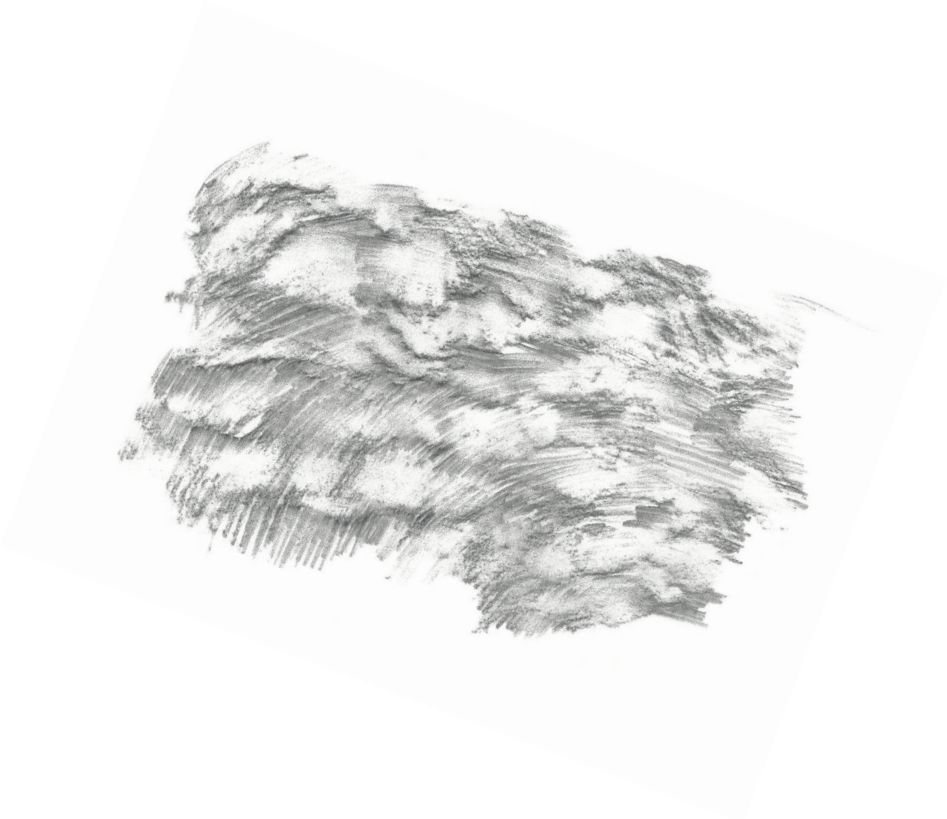
Bianca Hester
Lithic Bodies



all the heres and nows brought into relief
traversing stratigraphic integrity and transversal planes

In some ways, I should have written this essay before working closely with Bianca Hester. It would have been simpler. I could have mentioned how her sculptural works connect materially through a space-time paradigm that upends linear thinking. I might have discussed how she expertly manipulates materials, from bronze to blast furnace slag. Or her use of *frottage*, an exercise I remember from childhood, where you rub lead pencil over a textured surface like bark or fossil to create an imprint. In the hands of Bianca, these imprints become circulating, materially based compositions that resurface as hand-held bronze objects, printed matter, video, and text. Together, these fragments bleed meaning from deep time into a materially rich concave net that holds both matter and memory.

But instead, I am writing this after working closely with Bianca for the past year—in person, over text, on Zoom, by phone, walking together, meeting others, driving, eating—the joy of interspersed moments shared alongside the artist. This is the privileged front-row seat of the curator. I am less interested in the flash of opening night—for me, curating is about caring for the relations between art and artist, art and artistry, art and audience. For that reason, I see my fortune to have viewed the making of the dark side of this moon, if you will.

Bianca is a rare artist; she is expertly in command of materials, completely obsessed with the making and presentation of the work, yet equally invested in tracing the material origins of each piece—where and how it is born into the world. Her practice is informed by a deep relationality to place, people, and the multifarious stories that materials carry. She envisions stratigraphic thinking as a process we can materially connect to—through objects and conversation, or by revisiting and elevating transversal planes. She preferences the horizontal, disrupting the vertical by returning to the layers of time imprinted in coal, rock, and sea spray.

After working closely with Bianca, I now understand that her work does everything I believed it to do. It moves between timescales, infers a shift of archival meaning, and acts as a congealing element between interlocking times and materials. Yet I also see that her practice is more elastic—a conglomerate, a meeting place. By making meaningful connections and finding a community of place, she uses *frottage* not only to imprint ancient surfaces but to imprint with people. Through this dynamic relationality, Bianca approaches the expansive and complex questions: What are we made of? What is the world made of? What crises can we afford to live through and learn from?

Standing on the beach at Scarborough-Wombarra with Bianca, this is the second time she has taken me to visit 'The Log'. Bianca has formed a strong relationship with this log who has become a 'guiding figure' for this lithic project. The log is a fossilised *Glossopteris* tree from the Permian Age, which around 250 million years ago was washed down an ancient river system, wedged, and over millennia, silicified to stone. We are meeting Nicole and Tyson at the beach, and as the wind lashes around us, Bianca takes time to introduce us to the site. An old surf club sits quietly behind us, the great ocean stretches out ahead, and the cascading tree-lined escarpment prickled with development surrounds.

We are meeting on Dharawal Country, and we talk about the meaning of the wind, the exposure of new shells since last visiting, and the smell of kelp. Together, we take pleasure in the opportunity to walk on Country, to be with it, and listen, listen, listen. Human voices drown out as the wind whips my ears, and the liminality and fertility of the expressive coastline speaks volumes. We look closely at the rock pools, spend time with zebra snails, barnacles, little blue periwinkles, and take note of sites where anthropogenic interference interlocks with stone, kelp, and sea spray. We see a drain cover ripped off from recent floods, where the sea has already started covering the geometric metal with sand.

We share stories of this place—the migrating whales, the beauty of Sea Country backing onto cliffs and beaches. The water splashes us, playful, immense, and immediate. I am compelled to touch the log, trying to recognise it as a whole being, a wedge in time, but also storied matter—part of a forest who lost its pack. The tree was once at home in the Gondwanan forest ecology which over unknowable timescales became coal, now extracted and burned.

Over the past two years, Bianca has been here most weeks, learning the tides, visiting with Cultural Custodians, geologists, collaborators, plant ecologists, paleobotanists, friends, and family. While her practice is sculptural and materially precise, it involves much more than objects. To me, the objects are interlocutors—they say the unsayable about this extinction line that Bianca is so drawn to. They assemble and transform unfathomable timescales into tangible, listenable, aesthetic renderings.

As we gaze at the log, we have lingered too long. The tide pulls into us, wetting our feet. We concede to its strength, and climb ungracefully over the boulders back towards the beach. Briefly, we are perched between land and sea where Bianca's gaze has led us, into the crevice of deep time. In this moment, it is obvious that her practice radiates from a place of relations deeply held in recognition and responsibility: to place, people, geologic histories, and the effervescent intermingling of these deep and complex stories. By uncovering the subliminal meanings of the subterranean geologic, Bianca offers new ways of engaging with the space-time vortex, of being here, ever so briefly.

Bronwyn Bailey-Charteris, August 2024

Bodies of Stone

"This project began for me in the final passages of *Sandstone*," Bianca Hester tells me as we drive north of Wollongong to visit her research locations. Her small book, published in 2020 as part of the 'Lost Rocks' series, closes with a startled consideration of the vast coal seams that underlie the Illawarra.

Lying awake at night not long after moving to the region in 2018, she hears the deep, pervasive, mechanical rumblings of a colliery over the range. Until then, she'd forgotten its presence—out of sight, over the hill.

Coal dust gathers on her windowsills. She thinks of her young daughter's lungs. The mine is so large that you can see striation marks made by trucks moving the "guts of the mountain" around on Google Maps.[1] It produces millions of tonnes of metallurgical and thermal coal each year, and once she's aware of its presence, it's impossible to ignore.

