary people who see the world through either an idealistic or materialistic lens:

Even though most explorations of globalization have left their theoretical perspective implicit, a broad distinction can be discerned between idealist and materialist approaches. Methodologically idealists have regarded globalization as mental forces such as imagination, invention, metaphor, identity and ideology. Examples include social constructivism, post-modernism and post-colonialism. In contrast, methodological materialists have treated globalization as a result of forces such as nature, production, technology, laws and institutions. Examples include liberalism, political realism, Marxism, and social ecology (Scholte 2005, pp. 20, 1).

Pirrie (2011) suggested that artists wishing to be ecological may experience an intellectualized disjunction between ideas and the reality. Where artists are faced with the environmentalist’s role, confusion occurs in regards to inclusion in modern society and with the artist identity being different in essence from scientists, philosophers or politicians. She suggested that after the 1950s and 1960s, many artists embarked on an activist agenda where the term Land Art or Environmental Art emerged to describe many art practices.

Furthermore, Weintraub (2007) stated that when artists are also environmentalists or environmental artists, they have an ability to guide policies that advance sustainability. She claims that there are differences between art and ecology, providing reasons why a
synthesis between these disciplines can be greater than their independent career endeavors. When together they can invigorate both cultural and physical landscapes. Weintraub proposes that: ‘Ecology’s methods and its pronouncements are strictly impersonal. Art, however, has the license to exploit many communicative components of personality like humor, fear, shock, seduction, etc.’ (Weintraub 2007, p. 17).

Ecological concerns are also made by the artists’ choices from medium to tools, display and storage strategies, and how they deal with studio waste as seen in Louis Pratt’s use of the raw material coal to make his sculpture ‘King Coal’ (Figure 2.31). The sculpture by Pratt, a finalist in the 2015 Wynne Prize, showcases a larger than life figure made entirely of compressed coal, which is slowly disintegrating. Pratt suggests that the work is anthropomorphized coal and that that title of the artwork, King Coal, derives from a novel by Upton Sinclair, which details the terrible state of working conditions in the coal industry in the United States during the early stages of the twentieth century.

Figure 2.31: King Coal Louis Pratt 2015
Materials: Coal, resin, fibreglass and steel
Dimensions: 172 cm x 101 cm x 119 cm
'Art Gallery of New South Wales website’. © Louis Pratt
The artwork hooks in the viewer with the figurative stance and it's only upon closer scrutiny that its ecological message is revealed. Pratt states:

Coal is an important issue for Australia. But a future with coal will lead to environmental disaster. The overwhelming majority of scientists agree we are at a tipping point for the use of fossil fuels. To continue will irreparably poison our atmosphere. My work depicts an arrogant character unwilling to change and unaware of his impending doom (Art Gallery of NSW 2015b).

A similar message awaited the viewer of another successful finalist in the 2015 Wynne Prize, with Kate Shaw’s colourful work, *Anthropocene*, (Figure 2.32).

![Anthropocene](Figure 2.32: Anthropocene Kate Shaw 2015 Materials: Acrylic and resin on board Dimensions: 120 cm x 240 cm AGNSW website. © Kate Shaw)

Shaw states that *Anthropocene* is a proposed geologic chronological term for a period that begins when human activities have had significant global impact on the Earth’s environments.
I came across some small rocks with plastic fused to them. I found that every single piece of synthetic plastic manufactured since 1950 still exists, as each takes thousands of years to break down. Plastic litter can become fused with rocks and other materials to form a new material: plastiglomerate. This could well become a permanent part of the geological record, forever marking humanity's impact on the world’ (Art Gallery of NSW 2015a).

On another ecological theme, and as a further example of artwork seductively attracting the viewer, only to reveal after the shine and glow has done their work, that radioactivity is a current issue in Japan, is expressed in Ken and Julia Yonetani’s work. Ken Yonetani was quoted explaining about working with the slightly radioactive glass used in the glass of the chandeliers. ‘Some specialists say it is safe for our health, but we wanted to work quickly to finish the installation’(RMIT Gallery 2015).

Figure 2.33: Radioactive 2012 Ken and Julia Yonetani, installation at RMIT Gallery 2015
Uranium glass tubing, generated by the uranium reacting to a UV bulb
Dimensions variable
Photo by Mark Ashkanasy, 2015
'Japanese Art After Fukushima’, highlighted the ecological disaster that struck Fukushima after a devastating earthquake (Figure 2.33). Ken and Julia Yonetani’s work depicted radioactive chandeliers that emitted an eerie light.

Relevant examples of my earlier contemporary environmental art utilising the practice of both hooking in the viewer with a visual aesthetic whilst making an ecological statement through the use of found plastic materials include *Black River* (Figure 2.34), and *Plastic Bag Diptych* (Figure 2.35), forerunners to and influences of the body of work developed for the creative practice component of this research. (See further examples in Appendix E).

These two artworks were donated individually to the Northern Rivers ‘Buttery’ Rehabilitation Centre and to the Byron Bay Library and were donated through the Cultural Gifts Program of the Australian Federal Government (Arts 2015).
2.5 Indigenous art: links to environmental art

While researching Indigenous art was not a primary focus of my research, one cannot live in Northern Australia and not be influenced by perceptions of the environment by Indigenous people. Reflections on some Indigenous artists and summarising an interview with a Larrakia Nation Indigenous artist provides a brief link between environmental art and Indigenous perspectives in the place where I have been working. The latest series of works are influenced by exposure to Indigenous art in the Northern Territory, in particular the shapes of the totemic burial poles (Figure 2.36), which are available for viewing in most major Australian museums and art galleries and feature in museums internationally.
Meticulously painted on the outside in traditional Indigenous designs, burial poles often stand approximately the same height as the *Echoes* sculptures and possibly arouse the sense of humans being smaller than spirits. The shapes in Figure 2.36 are reminiscent of the same elongated circular sculptural forms in my *Echoes* series created in 2014.

This research enquiry has opened up particular unique issues about environmental art practice and the variations between Indigenous and Western ideology. Within Indigenous art there exists a form of environmental art as transcendent, which can most obviously be seen in Indigenous art as a link to spirits in the land. It has also drawn on the valid deeper questions of differences in interpretation that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people have with art.
Contemporary Indigenous artist, Danie Mellor highlighted his affinity with the land and the ecology in his work.

I keep in mind those things that are important which are passed on: cultural knowledge, history and Elders’ stories or narrative. If you keep these in mind and stay connected in mind and spirit to a place when you are making work, then ancestry, history and place becomes embedded in contemporary art practice. I will be working on more imagery of landscapes with a focus on nature, gentleness and spirituality (Mellor cited by Wells 2015).

Figure 2.37: *Culture Warriors* Danie Mellor 2008
Materials: Pastel, pencil and wash with glitter and Swarovski crystal on Saunders Waterford paper, 147 cm x 195 cm
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

The artwork in Figure 2.37 reveals Mellor’s multi-layered expression of the landscape mixed with his own blend of activism. Mellor described his use of the kangaroo in his images:

The kangaroos encrusted with blue and white dinnerware shards explored the notion of misconceptions about colonial views of Australia. The
landscape and Aboriginal people and their knowledge systems were often beyond the scope of cultural knowledge held by the early settlers. This seemed to fit comfortably with showing a blue (a true blue) or transformed land and country, in as much as it could be used to indicate a settled and colonised landscape and environment (Wells 2015).

Whilst completing this PhD in Darwin, there has been contact with the artwork of the Indigenous Larrakia people. The encounter with the works of the Larrakia artists as well as other environmental artists working in the Northern Territory has had a profound impact upon my reflections about the meaning of environmental art and on my situatedness in the Darwin scene.

Making Indigenous connections has been important, especially through being helpful with receiving feedback on the current work for this research. In particular, this has been the case with one Larrakia artist, Nadine Lee, who agreed to be interviewed for this exegesis. Nadine had beautiful contemporary environmental artworks shown in an exhibition titled: ‘Counting Tidelines’ at the Nan Giese Gallery at CDU in 2015. The exhibition showcased Indigenous coastal collaborations, where she presented a selection of ecological artworks. *Balance* (Figure 2.38) is an example of her work.

The purpose of the interaction with Nadine was to identify what her reaction to central components of my work was and to see what ideas I had as a response to her interview questions. The interview was to focus especially on the themes of environmental art, aesthetics in the form of the geometrical shapes, and her insights on totemic works within the Indigenous culture. The interview served to provide the required orientation of links of environmental art and Indigenous perspectives through the eyes of a local practitioner.
A few of Nadine's comments guided my thinking about this work. For example, Nadine discussed the role of totems and highlighted that her 'totems were not sacred' and so she uses them in her art, not because they represent something 'Aboriginal' but they mean something to her. This resonated with thoughts about how I use totemic shapes in my own work.

Nadine also discussed her understanding and use of the triangle, circle and square, not only as traditional Aboriginal art but other forms of representation. Particularly she noted the current use of an egg-shape claiming; 'It's a holistic approach that I have worked on to keep me, myself and I balanced. These shapes are universally recognised. We are taught these shapes as children. They are part of a common language, but they
don’t always mean the same thing, not even for any one person who uses them in different works of art’ (Nadine Lee, Personal Communication 2015). In considering this response I thought about my own cultural tropes related to these shapes.

Nadine’s ideas were significant for me. They heightened my appreciation of the Indigenous culture through her frank description for example, of the use of totems, which are used differently in Western culture.

Her guileless responses came from a contemporary artist working with ecological themes in her work, who also relates to totems and shapes similar to those used in my work. Her blunt openness regarding environmental art and her down to earth vision about the repurposing of discarded materials was realistic, with her comments that it had a “modest but positive impact on environmental values” and the good feeling she has “if the materials I’m using are rubbish and in the process of doing my art I’m cleaning up the beach or wherever”, was refreshingly candid. Her love of “using natural materials” also had resonances for me with its simplicity. Nadine’s opinion that this art has the capacity of making understated commentary about ecological issues was insightful. Comments such as this, remind me of both the insignificant and deeply important role that this art actually plays in the bigger picture.

I met with a number of members of the Larrakia art group previously in 2013 and visited their print facility in Coconut Grove after being asked to help with advice on building a Thong House; (Figure 2.39), which was later exhibited at the local ‘Seabreeze Festival’ in Nightcliff. This interaction provided an entry point for discussions with Nadine Lee. (See full transcript of interview in Appendix 2).
Figure 2.39: *Thong House* 2014  
Larrakia Nation Long-Grass Art Project  
Sea breeze Festival Nightcliff Photo: John Dahlsen

### 2.6 Conclusion:

In this chapter on environmental art practice and practitioners, various forms of this art practice have been described and, in some instances, summarised. The full breadth and extent of this field has not been exhausted. Rather, many areas have been outlined, particularly where my practice overlaps with these forms of art.

There has also been a positioning my own arena of enquiry within the field of environmental art, with the work created representing a unique contribution to knowledge with this research. Each form of art discussed in this chapter has clear links to this field of art by way of the following examples, which help to situate them within this bourgeoning broad art form. Firstly, land art has been included to pinpoint
environmental art chronologically. Environmental art, akin to land art is considered in its role to highlight the natural ecology and its forms as well as its statement against the commodification of the natural environment. Closely related, assemblage and recycled art, through the creative re-use of found and recycled materials were shown to reinforce the ability to create art from second hand materials. It was argued that this can highlight consumerism and over production particularly of plastics.

Then, outsider art was considered as often made by people with psychological conditions, which in many cases have led to them being placed in institutions. Many of these practitioners are known to make art not intended for sale or for commercial exhibition. My art, with its attention to detail in relation to the collection and sorting of plastic, may contribute to revealing personal Obsessive Compulsive Disorder tendencies. I argue that these characteristics nevertheless have a decisive contribution to environmental art. Finally, some links were made with Indigenous art and an Indigenous practitioner's perception of environmental issues and how she operates in the zone between activist statements and aesthetics.

