

RADICAL FUTURES: FERTILE GROUND

Curator: Saira Ellen K. Spencer

OVERVIEW

Presented by Denmark Arts and Emerging Curator Saira Spencer as part of the 2025/26 Regional Arts Triennial, Radical Futures: Fertile Ground is a group exhibition that will explore how Great Southern communities engage with bushfire and bushfire management in the near and distant future.

The brief challenges artists to imagine a world where we have gone through a cultural palimpsest:

A process where a socially-divided group of people come together to replace old ways of understanding with new ones, but original ideas still influence how those new ideas take shape.

It responds to the Triennial's core theme *Radical Futures*, as outlined by Lead Curator Sarah Roots. [\[Insert link to Sarah's brief\]](#)

In responding to Fertile Ground, regional artists are directed to critically examine the dominant narratives of bushfire resilience that position human beings outside of ecosystems to produce work that engages with hopeful, positive expressions toward a future where the intersections of fire and community are experienced as productive and generative.

In developing their work, artists are asked to consider the roles of collective responsibility, community-driven response and environmental stewardship in building true resilience.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists are particularly encouraged to contribute to the project. Non-Indigenous artists are urged to consider how the Menang-Noongar people's cultural connection to fire has shaped the land around us and impacts their relationship to fire.

Fertile Ground will be exhibited at Albany Town Hall xx December 2025- xx January 2026.

BRIEF

Each dry season Great Southern communities are put in our place by fire. Images of charred homes, towns, wildlife and landscape are weaponised to promise an apocalyptic future of smoke-choked airways and anxiety-filled dry seasons.

We find ourselves at a point of crisis: one where we are grieving past losses, human and ecological, whilst attempting to anticipate and conceptualise this future devastation.

But... What if we no longer felt the need to mourn for a future that hasn't happened yet?

What if the threat of fire wasn't so threatening?

In constructing this future, Fertile Ground challenges artists and creatives to reflect on the collective agency and collaborative capacity of your community (and not just those who agree with you) and imagine a world where our culture of care for all forms of life extends beyond times of crisis.

You are particularly encouraged to draw inspiration from the unique ways Great Southern communities cope with profound loss and how in the (radical) future, these capacities could offer a foundation for addressing and shaping our emotional, psychological and spiritual rebuilding process before, during and after fire.

If you are looking for an opportunity to argue your point of view about what should be done now, or what you think is being done wrong by others (or correctly)... This is not it...

Instead, you are challenged to de-center yourself to make transformative work that heralds a future where the necessary work is done, our country is still burning but so is our passion to protect this place we call home.

Ask yourself: How can we move forward from this point of discord? What existing and emergent ideas will help us get there?

"We must draw from the tangible miracles of everyday life"

- Manifesto of Futurist Painters, 1910

BACKGROUND

In the past 20 years homes, lives and thousands of hectares of native vegetation within the Great Southern have been lost to fire, driven by extreme weather and a drying climate.

However: climate change aside, bushfires are one of the few 'natural' disasters that human action is often directly responsible for. In Australia, approximately 50% of fires in remote areas are caused by lightning but in areas populated or visited by people up to 85% of bushfires are the result of human activity or infrastructure. Yet, responsibility and culpability for their management and prevention is currently a burden shouldered by a brave few.

Prescribed burning is a key government strategy to mitigate the risks that Great Southern residents assume by choosing to live amongst the region's unique fire-loving, Gwondanan scrublands and forests.

Burn regimes predominantly began as a Department of Forestry initiative to protect and maintain logging forests. They were expanded in WA following the 1961 fires south-west of Perth that destroyed 1.8 million hectares of bush, forest and farmland and displaced hundreds of residents.

These burns are performed to reduce threat to built environments and to people, with efforts made to minimise impact on native environment & wildlife. The motivation to maintain this practice has increased as more and more people move to or visit southern WA seeking out solace in nature, economic reprieve and community life.

Opponents of prescribed burns are calling for state and local governments to expand rapid detection and suppression strategies to reduce the need for burning. This includes investing in existing and emergent technologies such as autonomous drones, AI-supported fire detection systems and satellites with thermal sensors as well as increasing resources and staffing for firefighting crews.

Concerns amongst scientific communities that WA's fire ecology is being mis-managed have existed since the 70's. Environmental advocates argue that both controlled burns and wildfires can be catastrophic for ecologically vulnerable areas. While many native flora and fauna species are fire-adapted, many ecosystems cannot survive frequent, intense fires regardless of how they first started.

Many parties have pointed toward Indigenous traditional burning practices as an alternative. Studies show that intense forest fires, in particular, became far more frequent in WA following European colonisation and the subsequent dramatic change to landscape and disruption of cultural burning practices.

However, Menang-Noongar Elders interviewed in 2020 by academic Ursula Rodrigues emphasised that while fire management is a cultural obligation, the landscape has changed too much for them to take on the responsibility entirely. One Elder stated:

"The biggest issue is that we're fixing something, we don't have the knowledge about fixing."

Another added:

“We are trying to fix something here that is broken, so maybe their [fire practitioners’] science is about creating fire breaks first and then later on let the old Noongars strike the match and let it burn.”

Regardless of the solutions offered, discussions on prevention and resilience do little to address the reality that living through a firestorm is a deeply traumatic, isolating experience. Firefighters are particularly vulnerable to developing PTSD from fire exposure, with their symptoms worsening over time.

For civilian survivors of destructive fires, studies report that many people feel abandoned by emergency services during the fire. In addition, while grassroots community responses from their neighbours, local groups (such as the CWA) or fellow townsfolk were crucial in emotionally surviving the event they often experience a second form of abandonment when help fades as the sense of urgency subsides.

Regardless of what is the most wicked truth about coexisting with fire: Great Southern communities are uniquely positioned to tackle our future reality together.

CSIRO reports that while the region could become even more vulnerable to catastrophic fire in the future, our unique ecology has the potential to balance this risk. **In addition, thanks to a sense of shared values, belonging and social cohesion, rural communities are uniquely poised to inform how we respond to fire before, during and after events.**

So...the burning question is... how will Great Southern communities navigate a fire-filled future?

“Like my dad used to say, ‘fire fixes everything!’”

- Noongar Elder, 2020