The mine launches Hester into a years-long process of discovering and responding to "geosocial forces" in her new locality, culminating in the exhibition 'Lithic Bodies'.[2] Lithic, from Greek *lithikos* or *lithos*, meaning 'stone'. Bodies of stone.

Some of these bodies are singular and intimate: a fossilised leaf found in Hester's garden, or specimens sourced from the Australian Museum's palaeobotanical collection. Cast as palm-sized bronze objects, they are small missives from the past, their intricate detail and mysterious textures inviting contemplation. Other works evoke massed, weighted bodies of almost imponderable scale: a vast fossilised riverbed, or a body of dark coal lying beneath sandstone, separated by a pale 'extinction line'.

This line, known as the Permian-Triassic boundary, lies at the heart of the exhibition. It is a puzzle, a metaphor, an engine room, propelling Hester's working process. Creating the work involves not only her own personal engagement with place but the participation of a community of "critical companions".[3] For 'Lithic Bodies', she consults and walks with Jerrinja/Yuin educator and artist Peter Hewitt, local Elder Uncle Peter Button, scientists, horticulturalists, curators, and artists who inform and shape the project in various ways.

The Permian-Triassic extinction, dubbed the "great dying", occurred around 252 million years ago, and was the deadliest of Earth's mass extinction events.[4] With 80–97 percent of species gone, "life on this planet was

1. Bianca Hester, *Sandstone*, A Published Event, Hobart, 2020, pp 77–79; Dendrobium South 32 produced 5.5 million tons of metallurgical coal in 2022–-2023, Metallurgical Coal, South32, https://www.south32.net/what-we-do/our-commodities/metallurgical-coal
2. Kathryn Yusoff, 'Geosocial strata', *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol 34, no 2–3, 2017, pp 105–127.
3. Bianca Hester, *Groundwork*, Perimeter Editions, Melbourne, 2022, pp 42–43.
4. National Geographic, https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/mass-extinctions/; Oliver Milman, 'The "great dying": Rapid warming caused largest extinction event ever', *The Guardian*, 7 December 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/dec/06/global-warming-extinction-report-the-great-dying

almost lost" writes geologist Gregory J Retallack.[5] Global biodiversity took millions of years to recover.

In a script for 'Dust of these domains' 2023, a project staged for Siteworks at Bundanon, Hester cites a conception of this cataclysmic event as a "global, deep time analogue for modern deforestation and diversity loss".[6] Ancient dust residues reveal that on the supercontinent Gondwana, from which Australia cleaved, raging bushfires and floods pulsed through once-dominant *Glossopteris* forests.

In 'Lithic Bodies', Hester is drawn back to this analogue where her exploration reaches a crescendo. The Permian-Triassic boundary, clearly visible in the coastal escarpment near Clifton, becomes a site of intense material experimentation, spawning a series of frottages, silicon castings for sculptures, photographs, and the video *Extinction lines* 2024.

We stand at the boundary line. Behind us, the sea churns and waves pound against land with relentless energy. Nearby, the mouth of the obsolete Coalcliff mine is plugged with an immense graffitied concrete disc. Arched high overhead is Sea Cliff Bridge, a road perched on monolithic concrete pylons, hovering between land and ocean. Built twenty years ago, it replaces the old road carved into the cliff, now crumbling and overgrown. Beneath the "technocratic gleam" of the bridge, is a place of decay and flux.[7] Pieces of old road tumble down with landslips to lie between the pylons.

At the base of the rock profile is Bulli Coal, which is surprisingly seductive, crystalline, friable, and sparkling in the sun. It signifies life. Here are remains of the vast extinct *Glossopteris* forests with distinctive tongue-like leaves and, in one species *Vertebraria australis*, roots that resemble the human spine.[8] The coal is overlaid with a "light gray brownish yellow" layer whose paucity of organic matter and carbonate reveals the dead-zone during which life on Earth almost ceased.[9]

In the exhibition 'Open Spatial Workshop: Converging in Time' 2017, produced with Hester's collaborators Terri Bird and Scott Mitchell, a huge partially fossilised kauri log hulked in the gallery. Excavated from Victorian coal fields at Yallourn and weighing tonnes, it was a major feat to manoeuvre this relic. Once in place, it exerted a sheer material force. Yet, its surprisingly fragile, tattered, tessellated skin looked as though feathers of ancient bark could fall at the lightest touch.