Throughout these descriptions of artistic influences, this chapter included an exploration of the precarious balance between aesthetics, beauty and action in environmental art. Through these descriptions, I suggest this art promotes the appreciation of nature and the ecology and the exploration of inherent beauty in the landscape and can also be expressed with the use of trash or recycled items. As a form of protest against over consumerism and often made using recycled objects, this art form is highlighted as a constant thread throughout my work and in the work of the majority of environmental artists.
It has been argued that artists practicing in the various areas described have shown dissent through challenging acceptable social norms of ‘nice art’ or safe art with their creativity.

There has also been an exploration of the didactical agit-prop approach present in the work, creating a balance between activist statements and the expression of a beautiful aesthetic.

The current work made for this research sits somewhere at a nexus between these styles and is a synthesis of ecological art activism that uses a particular set of aesthetics to give the artworks inherent transformative properties.
Chapter 3

Envisioning the Art (Aesthetics)

In the Kenninji temple in Kyoto, there is a garden called the Circle, Triangle, Square Garden. It is said that the idea behind the circle, triangle, and square is that these forms represent all things in the universe. All things related to the state of prolonged presence are represented by the square, the circle and the triangle’ (Sell 2015).

3.1 Introduction

Bringing together the sense of aesthetics in this creative practice component of the research has involved the incorporation of key geometrical shapes. The purpose of this chapter is to present an in-depth study into the practical application of ideas and recurring themes in my work. It seeks to explain the repeated use of the three simple shapes and their symbology, the links to the expression of a meditative element in the work, and the persistent return to sculpture, painting, drawing, printmaking, assemblage and installation as aesthetic practice in the past and the present.

The body of work created over three and a half years for this research has drawn together many elements of primary importance and relevance to my career. It highlights basic elements that have proven be essential. These include; composition, colour, line; universal shapes—circle, square, triangle; and modalities—sculpture, painting, drawing, printmaking, assemblage and installation. What mattered was an aesthetic depiction of rubbish as a semi-abstract medium when brought together as
assemblage. The illumination of individual characteristics of everyday 'rubbish' - cigarette lighters, bottle tops, straws, a wristwatch fused with the universal geometric shapes. These three shapes have been the foundation of many previous works and I resolved that they would be the basis of the new body of work, which is comprised of twelve sculptures, twenty-four paintings, and twenty-four prints.

In examining the core essentials of what had to be expressed in this new body of work, the shapes became central. Thus began the foundation of the decision to exalt them. They would become glowing elongated forms (Figure 3.1), built into an assemblage field of plastics, taking the viewer on a journey into colour and form.

Figure 3.1: Plastic Mix Fusion Print
Digital & woodblock print of plastic found objects
94 cm x 61 cm John Dahlsen 2015
Why twenty-four? In many ways this number is random, representing the number of images compiled as the collection of assemblages of varieties of found materials, or rubbish were exhausted. The new body of work symbolises an ending, and a new beginning. (Perhaps it is also exemplifying the end of a twenty-four hour day in the life of an artist).

3.2 Artistic, aesthetic and ethical values

Sartwell (2010) proposed that form has an influence in conveying meanings that reveal other values being superior to aesthetics, believing that people would be better off helping others in need as opposed to being overly concerned about how things look aesthetically. He argued:

A famine with a gorgeous view, for instance - isn't any better than a really ugly one. Aesthetics is a luxury - important, perhaps, but a desire to be satisfied when through just means we achieve some sort of leisure. Aesthetic disinterest or distance as understood in modernism specifically requires the aesthetic experencer to ignore moral implications, or to perform a separation of aesthetic from ethical value (Sartwell 2010, pp. 63, 5).

An artistic ethical dilemma became apparent with the use of the acrylic casing in this new work. It was an unavoidable necessity to achieve the shapes required for the sculptures. This could be viewed as a compromise in the aesthetic process and seen as a challenge to an ethical standpoint. On the one hand there is the making of environmental statements with the work. On the other hand, less-than-desirable elements are being used in the constructions to attain the degree of aesthetics, whilst simultaneously having the practical requirements for them to be successful as
sculptures in meeting standards as beautiful objects. Environmental philosopher Peter Singer addressed this predicament in proposing the following hypothesis:

Suppose I notice that a small child has fallen in (a pond) and is in danger of drowning. Would anyone deny that I ought to pull the child out? This will mean getting my clothes muddy and either cancelling my lecture or delaying it until I can find something dry to change into: but compared with the avoidable death of a child this is insignificant. A plausible principle that would support the judgment that I ought to pull the child out is this: if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, we ought to do it (Singer 2011, p. 229).

While not dealing with life and death in the creation of these artworks, there is the recognition of the inherent compromise in creating and presenting this work. The materials used in the sculptures are a necessary compromise. This is addressed by stating that even though in this art, materials such as petroleum-based moulded Perspex are used; this is justified because the possibility to spread the ecological message outweighs these other considerations. It is also hoped that these tensions can have the effect of transporting the viewer to a place of awareness of the bigger picture.

3.3 Components of transforming aesthetics

The artwork created is essentially a celebration of being pushed as an artist by the forces of many things, internally and externally, to create a body of work that reflects a quality of transcendence. This has been done through the elevation of collected plastic trash into artworks that are represented in transformative works as totems of elongated geometrical shapes in sculptures. These have been superimposed in
paintings and prints using the plastic assemblages, with the symbolism of the images and the three shapes being so unnatural, precise and humanly imposed that they reflect the plastics on which they are superimposed. The resulting effect is aimed at shifting the consciousness of the viewer to other levels. This gifted work (Figure 3.2) owes its origin to the millions of coffee drinkers who dispose of their aluminum coffee pods destined for landfill, because they can and are encouraged to recycle them. The allure of 18-carat gold plating was used on the frame and a semi-abstracted landscape within, which could be viewed from both sides of the artwork. It was placed on a plinth, secured from below and had toughened glass on either side. In essence this work could be referred to as a form of 3D art collage/assemblage.

Figure 3.2: Ecolaboration Dahlsen 2013
Size: 100 cm x 100 cm
Donated to the Sydney Institute of Marine Sciences Emerald Auction 2013
Ecollaboration (Figure 3.2) used leftover, recycled coffee pods from the commissioning body Nespresso, re-creating them into a contemporary semi-abstract landscape. This is an aesthetic representation about recycling which also provided income to the artist. Another example of an alternative way to make a large-scale environmental artwork is The Guardian (Figure 3.3). It is a public artwork over ten metres high, which was created for the Brisbane City Council, using left over guard rails and concrete pipes as the construction materials.

Figure 3.3: The Guardian Dahlsen 2002-2003
Dimensions variable
Permanent display at Kangaroo Point, Brisbane.
Monumental in scale, *The Guardian* exemplifies the kind of art described in Chapter Two, where the viewer is enticed by its beauty to consider the communication with an activist form of art that has an ecological statement at its core. The creation of the *The Guardian* has a linked connection with other forms of collection practices when making artworks from recycled objects. With larger public art commissions; the materials tend to be additionally monumental in scale and more robust.

Figure 3.4: Collecting Plastics Dahlsen 2004

There are different qualities observed in the organic driftwood material and the sun-bleached and weathered silvery surfaces, as opposed to the brightness of the coloured plastics, which are also mostly weathered by nature’s elements. The image in Figure 3.4 shows how previous actions inform the current practice, with using the method of ‘performance art’; in collecting the found plastics, it is identical to that used in the 1990s when collecting to use in the art.
Basic Geometric Shapes (square, circle, triangle)

The geometry in the work Figure: 3.5 was informed by exposure to the work of the Japanese painter and mystic, Sengai. This master regularly used these shapes in his work, referring to them as 'the universal forms'.

The artwork in Figure 3.5 shows an example of a painting with the recurring motif of these geometric shapes. As the work progressed over the years, these shapes continued to assert themselves as convenient 'editing' tools deeply embedded in richly abstract paintings that I was working on at the time. This had the effect of anchoring the paintings and the vastness of the semi-abstract surface in a way that the current shapes serve to do in this series, with the vastness of the assembled plastic waste as
background to these works. This influence continued through to 2009 with the *Driftwood Sculpture Trio*, a series of driftwood sculptures based on the geometric theme of the symbols.

This envisioned body of work would comprise all the major visual art creative practice elements in which I had been proficient during the course of a career: sculpture, painting, drawing, printmaking, installation and working with found objects. Recurring elements in the work as an environmental artist and painter had also included the three shapes (Figures 3.7 and 3.8). (See further images of earlier work influenced by the square, circle and the triangle in Appendix 3).
Figure 3.7: *Made in India*
Ink on hand made 300gsm cotton paper
70 cm x 100 cm
John Dahlsen 1989

Figure 3.8: *Departure* (Triptych)
Oil, acrylic, wax, charcoal, contact paper on board
122 cm x 320 cm
John Dahlsen 1991
During the time spent whilst on a 2015 Churchill Fellowship in Kyoto, I viewed ink drawings by Sengai, which were exhibited in Kyoto’s major Art Museum. Seeing these served as a reminder about his work with the geometric shapes (Figure 3.9), and I was buoyed by the perfection of their incorporation into the new body of work.

![Figure 3.9: The Circle, Triangle, and Square](image)
Sengai Gibon (Japanese, 1750-1837)
Edo period, early 19th century
Ink on paper
28.4 cm x 48.1 cm

These symbols became a core element of the artistic design of the new sculptures, paintings and prints in a way that exalted the mundane in significant ways and have been used as an editing technique within the work. This may also have the effect of being a foil to the moralistic nuance of the ecological meaning. They ultimately serve as a way of evoking a sense of presence. These recognised shapes are featured in all aspects of art, design and architecture.
Bradley (2010), presented an analysis online with his 'Meaning of Shapes':

Triangles can be stable when sitting on their base or unstable when not. They are balanced and can be a symbol for law, science, and religion and are used to convey progression, direction, and purpose. Squares and rectangles are stable. They’re familiar and trusted shapes and suggest honesty. They have right angles and represent order, mathematics, rationality, and formality. Circles have no beginning or end. They represent the eternal whole and in every culture are archetypical forms. They suggest well roundedness and completeness (Bradley 2010).

The meditative infusion into the new work was significantly enhanced by reflections on Basho’s poetry, described here by (Palmer 2001):

Basho almost certainly learnt to meditate under a Zen master and direct references to Buddhism are scattered throughout his verse.

The anniversary of the Death of the Buddha;

From wrinkled praying hands,

The sound of the rosaries. - Basho

(From The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches. p.119).

Basho’s verse often points to Buddhism - awareness of impermanence, the non-existence of the self, the emptiness’ (Palmer 2001, p. P.54).

Plato (as cited in 2009 Reprint), spoke at length about these shapes. In ‘Timaeus’ he stated his philosophical view that universal shapes can be reduced to a square, triangle and a circular shape in the form of a tetrahedron. Plato presented an elaborate account of the formation of the universe, which had him deeply impressed with the order and beauty of the universe. He believed that the beautiful orderliness of the universe was not only the manifestation of the intellect; it was also the model for rational souls to
rationalise and emulate. For Plato, these symbols were a highly effective editing tool through which the viewer might simplify a highly abstract surface. The example seen in Figure 3.10, illustrates the print component of the new body of work that has been created as a core element of this project, effectively portraying the editing process described.

Figure 3.10: *Clear Fusion Print*
Digital and woodblock print of plastic found objects
Size: 94 cm x 61 cm
John Dahlsen 2015
For the new body of work, rather than offering the found plastics that are raw material as an assemblage on the floor, or as a series of wall works behind Perspex, they have been constructed into the geometric shapes. I elected to present them as sculptural works that would engage the viewer on numerous levels.

