

DEEP REST

In 2023 in search of deep rest, the Kaurna-based artist Oakey climbs on her motorbike and rides 1,500 km to a wilderness retreat on the east coast of Australia, a four-day experience that will involve sleeping on the forest floor inside a circle four strides wide: alone, without shelter or food, with only a tarp for protection.

This spiritual rite of passage in which participants seek clarity through introspection, reflection and surrender is rooted in ancient universal journeying traditions. Visionaries report the experience to be transformative, likening it to shedding layers to arrive at a powerful understanding of consciousness and self.

Oakey in response to feelings of overwhelm and exhaustion, has often imagined crawling back into the earth, comfortingly covered by a layer of moss.

Out bush, free of all responsibilities other than an obligation to place a rock each day some distance away as a sign of life, Oakey simply exists.

She tunes in to her immediate environment, minutely observing the dense foliage and vegetation from ground cover to canopy, the play of shadows. The rustle of nearby insects and birds. The area is densely populated with paper bark tea trees (*Melaleuca quinquenervia*), a tree common to places with silty or swampy soil, their limbs shed soft, papery layers.

Over the course of the day she paces, sits, cries, listens and watches, a sometimes painful, sometimes peaceful process of shedding. Her sense of perception is heightened and influenced by the processes of her fasting body.

Dust settles on her skin, dirt under nails. She becomes absorbed by the rhythm of her surroundings and experiences a sense of the interconnectedness of all things in the universe.

At its completion, she walks out the way she arrived on foot, beginning a gradual process of reintegration, reawakening the digestion system, and being in the presence of humans before climbing back on the bike and returning home. She is no longer tired.

To return to Oakey imagining herself under a blanket of moss. Covering oneself is a gesture of protection and camouflage, possibly even obliteration, in merging with the earth itself.

Shedding on the other hand...intimations of dropping away, or discarding something that is no longer of use, is a form of uncovering.

We all seek safety and self-knowledge. We crave peace of mind. We share a longing to be grounded in place, in ourselves and in relationship to others.

Oakey draws on this recent transformative experience to produce the body of work on display. Through sculpture, installation, moving image, sound and accompanying performance, the exhibition transcribes a personal spiritual odyssey for the gallery.

In the process, Oakey engages in a conversation with ecologically informed art practice, an approach and set of concerns shared by national and international artist peers, rooted in a consideration of ecologies and the environment. The paper bark of Oakey's habitat fills the

space. The shape of a circle, itself a potent ancient symbol of wholeness and boundedness, appears in various iterations. The sustained vibration of a low frequency, a struck Tibetan bowl, fills the air.

This ecological aesthetic collapses the traditional art historical preoccupation with figure and ground into a habitat of ongoing emergence. Rather than trying to set figures or forms against a background, with all that Euclidean logic and existential hubris, Oakey folds mind into matter, and lets her body go with the flow.

Words by Anna Zagala