'Lithic Bodies' plays with material remains differently. Here, fossils and other evidence of deep time stories remain in situ. A rare example of an intact *Glossopteris*

5. Gregory J Retallack, 'Postapocalyptic greenhouse paleoclimate revealed by earliest Triassic paleosols in the Sydney Basin, Australia', *GSA Bulletin*, January 1999, vol 111, no 1, pp 52–70.
6. Viva Vajda et al, 'End-Permian (252 Mya) deforestation, wildfires and flooding—An ancient biotic crisis with lessons for the present', *Earth and Planetary Science Letters*, vol 529, article 115875, 2020 cited in Bianca Hester, poster for 'dust of these domains', Siteworks, Bundanon, 26 February 2023.
7. Bianca Hester to the author, 16 June 2024.
8. Sydney Basin, 'How tall did Glossopteris grow? Large fossilised Glossopteris trees', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5a7yCSXwks

log lies firmly embedded in a rock platform north of Scarborough beach. It is non-collectible. Instead, with a small team, Hester cast the log in segments dictated by duration of low tide. The tree, immortalised through the mineralisation process and turned to stone, is reinscribed in polymerised gypsum and laid on the gallery floor. Hester seems bound in a process of transference and translation. Objects lost to time or disregard are reanimated.

"The key is embodiment", she says of multiple rubbings taken from geological and anthropogenic surfaces. "I see the rubbings as registrations of multiple engagements and encounters, timed between tides, negotiating rock. And then there's the minutiae of surfaces and textures, and what they themselves register in terms of epic processes over time."[10]

If we think of the mine as a "shadow place", then what is involved is a process of dematerialisation. Philosopher Val Plumwood proposed that for each "homeplace" celebrated as a place of belonging, there is an unrecognised place that provides our material and ecological support. In a global economy, most shadow places are "likely to elude our knowledge and responsibility"—out of sight, over the hill. More than this, they are dematerialised, "the process of becoming more and more out of touch with the *material conditions ... that support or enable our lives*".[11] With dematerialisation comes a troubling corollary: the tendency to demand increasingly more of these unseen places and ecologies that support life.

If anything, 'Lithic Bodies' is an attempt to re-materialise place—through visiting and revisiting, paying close attention, and refusing to turn away, through ceaseless questioning, conversing, and listening to others, and through physical processes of registration and re-registration. 'Lithic Bodies' takes Hester's work to a new pitch of intensity and determination. Through her visceral and embodied encounters with place, she offers them up for our own.

Saskia Beudel, August 2024

9. Retallack, pp 52, 60.
10. Bianca Hester to the author, 16 June 2024.
11. Val Plumwood, 'Shadow places and the politics of dwelling', *Australian Humanities Review*, vol 44, March 2008, https://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2008/03/01/shadow-places-and-the-politics-of-dwelling/

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We recognise the Bidjigal and Gadigal peoples as the Traditional Custodians of this site and acknowledge them as the first artists to inhabit this Land.

We pay our respects to their Elders past and present, and extend this respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from all nations of Australia.

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Lithic Bodies

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Images:

1. Frottage fragment made from the surface of a Permian era fossilised river system present at the intertidal zone at Scarborough-Wombarra, 2024
2. *Dust of these domains*, (performance detail) 2023. Patinated bronze object with surface impression of Permian era plant fossil *Glossopteris*. SITEWORKS, Bundanon, 2023. Photo: Rachael Tagg
3. *Extinction lines*, (video still) 2024. Photo: Sammy Hawker
4. Bronze object with surface impression of residual fossilised charcoal from a Permian era wildfire, patinated with seawater from the intertidal zone at Scarborough-Wombarra, 2024

Courtesy of the artist and Sarah Scout Presents, Naarm/Melbourne