There have been many interpretations of the symbology of symbols, Liungman (1991) proposed that circles have some of the following characteristics:

Circles belong to the oldest ideograms and have been dated to the period immediately after the emergence of the simplest conventionalised representations of humans and animals found on the walls of prehistoric caves and rock faces and has been used in systems of writing for more than 5000 years. In astrology, the circle represents the eternal, endless, without beginning or end and the spirit. In today's Western Ideography the circle stands for all possibilities (within a given system) (Liungman 1991, p. 274)

Being aware that the shapes have these associated histories, as described by Liungman, provided an added confidence that they have the capacity to act as an appropriate hook in order to work in an aesthetic sense, drawing the viewer into the beauty of the sculptural pieces and, later—or simultaneously in some instances—the ecological message would unfold, revealing its messages and resonating at various levels with the viewer. Ultimately it was hoped that the viewer could experience an expanded space of awareness whilst standing in front of, and having a physical interaction with, the work. The obvious use of the glowing halo like imagery radiating from the edges of these shapes, seen in the print and painting components of this body of work are the most prominent examples of this artistic intention. Further interpretations of the triangle and the square by Liungman (1991) include the following statement:
The triangle is first and foremost associated with the holy, divine number of three. It is through the tension of opposites that the new is created, the third. It is also a symbol for power, and as such is related to danger. It also means success, prosperity and safety. The square is an expression of the two dimensions that represent a surface. The square means land, field, ground or the element earth. The Egyptians used it in their belief system of Hieroglyphs, where it was supposed to have meant realisation or materialisation (Liungman 1991, pp. 306, 9).

The question remains: why are the three shapes integrated into impressions of rubbish? We cannot avoid rubbish—any more than we can avoid universal shapes. Rubbish is universal in our contemporary society and the connections of this universality can no longer be avoided or understated, especially when we, collective humankind, are acutely aware of the issue and our contribution to it. The fact is that these plastics, by-products of our consumerism, are making their way into our oceans, being ingested by fish and then, when we eat the fish, we become part of this chain of toxicity. Placing the shapes over rubbish brings people face to face with realities of their own existence, with the fact that the rubbish they threw away and thought they could forget is actually right there in the room with them. In stating this, I am not saying consumption is a bad thing, that if we have less stuff are we somehow better people, as only someone who knows very little about anthropology or history can make this claim with any seriousness. The reason Marx was not a romantic like Rousseau (Berlin 2003), is because he saw scarcity as leading to violence rather than being a more moral state. As we consume we inevitably have an excess of undesirable material - rubbish - what I do is deploy it benignly and aesthetically. I take the unwanted and the ugly and reveal it to be beautiful and even 'useful' in a non-utilitarian way.
There is also another wide-reaching reality in play; the shapes and the plastic are both universal. People easily recognise these three symbols. They are familiar and comfortable, each with their own resonance. As such, they draw in each person who views the works for different reasons. The three shapes are precise, and human-imposed. In this work they reflect the irregular plastics on which they are superimposed and bring together those fragmented shapes. Incorporating them into the new body of work, particularly in the fusion of digital and woodblock printing (discussed in detail in the next chapter), elevated the importance and the relevance of primordial geometry to contemporary time, place and culture.

These shapes have been described as having universal elements. Cooper (1978) argued the circle as having the properties of being a universal symbol containing totality, wholeness and eternity (Cooper 1978, p. 36). His further analysis of the square and triangle broadens the understanding of them having a universal quality and relevance, and it is also due to these inherent properties that provide a personal attraction to my using them as fundamental elements in these artworks. He states that the square shape represents the earth, static perfection, integration, integrity, morality and limitation (Cooper 1978, p. 157). In reference to the triangle he noted that it represented the threefold nature of the universe; heaven, earth, man; father, mother, child, man as body, soul and spirit, the mystic number three; hence the fundamental representation of surface; ‘Surface is composed of triangles’ (Plato); the equilateral triangle depicts completion (Cooper 1978, p. 179).

When discussing universal shapes in art and nature, Harris (2010) proposed that using them while creating art can be seen as an attempt to reduce composition to a basic set of shapes and he acknowledged that it contributed to the birth of abstract art. ‘Cezanne thought that for painting nature, three were sufficient: cylinder, sphere and cone’
(Harris 2010, p. 11). Harris (2010) sees that when understanding art it has to be paired with having an analysis of its essential organisational forms and that this is where we can discover the essence of the art.

In terms of psychological symbolism, Jung (1964) elaborated on his understanding of the circle symbol when he stated:

> Whether the symbol of the circle appears in primitive sun worship or modern religion, in myths or dreams, in the mandalas drawn by Tibetan monks, in the ground plans of cities, or in the spherical concepts of early astronomers, it always points to the single most vital aspect of life - its ultimate wholeness. The abstract circle also features in Zen painting. Speaking of a picture by the famous Zen priest Sengai, another Zen master writes "In the Zen sect, the circle represents enlightenment. It symbolises human perfection" (Jung 1964, p. 240).

The reference to Zen and the circle representing the state of transcendence, supports the reference in my own work to Sengai and his work with these shapes, which has been a core element influencing the current work. The expression of a deeper meditative element in the work was triggered by the Japanese experience, which drew a greater interest in Zen meditation and the poetry of Basho and the art of Sengai, both being recognized as having attained the state of spiritual awakening.

Visual artists have also made statements about the significance of these universal shapes, including Vasily Kandinsky, from the Bauhaus, 1922–33, who stated in 1930:

> The circle...is the synthesis of the greatest oppositions. [It] combines the concentric and the eccentric in a single form, and in equilibrium. Of the
three primary forms [triangle, square, circle], it points most clearly to the fourth dimension (Kandinsky).

The shapes run through every aspect of the new body of work, like a stream re-emerging from the dark earth, consequently, their presence symbolises the evolution of the artist through a time of transition and expansion.

At the same time, there are alternate views on the three forms and their relative importance or perceived lack of significance, which include the following examples of differing thoughts and realities. Here, where the ideas of the Gestalt theorists proposed a primary status of the square, circle and triangle, over other shapes were described as ‘good shapes’, which was widely accepted.

However, Roberson, Davidoff and Shapiro (2002), argued:

Rosch (1973), found that speakers of a language lacking terms for any geometric shape nevertheless learnt paired-associates to these ‘good’ shapes more easily than to asymmetric variants. A cross-cultural investigation sought to replicate Rosch’s findings with the Himba of Northern Namibia who also have no terms in their language for the supposedly basic shapes of circle, square and triangle. It was concluded that there is no necessary salience for circles, squares and triangles. Indeed, we argue for the opposite because these shapes are rare in nature. The general absence of straight lines and symmetry in the perceptual environment should rather make circles, squares and triangles unusual, therefore, less likely to be used as prototypes in categorization tasks (Roberson, Davidoff & Shapiro 2002, p. 29).
While the contradiction exemplified by the Northern Namibian's cultural views, evidenced in their not having any terms for these three geometric shapes, is appreciated, the target audience for this work is the Western observer, who is more likely to be both the observer and potential collector of this art.

**Aesthetics: colour, line, composition**

A particular sense of aesthetics was drawn upon for this research from my years as a painter, especially when it came to decision making regarding, colour, line and compositional elements in the work. It has been as important in this art practice as the activist sentimentalities, and this new body of work is a continuation of this predilection.

The didactic or agit-prop dialogue inherent in the new work has been constantly finely balanced to draw attention to the creation of beauty. This is not an apologetic gesture for the didacticism in the work; rather, the expression of contemporary social and ecological issues in the art that is an imperative articulation of the artist as the creator.

The importance of an artwork having a certain element of alchemy involved in its creation, particularly artworks involving the use of trash or discarded materials, cannot be understated and is a vital component of this creative output. Various philosophers, including Gadamer (1986), have addressed this as being central to the creation of an artwork. He argued: that 'Just as a symbolic gesture is not just itself but expresses something else through itself, so too the work of art is not itself simply as a product’ (Gadamer 1986, p. 126).
3.4 Modalities in the art

Assemblage

Assemblage is the cornerstone of this series of works in the installation of sculptures, made from collections of found objects and prints and paintings using photographic digitalised imagery of assemblages of plastics and driftwood recovered from the beach. This expression has long been a manifestation of my contemporary art practice. The digital assemblages produced photographically here, which have finally found their full expression of place in this new work, firmly position aesthetics and beauty at the forefront of their message. Assemblages involve multifaceted networks that speak to the viewer's senses through colour, composition and line. These particular works transform objects, change the self and transmute public opinion, which, as with all good art, has the possibility of transporting the viewer into a number of states, which may include the state of meditation, or shock, appreciation, or a serendipitous sense of familiarity with the artwork.

The colour fields of the assemblages used in this series include yellow, black, red, white, blue, brown, pink, green, various shades of clear, grey and purple in certain places in the multi-coloured pieces, though purple plastics is the rarest colour seen in the plastics found on beaches.

A key element of expression in this assemblage series is in the form of Wabi-Sabi, which has been described by Koren (1994), in the following terms:

The material qualities of Wabi-Sabi (include): The suggestion of natural process. Things Wabi-Sabi are expressions of time frozen. They are made of materials that are visibly vulnerable to the effects of weathering and human treatment. They record the sun, wind, rain, rust, tarnish, stain, warping,
shrinking, shriveling and cracking. (Wabi-Sabi) is irregular. Things Wabi-Sabi are indifferent to conventional good taste. As a result, things Wabi-Sabi often appear odd, misshapen, awkward, or what many people would consider ugly (Koren 1994, p. 62).

Whilst in Japan, the philosophy of Wabi-Sabi was seen in various physical manifestations. The most obvious examples of this art form, apart from in the visual arts, was to be seen in Japanese architecture, where in many cases intricately designed structures with the most intense exacting detail, have a final brick or another object placed slightly askew, as a way of emphasising the imperfection of life. This was related to my own work with a deliberate inclusion of an imperfect element, be it an irregular line or inconsistent shadow or other effect to counteract the seemingly exact style.

![Image](image-url)
As a final addition to this series and the one referred to as my Wabi-Sabi moment, one work was created with a combination of both red and white plastics (Figure 3.11) that had a completely different feel to the other twenty-three works in the series.

**Sculpture**

These environmental sculptures where the worn, abraded, eroded and degraded manmade rubbish collected from Australia’s beaches has been presented in severe simple geometric form, generate a powerful contrast with the random sizes and accidental shapes of the material. This is in order to provoke our awareness and appreciation of their real nature (Stuart Gluth Personal communication to artist John Dahlsen, October 31 2015).

Initially, headlining the new work was the inspiration to create a series of twelve totemic sculptures, each of which would be created in the form of one of three geometric shapes. This sculptural body of work is the culmination of the best elements of the earlier work, and though embracing the inherent statements about the ecology, it also is largely a statement about making art for art’s sake, rather than the sake of economic reward. These three-dimensional totemic works are titled *Echoes* (Figures 3.12 and 3.13), and tie in with themes suggested by Charles Baudelaire in his poetic tome *The Flowers of Evil*, specifically, the themes of modernity and decay, and the discovery of beauty in the ugliness of the world.
**Figure 3.12a: Echoes** John Dahlsen 2014 (2016 Exhibition photo)
Perspex, ply and plastic found objects
200 cm - 240 cm x 30 cm x 12 totems. Photo: Fiona Morrison

**Figure 3.12b: Echoes** John Dahlsen 2014 (2016 Exhibition photo)
Perspex, ply and plastic found objects
200 cm - 240 cm x 30 cm x 12 totems. Photo: Fiona Morrison
Figure 3.13: *Echoes (with multi-colours and black)* John Dahlsen 2014
Perspex, ply and plastic found objects
200 cm - 240 cm x 30 cm x 6 totems
Echoes

In nature’s temple, living columns rise,
Which oftentimes give tongue to words subdued,
And man traverses this symbolic wood,
Which looks at him with half familiar eyes,
Like lingering echoes, which afar confound.

(Baudelaire, Charles 1857)

Connections to Baudelaire’s poetry are identified and reflected in the poetics of discarded objects. Whiteley (2010) stated: ‘Abandoned and discarded objects feed the imagination... And where there is industrial and architectural dereliction, in the midst of war or urban decay, the flowers of evil blossom and lyric poetry is written’ (Whiteley 2010, p. 156).

