

# Carbon Ecologies 1998-2008

## Richard Thomas

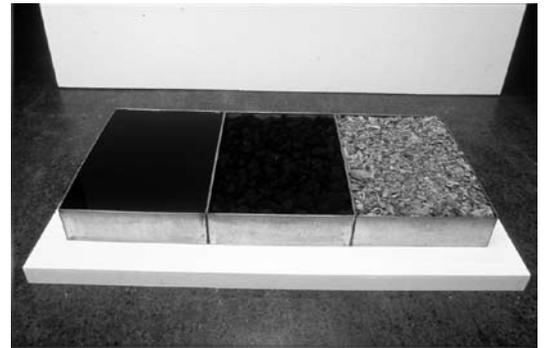
4-7 pm, 15-18th October 2008  
Opening 6pm 15th October 2008  
Carlton Hotel and Studios  
2nd Floor, 193 Bourke st, Melbourne

### