

GROUNDSWELL

CHANNELING CREATIVE ACTIVISM

“We need to start a revolution. I’m serious like ... and it needs to be fun. And it needs to be something that we’re jumping out of bed in the morning and we can’t wait to get to because this stuff is too dangerous.”

June Mills, *Brace Yourself*, 2020.

The Northern Territory is running out of water. Assembling a travelling exhibition centred on this unavoidable reality is to unambiguously question the role of art within the process of change – urgent, revolutionary change – like the kind Auntie June names. Rediscovering how to move together as a collective force is our sole option if we are to adequately confront the most pressing and dangerous questions of our livelihoods. With the hope of tapping into this revolutionary potential, over the years I have approached creative activism as an arts worker, as an activist, as a community facilitator, and now, with *Groundswell: Recent movements in art and territory*, as a curator.

I have done this because I have never been satisfied with the worn, catch-all statement that art simply ‘starts a conversation’. Art arms us with a common visual language to create deep connections which are emotively felt before they are intellectually known. It generates a conceptual exchange in ways more visceral than the mode of spoken dialogue and consequently proves itself a tool of broader application in the process of change. Imbued with the energy to inspire concrete action, art can forge a sense of solidarity with the viewer. This solidarity becomes the momentum required to form wider collective channels of progressive action which flow out beyond the boundaries of nation and state.

Groundswell is my effort to demonstrate this greater role. This exhibition introduces you, the viewer, to a group of Territory artists, diverse in perspective but united in their demand for adequate and fair allocation of water as our most vital and dwindling natural resource. Through the issues of access, contamination, scarcity and culture, I have curated these works to unify the collective power of their individual perspectives. But *Groundswell* doesn’t simply present an exhibition for consumption. It harbours other forms of collectivism which

expand outward to involve the viewer as an active participant. It does this by operating as a testing ground, arranged with the intent of sparking action from audiences who see their concerns reflected within these works of art, in the same way I recognised my own when I selected them for exhibition.

Groundswell seeks to play an instrumental part in a wider strategy to escalate grassroots action. This is an ambitious task that has required me to draw upon my history as a political organiser to inform this new role as a curator. Exhibitions charting the current state of the world can often leave us feeling overwhelmed or resigned to a grim fate. It is my desire to present you with an experience that impresses the opposite by balancing the imminence of mass water insecurity with a plan of action to become involved in solutions, of which there are many. To this end, I have created an activist toolkit that you can take home or download, posted links on the Artback NT website to Territory activist groups you can join, included activist workshops alongside more traditional artist floor talks, and will host film screenings providing local contextualisation on issues raised.

When Auntie June says that we have to jump out of bed, excited to get to the revolution every day, for me this encapsulates the fun and full potential of creative activism as a unique tool within the building of mass movements. I think the artworks in *Groundswell* demonstrate this excitement in their own unique way, as explicit gestures of protest, but also as beautiful and powerful objects. Through curating as an organiser, I have discovered that it is possible to bundle up this excitement and relay it to you, the viewer, in the hope that it tangibly contributes to the mounting groundswell we need to change our collective course for the better.

Camen Ansaldo, SPARK NT Curator