The sculptures, connecting to the imagery evoked in Baudelaire’s poem, illuminate that which is simultaneously visually beautiful and hideous in the modern world. Baudelaire’s ‘symbolic wood’ can be viewed as the buildings of a chaotic city or as totemic art, thus providing meaning when words fail, echoing feelings and memories of other times and other connections.

Working with three-dimensional forms was an exciting path to choose for these sculptures, which herald the first time I have been able to effectively exhibit the found plastics in a way that was not confined to being within wall works behind Perspex. The physicality of the found plastics encased in the sculptural forms I see as an elegant, contemporary and meaningful way to aesthetically express a confronting
environmental message about the proliferation of ocean litter plastics. Pivotal to the symbology of the sculptures is their totemic nature, as symbolic of the clan (Merriam-Webster 2016).

This work extended on previous work (Figures 3.14 – 3.16), completed in the US. The resonances of this current work can be seen with this sculptural body of artwork created and gifted to Jefferson City Missouri when Artist in Residence there in 2005. The works exhibited were a series of sculptures for their sculpture walk. During this time in Missouri, a series of installations forming a public artwork were constructed from recycled plastic bags donated by the people of Jefferson City.

Figure 3.14: Recycled Primary Coloured Plastic Bags in Acrylic
Jefferson City Missouri Artist in Residence.
John Dahlsen 2005
These works (Figures 3.14 and 3.15) were made from recycled plastic bags in acrylic tubes. (Figure 3.16) is a studio photo of the works in progress with community involvement.
The present body of sculptures are an extension from this Jefferson City series. The recent work however, is very different than the work made in 2005 and is calling on a much more significant complexity and refinement.

The need for such refinement has unearthed a level of 'presence' in the new work. This was partially due to the more sophisticated materials used in the current series, but is also due to an acknowledgement of having transformed internally in the intervening years, which has helped raise the vibration, and overall intensity, of the work. By processing the complexities of production of the new sculptures, it was a natural extension to fuse together the previous work created in Jefferson City with totems, together with the acrylic wall assemblage (Figure 3.17). The inspiration, and the challenge, was to take the concept of the wall assemblages and transform them into sculptures, thus giving the viewer a three-dimensional experience of the art.

Figure 3.17: *Styrofoam Triptych* John Dahlsen 2003
Found plastics behind Perspex 165 cm x 44 cm each
Another work that has influenced the current series of sculptures is a work titled *Gold Box* (Figure 3.18), which was made in the form of a square with clear acrylic, wood, gold leaf and found Styrofoam. It has similarities to Fiona Hall’s work discussed in the previous chapter, or Damien Hirst’s diamond encrusted skull (Figure 2.11). It too grabs the viewer with it’s pleasing aesthetics, which include the use of gold leaf on the framing components of the box, only to reveal on closer inspection, that the interior is not in fact constructed from shells and stones but from ‘rubbish’ found on the beach.

![Gold Box](image)

*Figure 3.18: Gold Box John Dahlsen 2001*
*Found objects behind Perspex, wood, gold leaf*
*70 cm x 100 cm x 100 cm*

*Gold Box* reveals the extent of the problem of Styrofoam in oceans and on beaches. The Styrofoam seen in this artwork has been gathered from Australia’s beaches and fills the
interior of the sculpture. It also makes the distinction between being too large to be a coffee table and too small to be a dining table, and has the extra element of a clear acrylic top, which further restricts the possibility of it being an object suitable for a functional use, all triggers for destabilising the viewer and essentially serving also as a reminder of its artistic and activist intention.

Figure 3.19: *Echoes* (Detail)
Perspex, ply and plastic found objects
240 cm x 30 cm x 12 totems. Photo: John Dahlsen
The totem sculptures, with symbolic influences, also represent the vitality to be gained through reconnecting with our roots, a return to basics and an alignment of aesthetic and activist truths, including the values so essential to being in balance with nature and the ecology. The series of sculptures may well have had been given the title: ‘Contemporary Middens’, being evocative of a collection of objects, simultaneously contained within sculptural forms that are in distantly reminiscent of Indigenous ‘Burial Poles’. Once the sculptural works had been completed as elongated three-dimensional forms, they became the initial inspiration for the new body of work created as prints and paintings. In determining effective solutions for the development of the sculptures, the idea of creating these acrylic shapes were initially generated after viewing these acrylic boxes in 2012. The acrylic boxes at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT) as shown in Figure 3.20, influenced the three-dimensional components of this installation.

Figure: 3.20: Possum-fur string feathers Narritjin Maymuru Nyapililingu
Acrylic box, natural pigments on wood
Museum and Gallery of the Northern Territory Photo: John Dahlsen
These acrylic boxes protected the delicate nature of some of the Indigenous sculptures, which used feathers and other fragile elements in their construction. Although there was use of smaller clear acrylic cylindrical shapes in the Jefferson City artworks, (Figures 3.14 to 3.15) the new series was similar to the size of the protective acrylic cases seen at MAGNT.

A further link became apparent in the disparity between encasing figures of cultural symbolic value versus detritus as seen in the sculptures using acrylic casing. In the case of these new sculptural works, the acrylic was used as a form of framing and not as an overtly protective function. There was nothing within the acrylic that was so fragile it needed protection; although it did in fact serve the function of both framing and ‘protecting’ the internal found plastics. The acrylic encased them and helped to retain the required form of the elongated geometric forms.

A further aspect of the new work is its relationship to the fundamental intentions of Aboriginal art, which was not originally motivated by money. Myers (2002) argued that Aboriginal art in the form of paintings are very connected to traditional tribal and cave painting. He proposed that:

Pintubi representations of their own cultural production are deeply entwined with ideas and practices of personhood, cosmology and the ontological articulation of subjects and objects (Munn 1970, 1973b). With the images said to come from the Dreaming, the emphasis is not on what the painter has done but on what is represented what that value has itself and on the painters relationship to it (Myers 2002, p. 21).
As a background to my printmaking aesthetics developing, I am aware there has been a certain haunting and repetition of many obsessions during my career as an artist, particularly (but not exclusively) combing Australian beaches for small washed-up pieces of plastic. However, primary among these obsessions has been the documentation of large-scale assemblages of the collected objects with the intention of creating a series of assemblage prints. This began with photographically documenting small collections of various plastics. It intensified with photographing larger piles of plastics laid out on the studio floor until ultimately there was no more room and was thus forced to lay out the found rubbish on a friend’s tennis court, using constructed scaffolding on wheels and waiting for overcast days to photograph them in segments under exquisite natural lighting. The resulting medium format transparencies were drum scanned and digitally stitched together until eventually there were twenty-four super high resolution prints that were originally envisioned being for large works on paper and canvas for potential future use in museum scale exhibitions.

These prints were the inspiration for the next phase in the creation and production, utilising them and introducing an entirely fresh element in aesthetics. The digital images created in 1999-2000 would be the vehicle to take the current work in prints to a different level. As digital prints, despite the effort they took to produce, this was the kind of work almost anyone can create in 2016 with a hi-resolution digital camera and a good quality printer.
Another component of the new body of work is a series of canvasses, upon which large-scale hi-resolution images of the assemblages of found plastics were printed using a digital printer. On these canvasses, the recurring theme of the three recurring symbols has been drawn and painted using a ‘halo’ or an emanating glow radiating from each individual form. Introducing the shapes into the current work, largely had the effect of making the work come to life after the fact. It was an experimental act and it was not known beforehand if it would be successful. Ponty (2003) argued this process of artists/painters creating such meaning by stating:

The painter can do no more than construct an image; he must wait for this image to come to life for other people. When it does, the work of art will have united those separate lives: it will no longer exist in one of them like a stubborn dream...it will dwell undivided in several minds (Ponty 2003, p. 284).

By incorporating the construction of images in these paintings, through the introduction of these shapes and forms, they had the effect of both exulting their own symbolic presence through the use of the lines, shading and pearling white emanating from each of them, whilst simultaneously raising the imagery of the found plastics into a state of conceivable radiance. They, as Ponty alluded to, came to life. This effect is intentional, with the current sense of aesthetics and, in one way, counteracts the didactic or agit-prop nature of the plastic installations within the work, where it contains an inherent altruistic teaching and possible moralistic message. It was done this way only for the resolution of these paintings. Once the sculptures had been made, the process was unleashed and one thing led to another. Through the creation of these paintings, a re-entry into creativity as a painter began again.
Installation

The installation of this series of work takes place in the form of an exhibition piece, which is to be read as a cohesive whole, each art practice, sculpture, printmaking and painting informing the other. Although each of the works can stand alone, together they reinforce the qualities of aesthetics, activism and transformation that is the subject nature of this research. This is a departure from previous practice of seeing installation as a particular work that either suspends from the gallery ceiling or protrudes off a wall (Figure 3.21).

Figure 3.21: Primary Installation
Digital prints on canvas and plastic found objects
250 cm x 100 cm each canvas. 40 cm x 130 cm x 200 cm each found plastics
John Dahlsen 2003
3.5 Conclusion

The ideas, themes and symbolism contained in the complete series of work are emblematic of the aesthetic focus of my artistic output and of the materials used during it. Viewed as a whole, they unify the components of the body of work, as well as the disparate elements of a career. The creation of the three dimensional sculptural works was the springboard to the prints and paintings so integral to completing the installation. Without these initial sculptural artworks being created as solid cornerstones at the time, the rest of the installation would not have evolved the way it did. The manner in which the production of the prints and paintings took place resulted in surprising developments, geographically, aesthetically and transcendentally. In Japan in keeping with the tension of opposites to be found consistently in the work, new artistic pathways opened up that melded ancient printmaking techniques with the 21st century.

In Darwin, a fascination with the three-dimensional sculpture series, which was the core element for the creative practice for this research, has resulted in pioneering new uses for Perspex and other manufactured materials to construct the totemic shapes. It was no accident that the paintings and prints mimicked the sculptures. This has been planned to have the effect of elevating the mundane beach-found plastics, common to all sixty pieces in the installation, in a way that changes them into objects that have an aesthetic and transformative quality.

The inception and the aesthetics involved in the new body of work were explored in this chapter. Its completion in the studio and the associated transformative elements experienced during the physical process of constructing art from ideas will be the subject of the next chapter.
Chapter 4

Creating the Art (Transformation)

Shariputra

Form does not differ from emptiness; Emptiness does not differ from form.

Form itself is emptiness; emptiness itself is form. So too are feeling, cognition, formation, and consciousness. Heart Sutra (Bodhidharma 527 AD).

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter explored the vision behind the new body of work and the ideas and aesthetic considerations that have shaped its final manifestation. This chapter explores the notion of transformation in a number of senses. It documents the production of the new work, including the manufacturing challenges inherent to bringing the sculptures from concept to fruition, the practical application of the idea to fuse digital printing with traditional Japanese woodblock printing techniques, and the apparently simple decision about which inks and paint to use in the production of the paintings, all of which provided significant transformative experiences personally and with the work.

It was not until well into this research that the complete body of new work was fully envisioned comprising the major visual art creative practice elements previously used in my career.
Creation of the components of sculpture, printing and painting called upon the full range of artistic skills developed; including skills not used in many years, such as precise figuration in painting. It also required an awareness of the interconnectedness of things in order to express a state of transcendence. A reminder of a childhood influence upon this installation of sculptures, paintings and prints is through the memory of the Catholic St Mary’s church interior, seen as a child whilst growing up in Bairnsdale, Victoria. The church not only had the most intricately detailed stained glass windows throughout, but also had painted murals adorning all of the walls and ceilings; they are reminiscent of elements of some of the images in this new installation (Figure 4.1).

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 4.1: Thongs Fusion Print**  
Digital and woodblock print of plastic found objects 94 cm x 61 cm  
John Dahlsen 2015
The interior was adorned with graphic depictions on the ceiling of angels, God depicted as an angel sitting high on his throne and other spiritual exaltations with a multitude of near naked angels young and old, down to the lower reaches of the walls and pillars with the most fearsome depictions of the devil, hellfire, damnation and the fallen. The windows were all stained glass assemblages, bringing forth dramatic light variations and dense saturations of contrasting colour and form. This new work contains elements of these two contradictions, from the quote from Bonaventure (1978), about St Francis and his depth of understanding about the interconnectedness of all things, to Plumwood (2002) and (Heidegger 1967) with their assessments about the global environmental situation.

When (St Francis) considered the primordial source of all things, he was filled with even more abundant piety, calling creatures no matter how small, by the name of brother and sister because he knew they had the same source as himself (Bonaventure 1978, pp. 254-5).

The creative body of work that is central to this research brings together all the genres of proficiency during the course of my creative output. It is a statement of a personal and artistic transformation. Themes and modalities that have journeyed alongside throughout the course of a career have been transformed into a collective installation.

4.2 Transformation

Transformation is a constant theme and presence in my practice, prior to and during the development as, an environmental artist. For many years now, found plastics—commonly known as ‘rubbish’ or ‘trash’—have been integral to the artworks, which transform discarded waste into political statements of aesthetic beauty. The work could as well be termed a form of outsider art, being made as what could be considered
an obsessive-compulsive activity. Dramatic efforts were made for the art in certain instances, such as in 2014, where collected rubbish was transported, after meticulous cleaning and sorting, across the breadth of the country in the form of a dozen bags of extra luggage on a Virgin Airlines flight.

Figure 4.2: *Echoes (with white)*
Perspex, ply and plastic found objects 240 cm x 30 cm x 6 totems
John Dahlsen 2014
To assist in highlighting this process of personal transformation is the description of an award, presented by The Art Gallery of NSW for the Wynne Prize. This award was for the series *Thong Totems* (Figure 4.3), where not only were national perceptions of what might be defined, as 'art' transformed, but my personal reputation as an artist was also transformed.

![Thong Totems](image)

**Figure 4.3: Thong Totems**  
Dimensions variable  
Winner Wynne Prize Art Gallery of NSW Dahlsen 2000

The Wynne was a career game changer that put my environmental art on the mainstream arts map in Australia. The judges' decision went against arts industry trends of the time: sculpture was only just beginning to enjoy its resurgence on the Australian art scene, and found objects (also known as rubbish) had, with the exception
of such artists as Rosalie Gascoigne and Tom Risley, yet to find resonance with arts elites. For the mainstream arts community, and more-so with the community at large, 'found objects' were thought to be predominantly, up until this Wynne, as simply rubbish and not suitable as materials for art. This can be said to a certain extent with the specially made work *Absolut Dahlsen* (Figure 4.4), which is an example of finding broad audiences for the viewing of this found object art using rubber thongs in the form of a commission.

![Image of Absolut Dahlsen artwork](image_url)

**Figure 4.4: Absolut Dahlsen**
Lent on a semi-permanent basis to the Gold Coast City Art Gallery
Dimensions variable
Dahlsen 2004
The Absolut commission received national and international exposure when it was exhibited at ‘Sculpture by the Sea’ in Sydney in 2004. With this work, the creation of such a significant piece highlighting the rubbish floating up on our beaches, in this case rubber thongs was made possible with the commissioning body paying all the bills associated with its construction. The process of this artwork’s creation would otherwise have been prohibitive to fund personally. The marketing reach of this exposure was also not possible to achieve singlehandedly. The fact that the commissioning body was the global vodka producer Absolut, existed as a point of contention for some who questioned the integrity of an artist working both with ecologically sustainable themes, as well as working with a vodka producer, however the broad reach the message in the work was able to achieve through both Absolut (and Sculpture By The Sea’s) marketing was phenomenal. This has also led to situations linked to this project, with as an example during the course of this current research, members of the Larrakia Artists making contact for advice on the construction of their Thong House (Figure 2.41), after seeing this artwork on the Internet.

Other transformative elements have been important and have been highlighted during this research. These include the potential for art to take the artist and the viewer into states of transcendence. The attraction to these states has been influenced by various religious traditions over the course of my years as a meditator. They include the inspiring effects of the poetic work of Basho, which highlights unity with and the momentary beauty of nature. This Haiku is from 'A Zen Wave', One Hundred Frogs:

The chestnut by the eaves

In magnificent bloom

Passes unnoticed

By men of this world.

It is the simplicity of the profound message in these four lines, which has been an inspiration that it is hoped has been successfully infused to some extent into this work with this installation series, giving it a power and presence that is a transformation in itself for those who view it. Basho’s poetry and its influence on both the work and personally in Japan, was also evident at this time, with reference to the following citation from *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* and other travel Sketches by Palmer (2001).

\begin{quote}
The old pond

A frog jumps in-

The sound of the water.

\end{quote}

As a way of introducing us into the affect of Haiku poetry in particular Basho’s Haiku, (Palmer 2001) stated: ‘The ‘plop’ of the frog jumping into the old mill pond, together with the stillness, the ripples of the water and the flash of colour evoked by ‘the sound of the water’, brings us to the kind of imagining a lengthier description may fail to evoke’ (Palmer 2001, pp. 52, 3).

Basho poetically brings us into the moment with his evocation of the sound of the frog hitting the water. Being drawn into the experience of the moment is the focus of the intention with this new body of work, which is hoping to guide the viewer/experiencer into this type of experience.

This artwork is the closest I have come to such a quality and herein rests an apparent contradiction. Much of the inspirational transcendental practices that have had their effect on me personally, such as Zen Buddhism and the poetry of Basho, point to a state of non-doing and not trying to change things, toward more of attaining a state of
dissolution into nothingness or what has been termed transcendence through meditation. Here the work seeks to subtly change the perception of the viewer through their interaction with it, offering them a silent invitation through observing the art into another state.

4.3 Sculpture: Transforming old to new

The creative practice component of this research began with an instinct to develop the three dimensional element of sculpture as a starting point. The process was well known and it would be premised on a time of collecting new plastics from Darwin's beaches and sorting them and the vast collection of found plastics. Work began on the series of twelve moulded Perspex totems at the beginning of 2014 and took a year to complete.
The base of each of these sculptural forms was made from laminated marine ply. Each ply base was approximately 30cm in width and up to 25cm in height. The bases each contain a removable section in which extra weight could be added to give them further stability prior to freight and exhibition. The overall weight of each totem was 30-40 kg each. The decision to use a multiple of four of each shape provided the possibility of breaking up the series of twelve at a later point into two series’ of six, or four series of three sculptures in the final installation. A final decision would depend on the aesthetic of the sculptures within the defined space.

One of the greatest challenges faced with creating the new sculptures, was the engineering. This required in-depth research of the acrylic casing, which was essential to house the beach-found plastics. While having produced vaguely similar sculptures previously, none were enclosed sculptures like these. This demanding phase of the work required numerous conversations with engineers, as they gave advice on the sizes and dimensions of the acrylic casing needed for each shape, and the type of base and base weight that would be required for stability.

What can be termed a ‘dumb sensibility’ develops in the artist over the years of a career, and through instinct and the right amount of engineering guidance, this intuitive sense helped to transform the sculptural forms and finalise them as stable works. However, the process was not without its own inherent difficulties. For example, the bases had to be machined out from the bottom so they contained a hollow section in which to insert heavy weights to ensure stability. The first batch of lids received also overlapped on the edges, having to be returned to the fabricator to be machined correctly to ensure high standards were maintained. In the end, the totemic sculptures worked structurally and aesthetically to satisfaction. As well, the sculptures completely exhausted my remaining supply of found plastics collected from Australian
beaches over the years. After months of collecting plastics from local beaches following the mini-cyclone in Darwin in early 2014, I only had half the plastics needed to complete the sculptures. Having recognised there were not enough found plastics to complete the full series, necessitated a return to Byron Bay (Figure 4.6), and thereupon I flew twelve jumbo bales of rubbish, each weighing thirty-two kilograms, back to Darwin on a business class domestic flight, which incidentally saved thousands of dollars in freight charges.

![Figure 4.6: Boxes of sorted found plastics.](image)

Photo: John Dahlsen 2014

This situation catapulted me directly into the realm of 'the rubbish warrior' Trevor Jenkins, who tediously carries his bags of rubbish around Darwin’s streets in the service of his art. In my case, it meant going to the extreme of delivering bags of rubbish to the airline counter and collecting it again at Darwin Airport. As it transpired, this was
exactly the amount needed to complete the series after it was sorted and mixed with the already sorted plastics in the studio at Charles Darwin University, where it all became a fusion of East Coast and North Coast beach found plastics.

Figure 4.7: Sorting plastics in the studio
Photo: John Dahlsen 2014

Working on the mundane repetitive action of sorting the found plastics in the studio caused a constant falling into states of meditation and expanded states of transcendence. This was similar to the experience after painting for extended periods of time. Early Buddhist scriptures describe these dual states in the Heart Sutra quote at the beginning of the chapter.
Figure 4.8: Fabricated triangular Perspex sculpture elements and ply bases
Photo: John Dahlsen

Figure 4.9: Fabricated square Perspex sculpture elements and ply bases
Photo: John Dahlsen

Figure 4.10: Fabricated circular Perspex sculpture elements and ply bases
Photo: John Dahlsen

(See further sculpture images in Appendix A).
4.4 Printmaking

At the beginning of 2015, five weeks were spent in Japan on a Churchill Foundation Fellowship, where training in specialised Moku-Hanga woodblock printmaking and collaboration with woodblock master printer and carver, Soichi Kitamura happened. This resulted in a body of limited edition works that blended contemporary digital printing techniques with traditional Japanese woodblock techniques (Figure 4.11).

Figure 4.11: Green Fusion Print
Digital & woodblock print of plastic found objects
94 cm x 61 cm John Dahlsen 2015
Kitamura-san said that upon having presented this project to him and to his assistant in April 2014 on a first visit to Kyoto, in conjunction with a nearby conference in Osaka, that he was both excited and looked forward to the work, and ultimately saw it as a challenge. He said the fusion of contemporary digital printmaking and woodblock printing was especially new for him as a combination of techniques. As a master carver and printmaker, Kitamura-san had no interest in being an artist by creating his own work. The woodblock training and collaboration in Japan transformed my printmaking skills to a new level; this is showcased in the practical application of the fusion of traditional woodblock printing techniques with the digital assemblage prints. The system of photographing the assemblage prints is documented in Chapter Three.

In Japan, I discovered the harmonic balance between contemporary digital printing practice and traditional woodblock practice as an art form. This developed the aim with the prints to retain a tension of opposites fusing ancient and contemporary techniques. Using the shaped elements as recurring motives, as a way of editing the information in the art. Creating such a fusion was unknown territory for myself and for the woodblock master. Initially, the idea was to reproduce the past digital prints entirely in woodblock form. I was concerned that this suggestion would be insulting to Japanese woodblock traditions. However he was excited to work alongside by joining the woodblock tradition with the modern age. Further discussion with the master printer, revealed his belief that while we may have been successful in creating one out of the series of twenty-four during the planned five weeks with him in Japan, to complete them all was impossible given the proposed timeframe. Following a reassessment, it occurred to me to use the traditional woodblock printing technique to mimic the geometric shapes developed in the sculptural component of the work as overlapping forms on the digital prints.
The master agreed this was achievable in the five weeks and so the process began. It was at this point that the entire series came together as whole. Even though it all looked to be plunging into a crisis when the Japanese master said the original vision was not possible, once it was decided to incorporate the three shapes into the prints, it also provided a resolution for how the planned paintings would derive their fundamental inspiration. As well, the prints made sense of the sculptures; integrating the shapes into the prints became a two-dimensional expression mimicking what had been done in three dimensions. The process worked well as collaboration with the Japanese master.

When negotiations with the master Japanese woodblock printer resulted in the successful incorporation of the shapes over the top of the assemblages, this opened the door for the works on paper to be fused with woodblock printing and canvases to be fused with painting.

The prints were to become a fusion of a contemporary digital printing method and the traditional Japanese ‘Moku-Hanga’ woodblock printing, incorporating the three elongated geometrical shapes seen in the sculptural forms. In essence, they can be seen as central components in the prints and paintings, acting as a way of anchoring the busy colours and shapes of the open field of waste depicted in the digital elements.

The creation of these assemblage prints involved firstly compiling twelve medium format transparencies per assemblage by laying out the found plastics on a tennis court and then mounting a camera on a trolley to take photographs at regulated stationary intervals. These medium format transparencies were then drum-scanned and digitally stitched together to form a super high-resolution print.
The initial parameters for this series of prints were set to meet museum standards. They needed to be produced with the degree of such a high resolution that no ‘blurriness’ occurred and the viewer could not see any form of pixilation. The primary reason so much trouble and expense was invested was because they needed to have the quality that could be later reproduced up to large-scale wall sizes if required for exhibition in major shows. This new technique of fusing digital and woodblock prints engaged some hitherto unconscious decisions about colour, composition, line and form and led to breakthroughs in the new work that was made.
All the creative control over the work and all aesthetic decisions were made by me alone. The creation of this work also included inherent skills as a colourist, which was developed whilst being a painter; this has aided in creating a complex web of colour relationships through the prints, paintings and sculptures, which are a natural extension and progression from the previous work. In this instance however, there has been a conscious deliberation to reach beyond previous limitations by incorporating some of the better elements of previous art practice, together with some newly discovered practices. This was in order to create something original and respond to what has been required as a visual language for this work, with the use of materials combined with form, line, colour and composition.

The series of plastic assemblages included various primary and secondary colours, black, clear and white, multi-coloured plastics, rope and string, drinking straws, rubber thongs, a plastic mix, Cyalumes or glow sticks, plastic coke bottles, a predominantly white Styrofoam assemblage as well as two versions of driftwood assemblages and three versions of recycled plastic bags including, green and grey, white and clear plastic bags. The production of the digital prints at the end of 2014 seemed to be a perfect time to explore new elements, such as the fusion of digital printing with woodblock printing and the incorporation of the shapes: square, circle, triangle.

*Thongs* (Figure 4.13) is one of the works that was developed in earlier years, which was suited to being exhibited in larger scale museum standard shows. Although it was an earlier work, it was exhibited during 2014 and 2015 whilst doing the PhD with its participation in the travelling exhibition 'Gyre' involving three US Art museums.
To take the digital print work further into a new realm, it was necessary to either abandon the use of them or include another refined element. That refined element was to be the fusion of traditional Japanese woodblock printing.
In the months preceding the time in Kyoto, I printed large-scale digital canvases from the digital files, in the process identifying which artworks would have the shapes of the elongated square/rectangles, the elongated tube/circles, and the elongated triangular shapes. I decided on this aesthetic by matching up opposites and creating what would be a visual balance of composition.

Shortly after arriving in Japan, there began the identification of the artist proof set of the digital prints, which would eventually become the digital/woodblock fusion series. The artist proof set were the prints that were the least successful of all the sets sent over from Australia to Japan and these had been set aside for experimentation.

Figure 4.15: Kyoto studio photo - sorting the digital prints into piles and deciding which prints had certain shapes.  
Photo: John Dahlsen 2015
In Chapter 3, it was mentioned that the Japanese artist and mystic Sengai Gibbon was influential in my decision to use the shapes that he was renowned for depicting in his work. Although his works were made with brush and ink and were not meant to be technically ‘precise’, they contained the essence of these shapes, just as Basho was able to do with his Japanese Haiku poetry, by describing states of expanded awareness in four simple lines of verse.

The creation of the blocks involved carving into the surface of a type of plywood. This wood is called ‘Shina Beniya Ita’ and it is similar to marine ply material. The wood was a laminated board approximately one centimetre in depth, with a flat plywood side that becomes the surface of the woodblock, which was carved after the template was traced onto the surface of the wood.

During the early stages of the time in Japan, Kitamura-san prepared the tracing paper from the printed outlines of the geometrical images that I had brought over from Australia. The series of geometric symbols were created full-size on plastic printed-paper, which made it easy to trace in readiness to draw them onto the surface of the wood by using tracing paper and carbon paper, which was selected for its ability to mark the top of the woodblock below when drawing from above. Coincidentally, the ‘Shina Beniya Ita’ wood was almost identical to the variety of marine ply used in the creation of the bases of the sculpture series. This brought a sense of cohesion to the work.

Another phase of the woodblock process involved deciding which shapes to print on each of the artworks. The square symbol was paired with assemblages that had either primarily circular or triangular imagery, and likewise with the other two shapes. In this way it was easy to control and limit to a certain extent a saturation of similar elements and provide some contrast.
Having worked with the geometric symbols for the previous year while making the sculptures, it seemed a natural step to incorporate them in similar ways on the prints. This expression worked hand in hand with the sense of aesthetics and was highlighted by the use of a glow emanating from the forms by using a luminous pearling compound, similar to the one used in a series of paintings in the early 1990s (Figure 1.5).

Figure 4.16: Tracing onto the woodblocks prior to carving
Photo: John Dahlsen

Figure 4.17: Tracing and marking the outline on the wood
Photo John Dahlsen
A critical aspect of traditional Japanese woodblock printing is 'registration'. Registrations are critical; they need to be exact to the minutest part of a millimetre. If the registration was incorrect, then the printing process would have been faulty, the woodblocks wouldn't align with the other woodblocks and hence the different layers of printing on the paper would have been out of alignment.
Most prints had a side border of approximately one centimetre, and for the purposes of registration it was decided to make this 1.5 centimetres at the registration markings. This created the need to attach a small sticker to each side, which would extend out to 1.5 centimetres.

Likewise, this was repeated at the top (which was actually the bottom when flipped over for the printing purposes). So the top with the 5.5 centimetre edge became 6 centimetres with the use of a little white sticker, which was then cut to exactly 6 centimetres and 1.5 centimetres on the side, (Figure 4.21).

Figure 4.20: Preparing the paper for the registrations
   Photo: Soichi Kitamura
There were two registration indicators per sheet on a print and on the woodcut itself, two indicators in the bottom corner and one along the edge; the paper would snugly fit into these and they would be the guidelines for how the print would sit when the ink was being rubbed onto the paper.

Paper cutting was tedious and meticulous work. In some cases close to a millimetre or two were taken off the edge of the paper in order to create an exact uniform edge all around. For myself, it was an excellent meditative exercise. The paper cutting, or 'paper pulling', was done by measuring the edges of the paper to get a one centimetre edge on the sides and bending them, which can force in the water along the edge, so that when a water soaked sponge was drawn along across the top of the paper and then the paper was pulled away, it left a natural looking slightly rough edge; this edge would look authentic when the print was 'free floated' (not mounted under a mat board) in a frame.
Figure 4.22: Carving the registration mark for the side of the woodblock  
Photo: John Dahlsen

Figure 4.23: Carving the registration position on the woodblock  
Photo: John Dahlsen
The process of cutting the woodblock required meticulous measuring and tracing onto the wood. Tools needed to be in impeccable condition, with chisels extremely sharp (Figure 4.24). Extraordinary cutting skills were necessary to precisely cut into the wood and acute attention to cutting angles was imperative.

This carving procedure can be done by a laser cutting machine, but it is both expensive, approximately AUD $700 per woodblock at this size, and would lack the expertise and individual touch that a master carver can bring to the work. At the beginning of the process, when laying the foundations for the printing process, it was critical that all aspects of the woodblocks’ carvings and registrations are exact.

The sharpening stones in Figure 4.25 were made from clay blocks. Three times a day, the woodblock carving knives were sharpened. To sharpen, water was poured onto the top of the sharpening blocks and another piece of the same kind was used to keep it flat, while at the same time raising some of its fine material. It was rubbed again and again in an extremely vigorous forward and backward motion. Precisely sharpened knives are essential in this art.
In the woodblock-cutting phase of the work, if any accidental movement were to take place, whereby the knife cut through the woodblock area where a line was intended to remain, then it would need to be immediately thrown away and recreated and re-carved again. There was little margin for error, and concentration was essential, although in some cases Supa-glue did become a handy remedy.
One of the initial stages of the woodblock printing process was the preparation of the newspaper, which needed to be sprayed with a fine layer of water that in turn would dampen the Washi paper. This dampening of the paper was necessary to slightly stretch the paper, which in turn provided a welcoming porous surface to which the inks could adhere. This was achieved by spraying each piece of newspaper on the front and on the
back, brushing the newspaper out after an even layer had been applied, and then by adding a new piece of newspaper and the process repeated. The process continued until approximately thirty or forty pieces of dampened newspaper were laid and brushed flat with a piece of plastic underneath and on top of them on the table and the air conditioning turned off so the room didn't become dry. The process was altogether very exacting and meticulous and the associated attention to detail very much in alignment with the processes in my studio in Australia, from collecting, sorting and arranging the various found plastics that are used in the artwork.

Deciding upon the types of inks, which are essentially gauche inks (Holbein), was the next step. The initial decision was to use a transparent white as a wash in the background to edit back the digital print of the assemblages, and use an opaque black line for the geometric shapes. This changed once the carvings had been done. It added more
translucency and depth to introduce some pearling compound, which is also known as Mica powder to the mix. Experimentation with a number of combinations assisted to settle on a combination of a fifty/fifty percent mix, which looked the most aesthetically pleasing on the digital prints. It was also decided at that moment to make the black outline of the shapes dark but transparent, with a faint trace of pearling compound added to the mix. The shadows would contain the same material and flex the three-dimensional aspect of the work. There was also a significant amount of adjustment necessary to fine-tune the paper to properly align with the printed services. These adjustments generally happened meticulously with small parts being either cut off the woodblock or slight additions to the woodblock itself, (Figure 4.29).

Figure 4.29: Adjusting registrations by adding slivers of Cherry wood. Photo: John Dahlsen
The chisel was used to make an incision next to the registration mark and a piece of cherry wood was inserted into the cavity and then cut, expanding the registration to the required level. Sometimes a millimetre was also cut from the paper registration as an alternative solution. Then the printing began on each of the ten sample experimental prints. The initial beginnings of certain shapes on some of the prints presented an idea of what the overall result was likely to be. Ideas kept formulating and changing as the work proceeded.

During this specific part of the process, a niggling suspicion arose that even though it was planned ahead do four woodblocks per print, this was one too many. The reason for this was due to the shadow part of the print that had been incorporated into the series, giving a certain three-dimensional look to each of the shapes. The testing phase revealed that that the extra woodblock would have compromised the three-dimensional effect, making it too clunky, and resulted in my decision not to proceed with it. It was discovered as a minute detail, which would have had a profound effect on the success of the work.

The woodblock printing procedure went remarkably well. This was largely due to the preparations undertaken prior to printing and during printing on the test prints. These tests were essentially ten rejects from the digital printing process, and they were perfect for making certain decisions regarding how many woodblocks to use, lining up exact registrations, deciding on the thickness of the lines being used and the various shadings and gradations. All of this was sorted out during that ten print run.

Beginning with large flat white areas on each of the three sets of eight shapes, the printing developed in a two-fold process because of the need to get a certain depth to the essentially transparent colour of the mix of white and pearl, and the only way for this to happen successfully was to print them twice (Figure 4.30).
After completing some variations on the prints, just to check if, for example, three reprints onto the surface were more effective than two, it was decided that two runs of the white print woodblock was the best approach, and this method continued throughout the complete series for consistency.

By the conclusion of the first two weeks' work in Japan, the large white woodblock areas on all of the prints had been completed twice. The following two woodblocks were completed in the second fortnight. This included the lines and the shadows, which were printed onto the triangular shape, the square and the rectangle shape in their respective sets of eight, with an initial artist’s proof set and three of the first print editions. The reason for the reprinting was due to the transparent nature of the white/pearl ink. It was extraordinarily difficult to have it strongly opaque on the first print run, and best not to be too dense. This made the prints delicate and refined. The black ink could have been more opaque. In many ways this was trial and error and mistakes in the printing process were refined as the work proceeded.
Figure 4.31: The printing equipment, brushes, inks, baking paper, baren and biscuits!  
Photo: John Dahlsen

Prior to leaving Kyoto in the last days, an opportunity was taken to visit art stores and knife stores in the city to put together a quality 'Moku-Hanga' tool kit to take back to Australia. This included the correct knives and chisels, sharpening blocks, a 'baren', which is used to apply pressure to the paper when printing, plus some starch paste, also necessary to add to the surface of the woodblock; along with the preparatory water and the inks and gouache, some brushes and other items best purchased in Japan (Figure 4.31).
It was important to dry some areas of the printed-paper that had become too damp due to the rest of the paper being printed on in extra areas. This required a specific process of removing each sheet and placing a small strip or section of dry newspaper over the area, to reduce the extra dampness of the printed Washi paper (Figure 4.32). A slight undulation could be seen in the Washi paper and this would take this negative inconsistent effect away. This was not good for the printing method, as it slightly interfered with the registration. The first eight completed prints were then dried under the cardboard sheets. This was the third time they had been ‘dried’, which meant the cardboard sheets had been exposed to warmth for some hours after drying the dampened sheets and were exchanged with the older ones. This essentially prevented any mould and at the same time flattened out the paper (Figure 4.33).
The return to Australia brought new knowledge of the fusion of ancient and traditional methods of printing. There was an overall elevation of the quality of my printmaking to a level where it became truly unique as an aspect of my work and the experience of travelling to Japan provided this opportunity.
The Japan experience simultaneously deepened the work that was being created as the creative practice component of the PhD and elevated the understanding of the transformation component of this research.
Figure 4.36: Digital/woodblock fusion test prints in Kyoto  
Photo: John Dahlsen

Figure 4.37: Digital/woodblock fusion test prints in Kyoto  
Photo: John Dahlsen
Figure 4.38: Digital/woodblock fusion test prints in Kyoto
Photo: John Dahlsen

The following three Figures (4.39 – 4.41) were the first finished digital/woodblock fusion prints. The print series created the threefold opportunity of bringing rubbish into close focus in an aesthetically beautiful way while finding a meditative and transformative process during its creation.
Figure 4.39: *Grey Fusion Print* (Square)
Digital and woodblock ‘Moku-Hanga’ Limited edition print
Materials: Water based inks on Japanese handmade ‘Washi’ paper
Size: Image size 83 cm x 58 cm. Paper size: 60.5 cm x 94 cm
Dahlsen 2015
Figure 4.40: Pink Fusion Print (Triangle)
Digital and woodblock ‘Moku-Hanga’ Limited edition print
Materials: Water based inks on Japanese handmade ‘Washi’ paper
Size: Image size 83 cm x 58 cm. Paper size: 60.5 cm x 94 cm
Dahlsen 2015
A studio photo of the framed prints ready for exhibition is presented in Figure: 4.42. Each of the prints were floated on corflute backing behind Perspex in a lime washed wood frame, which was chosen for the effect of the lime washing on the frames being reminiscent of the bleaching by the sun, sea and salt of the woods and plastics found on the beaches that are used in this series of work as assemblage prints.
Figure 4.42: Studio photo of the completed framed prints.
Photo: John Dahlsen 2016

(See further print images in Appendix A).

4.5 Painting and drawing

The final component of the new body of work was a series of canvasses upon which large-scale found plastic assemblage images, reminiscent of the totem sculptures, have been printed (via a large digital printer). The paintings that were worked on in the studio at Charles Darwin University were large-scale prints on canvas, again using the same series of assemblages of plastics on which were drawn the outline of the shapes of the three symbols. This series of paintings was created to complete the multi-dimensional creative practice component of this research.
I decided to mimic what had been done in Japan with the prints on the paintings. As with the sculptures and the prints, the production of the paintings contained challenges. By painting the shapes there was an exploration of a set of new techniques, which included exact highly figurative drawn and painted linear elements and the use of brushes normally used in woodblock printing to create the glowing edge effect emanating from the shapes in the centre of the canvasses. Furthermore, the paintings demanded a level of technical ability, as they were highly figurative and very detailed. Evoking earlier work (Figure 3.5), the paintings demanded exactness to create the symbols, and a level of skill not called upon for some time.

As part of the technical process in painting these images, the geometric shapes were both drawn and painted on the twenty-four canvasses. An oil paint stick was used to draw the black outline shapes and a pearling compound, also known as an acrylic mica emulsion, was used with a mix of diluted white paint for the outside of the semi-transparent outline. Finally, a transparent mix of black and a small addition of pearl emulsion in the shaded area completed the three-dimensional quality, creating a luminous light emanating from each shape which continued the suggestion of a three-dimensional quality, whilst in fact being created on a two-dimensional surface.

It is hoped this has the effect of being two-dimensional environmental art that sends a strong ecological statement, while at the same time creating a beautiful aesthetic. The purpose of creating this luminosity was to evoke an entry point for the viewer to be drawn into a state of stillness and meditation and have reflection about their existence as sentient beings and their corresponding responsibility for the state of the planet, while potentially having a transcendent experience in the process.
Figure 4.43: Canvasses in the CDU Darwin studio
Photo: John Dahlsen 2014
Figure 4.44: Influential shapes and templates from the woodblock printing process were also used in the paintings.
The production of the paintings yet again raised the paradox of using solvent-based inks, oddly named 'eco-sol-max', on the 'Roland' large format printer, which is known within printing circles for not being particularly ecologically friendly. A personal compromise was made here with the use of these materials, as the overall message regarding the environment and our need to care for it outweighed the questionable considerations that the use of these types of inks raised. Having this body of work broadcast by ABC TV in March 2015 in the form of a feature interview was a testament of the conviction that the methods of presenting this work to the public were justified.

Figure 4.45: Canvasses in the CDU Darwin studio
Photo: John Dahlsen 2014

Figure 4.46: Canvasses in the CDU Darwin studio
Photo: John Dahlsen 2014
Figure 4.47: Stretching the canvasses in the CDU Darwin studio
Photo: John Dahlsen 2016

Figure 4.48: Stretched canvasses in the CDU Darwin studio
Photo: John Dahlsen 2016
Figure 4.49: Driftwood#1 Painting (Square)
Materials: Acrylic, oil, pencil, ink on digital print on canvas
Size: 160 cm x 130 cm
Dahlsen 2015
Figure 4.50: *Straws Painting* (Circle)
Materials: Acrylic, oil, pencil, ink on digital print on canvas
Size: 160 cm x 130 cm
Dahlsen 2015
Figure 4.51: *Pink Plastics Painting* (Triangle)
Materials: Acrylic, oil, pencil, ink on digital print on canvas
Size: 160 cm x 130 cm
Dahlsen 2015

(See further painting images in Appendix A).
4.6 Transcendence, meditation

Creating an invitation to a space of expansion, commonly experienced through meditation and as a transcendent activity, is central to these artworks. In one way, other than aesthetically, this invitation or evocation helped to counteract or balance any didactic ecological messages through having the found plastics components in the work. Meditative elements in this work are a core element, and this intent has become renewed and more profound during the course of this research.

The new artworks are invitations to possible transcendent connection. The expression of awareness of impermanence, and ultimately of transcendence, that comes through meditation has taken front position in the development of the new work for this research. In particular, the print and painting works express a certain radiance surrounding the central shapes, where, upon exposure to them, there is an aim to transport the viewer to a potentially altered state of meditation. This condition has the potential of being intensified upon longer exposure, coaxing the viewers to abandon mental analysis and drop back inside themselves. To arrive at the place beyond the trappings and distractions of the chattering mind or the usual tensions of the physical body, where a still state of being naturally exists.

Rilke (1903), described this expanded state:

If only it were possible for us to see farther than our knowledge reaches, and even a little beyond the outworks of our presentiment. For they are the moments when something new has entered us, something unknown; our feelings grow mute in shy embarrassment, everything in us withdraws, a silence arises, and the new experience, which no one knows, stands in the midst of it all and says nothing (Rilke 1903).
The paintings of the Zen monk Sengai have had a profound influence on this work, first encountered when Zen meditation and Buddhism were strong influences, during which time I practiced meditation for several hours a day.

To what shall I compare this life of ours?

Even before I can say

it is like a lightning flash or a dewdrop

it is no more. - Sengai

The meditation practice has continued for many years, and the observation of qualities of meditation and stillness of the mind and body has caused this quality to be gradually embedded into the artwork. Thus there is an acute awareness that the introduction of these symbols into this new body of work may have the effect of both exulting their own symbolic presence through the use of the lines, shading and pearling white emanating from each of them, as well as simultaneously raising the imagery of the found plastics into a state of near radiance.

The process of woodblock printing in Japan was intended to heighten the ability to experience a greater sense of 'being in the moment', what is equated to a state of meditation, as the woodblock process was extremely tedious; it required an inordinate amount of patience, was time consuming and labor-intensive. It was a meditation in itself. During this time in Kyoto, an absorption of Japanese culture occurred alongside being awe inspired at their attention to detail and the incorporation into their work of what we in the West term 'meditative processes'. The Japanese experience triggered a renewed interest in Japanese poetry in general, in particular with poets and mystics with a deep connection with the ecology, in particular Basho.
An extended detailed description of the woodblock process has been included in this chapter as a way of documenting the practical application of the renewal of the meditative process in the work, which is reflected in the finished prints and paintings. The woodblock process, the reinvigorated meditative practices and the end products are directly connected to each other and intrinsically linked, providing an example of an ongoing move away from any sense of a commercial focus in this art.

It is worth noting that the shapes themselves aren’t spiritual; it is the way they are presented that creates the invitation into deep reflection that, ultimately, draws them into the activist statement, ready for transformation by a simple, subtle question that is, literally, staring them in the face: ‘what is my position on my contribution to widespread consumerism that is trashing the environment?’ From this deep reflective and receptive state, they connect directly with ‘the problem’ and, as with any deep reflection, this can only bring awareness and intelligence to the crisis confronting them.

It is certainly an intention that if people have not reflected on this issue previously, this body of work may provide a good place to start. The intention of the work is not about finger pointing. It is an invitation to wake up to the reality of our universal collective responsibility for taking care of the natural world. Using the tools available to me as an artist, in this case familiar symbols and a beautiful aesthetic, there is an objective to hopefully guide people in the direction of inner stillness and personal meditative reflection.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, transformation was considered within the processes that were involved in the creation of the sculptures, prints and paintings that form the new body of work.
All three components presented challenges, both foreseeable and unforeseen, from the creation of the Perspex casings for the sculptures to the artistic fusion of digital and traditional printing methods. A stretching and expansion has occurred through the experiences with everything from ideas to raw materials, and as a result the artistic practice has been transformed.

The production of this new work has reinvigorated my artistic career on a number of levels. A new inventiveness has surfaced in being able to present activist statements in a way that is different to previous work. This has occurred in particular with the technique of attracting the viewer with an aesthetic appeal after which the work shares its ecological messages about the destructiveness to the planet with ocean litter issues. On further reflection, the experience of learning traditional woodblock printing in Japan, particularly, paved the way for a complete reinvigoration of the artistic practice. This included a stronger emphasis of the meditative element in the work and potentially permeating from the work. The reinvigoration manifested in a number of other ways, including renewing an attention to detail in the work, last seen in the early days of my creative output as an environmental artist.

The idea underpinning this body of work is that one is encouraged to overcome ecological degradation by meditating on the transcendent. This is achieved by the placement of the evocative shapes that are used to provoke different levels of experience when viewing it, and can potentially get people to discover inner silent spaces where an intelligent response to and care for our ecological situation are the norm. As people are prompted by the artwork to have interactions with meditation and expand into the bigger picture of transcendence, an image of how to individually resolve some of the problems with our ecology may in turn become more apparent. The
new insights and aspirations that have required this new body of work to be created include the convergence of art and social responsibility.
Conclusion

All in the world know the beauty of the beautiful, and in doing this they have (the idea of) what the want of skill is. So it is that existence and non-existence give birth the one to (the idea of) the other; that difficulty and ease produce the one (the idea of) height and lowness arise from the contrast of the one with the other; that the musical notes and tones become harmonious through the relation of one with another; and that being before and behind give the idea of one following another (LaoTzu 6th century BC).

This exegesis, *Environmental Art: Activism, aesthetics and transformation*, has been an extensive inquiry into the role as an environmental artist at the beginning of the 21st century, a time of significant global ecological challenge. The new body of artwork that forms the creative component of this research relies on rubbish collected from Australian beaches and speaks directly to this challenge. The quote from LaoTzu in the epigraph above highlights the challenge experienced with making this work, where a balance has been found between contrasting elements of the heights of beauty, in the deliberate sense of aesthetics that have been brought to the creation of these artworks and the lowness of ocean litter, the material that forms the majority of the work.

During this research a synthesis has developed, with the work being presented and positioned as art within the environmental genre, having its roots in the unique interplay between art activism, aesthetics and transformation. These elements have been balanced in their equal value. The resulting exegesis marks a transformation for an environmental artist. Furthermore, this installation—the entire body of work—can be seen as a direct creative response to an artist’s renewal in practice upon re-entering academia as a symbolic reply. The new body of work is dedicated to the cycle of return.
This work encapsulates all of the threads personally explored as a visual artist, from recurring universal shapes to ecological statements to transcendence, incorporating figurative, abstract and semi-abstract elements into the work, employing artistic training and experience in the modalities that are significant: sculpture, painting, printmaking, drawing, assemblage and installation. The work is about the scourge of plastics destroying our planet and the carcinogens that make their way into the food chain, melded seamlessly into sublime appreciation for beauty, elegance and refinement. It is an invitation to experience different qualities expressed in the work including transcendence and, ultimately, connection with the ineffable. A key lesson in the creation of the sculptures was discovered in the core essential components of 'square, circle, triangle', the basic geometric shapes that have a significant symbology artistically. They afforded the simplicity of form that provided a reference point from which has grown an original expression. They also gave a tactile three-dimensional contribution to the overall body of work, which informed and gave a greater depth to the two-dimensionality of the prints and paintings. In these prints and in the paintings, the environment and activism is inherent: to lead the viewer to glimpse the real world of the unnatural, man-made discarded plastic rubbish, which is viewed as ugly when seen in the natural environment. This ‘ugliness’ in turn transforms when it is presented as aesthetically unique artworks, after undergoing an alchemic transformation, by being first exposed to nature and its weathering processes and, finally, when it is recreated as artwork in the studio, complete with an artistic attention to composition, colour, linear and other elements that forms an artwork.

It is possible that artists are attracted to these sectors of the arts industry as a method of discovering their own personal healing, growth and meditation; for this artist personally it has been so. This exegesis provides insight into the relationship between making art that rests on a fine balance between a statement about aesthetics and the
creative aspect of working with recycled objects and as an activist statement about contemporary society, while being largely dependant on that same people and social construct for sales and representation. This research project also aims to illuminate the transformative potential of art making and the possibility of art evoking states of transcendence in the viewer. It also identifies pressures on the integrity of artists who are intrinsically motivated by altruism as a core element in their work, and mounts a case for ensuring their ongoing survival in, and contribution to, a healthy broad-based arts culture/industry in Australian society. The status of, and conditions in, the environmental art sector are generalisable to other sectors within the arts industry. Therefore it follows that the results of this exegesis will be generalisable and of benefit to other niche sectors and individuals industry-wide. Although I recognise that art 'trends' will also determine community and industry art priorities and similarly, adverse conditions may affect different sectors at different times. It is my contention that artists who do not conform to art industry norms, as defined by expectations among the dominant elite, potentially face inherent difficulties, on many levels including, sociologically and sometimes psychologically in sustaining their practice. Realisations that have occurred during the course of this research, have led to a deepening practice of meditation and a renewed interest in transcendent experiences, which have been happening simultaneously in life and through work over the past three and a half years. I have tried to imbue the current art with a strong suggestion of transcendence in the way of deliberately making the shapes in the artworks radiate with a strong 'glow' emanating from their edges in the work.

As an environmental artist there exists a personal commitment to a social comment about the destruction of nature, for example seen by the use of plastics collected along Australia's coastline, fused together with an artistic intention to create art as an aesthetic appreciation of nature and of beauty itself. The nexus between these is the unique space
where this work is positioned as environmental art, within the various forms of art that I have made up until 2016, along with ecological statements encompassing climate change, and social commentary. There is a variety of other activist related art reflecting conscious thought on issues, all being expressed throughout myriad forms of creative practices.

It has been a cornerstone of my art practice to ensure the social/environmental statement it is making does not overtake the aesthetic qualities. It has also been imperative to have contemporary art and aesthetics as the backbone of the practice, while in turn being able to share a positive message about the need to care for the environment. The way this is achieved and is hopefully expressed in this work is through a positive aesthetic of beauty being central and intrinsically important. I believe that art can communicate ecological action while simultaneously be an aesthetic inspiration for those viewing it. If someone witnesses beauty in what I have done with the objects in these artworks, it may lead them to an intentional invitation toward a further step with the work, possibly having inspiration that they can also look at recycled materials in another way that can be creative. This work reveals the intrinsic beauty in certain wasted objects, which can then elevate the viewer to another almost unavoidable step of considering the ecological implications, necessary or not, but there because of the use of the plastic materials. I hope the viewer is coaxed into a third phase, through the use of the geometric shapes in the art, which helps to induce in the viewer a potentially transcendent state.

It is noted by the researcher that a key conceptual consequence these artworks evoke is a clear sense of irony. The repetitive use of the geometric shapes act on the one hand as a signifier of order, whilst on the other hand being placed centrally in each of the works within fields of inorganic and organic man made waste. This juxtaposition is further
heightened by the glowing edge in the two dimensional works, which in turn has the effect of focusing the viewer on the experience of viewing the rubbish found within each of the shapes. The strength of these tactics provides the work with an ironic aesthetic and conceptual basis.

This new work is a multi-dimensional suite of artworks that have not had any external commercial or artistic constraints placed upon them from any source, be that of size, content or style of framing. It is purely a body of art that has been created as a transformative response to finding links to activism and aesthetics in my work. As a result, I exhibit this art in non-commercial and commercial venues, which support altruism and activism; and have a commitment to gift whatever art is possible and realistic for me to present, to institutions and fundraising auctions for worthwhile causes. This is part of the basis of the concerns with the development of the body of art created for this research. There is also a belief that giving back something to society in the form of artistic messages about the environment, in a developed sense of aesthetics, is a positive altruistic statement, which has the potential to be an example for others on a number of levels. I hope this work rests on the edge between the nexus of all of the principle themes in the exegesis, activism, aesthetics and transformation.

*Chapter 1: The Contemporary Environmental Artist* documented influential environmental philosophy and how these ideas informed the practical work, coupled with inspiration from the wholistic beliefs of Eastern philosophers and the depth of their effect upon my work and life. To provide insights into development of the practice, there was a reflection on my experience as an Australian artist, who in the creation of a new body of work expressed aspects of his career, including being a painter and making the transition into becoming an environmental artist. The methodology of the new body of work was explained as the practical foundation of this
exegesis, where the activist, didactic approach present in the work, is expressed alongside an aesthetic and a deliberately transcendent evocative element, which aims to entice and draw in the viewer, all being guided by the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings outlined in the chapter.

*Chapter 2: Environmental Art Practice and Practitioners (Activism)*, delivered an overview of the role of environmental art practice and practitioners as activists in meeting the challenges of our time, specifically addressing consumerism and its impact on the ecology. There was an exploration of connections between ecological sustainability and sustainable art practices, and summaries of completed interviews were provided. It was during the writing of this chapter that it was identified whose shoulders I stand upon and intrinsically connect with today in the field of environmental art. A significant thread was recognised linking the work of the majority of practitioners through their works collectively containing activist elements, some overtly, and some more hidden behind a refined sense of aesthetics. This helped to clarify the positioning of this work as both activist and married together with a strong sense of aesthetics.

*Chapter 3: Envisioning the Art (Aesthetics)* was an investigation into the ideas, themes and modalities that eventually formed the overall vision for the final body of work. It included an exploration into universal shapes, specific mixed media, and questioned the place of aesthetics and beauty in environmental art making. This essentially helped to discover the relevance of core elements of the art practice; why particular art forms were selected, their relevance personally and as public statements, as well as the challenges and surprises inherent in their creation. The chapter also included explanation of aesthetic decisions related to the work practices, which were comprised of assemblage, sculpture, painting, printmaking and installation. There was also an
exploration into the choice of major elements of the final fabrication of the sculptures.

*Chapter 4: Creating the Art (Transformation)* documented the production, the step by step making of the new work, which led to transformative experiences with the materials themselves as they became artworks. This creative progression was explained as it links to the direct transformative experience for myself as an artist through the process. The chapter included specific detail about the process related to the creation of the sculpture series made from found plastics encased in clear acrylic, to the time in Japan creating the digital/woodblock fusion prints and the impact this experience had on the work and the resulting influence that this had on the series of paintings that were to follow. The chapter examined practical realities of attempting to produce a cutting edge passionate and ambitious body of work that hopes to have led into a strong transformative element in the viewer. As a result of producing these new works, clear links and crossovers with previous artworks have been noted which was integral to the evolution and development of the art and practice in the current installation.

Production of the new body of work has renewed an enthusiasm, resulting in a clear anticipation of returning to the studio in Darwin to move headlong into the creation of new forms of creativity. The new body of work demanded attention not only to the evolving big picture vision of an installation comprised of multiple components and themes, but also to small details in order to bring it to an aesthetic culmination.

In undertaking this research, a number of further questions surfaced that, while not core to this investigation, certainly informed the process. These questions could well serve the basis for new research to be undertaken by myself and/or other academics in the future. They include: Are 'outsiders' vital to the development of the arts sector? Are
artists attracted to niche sectors in the arts industry because of pre-existing social or psychological conditions, such as tendencies towards isolation and even narcissism?

There are potential exhibition strategies for this body of work in different kinds of venues and utilizing different subsets of work. It is proposed that the exhibition be toured through South East Asia in the second half of 2017 with the assistance of an Arts NT Presentation and Promotion Grant. This project is to show the work in Indonesia at the Bentara Budaya Museums in Denpasar, Yogyakarta, Surabaya and Jakarta, in conjunction with the Australian Consulate General in Bali and the Australian Embassy in Jakarta. I wish to present a large-scale exhibition including sculptures, paintings and woodblock/digital fusion prints, touring between the above cities and extend into other countries in S.E. Asia, including Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia. As part of the project it is proposed that the artist engage in an artist in residency position at Bentara Budaya Gallery in Denpasar and collaborate with two Indonesian artists and sections of the community to collect and create an installation which will form part of the touring exhibition. Different subsets of the work have and will continue to be exhibited domestically and internationally. Countries where the series of woodblock prints were shown during 2015 and 2016 included Wuhu China and in East Java, Indonesia, plus in Australia in Darwin and Sydney.

Finally, I would like to express the importance of the analysis of environmental art. This journey has been important on so many levels including the most obvious: having the opportunity of creating this new body of work with minimal distractions. It has also brought in an academic angle through my research, which has provided an invaluable possibility of positioning my work in the environmental art field. The artwork that has been created has developed my capacities far beyond what I would have envisaged before the process began, and for that I am exceptionally grateful.
References


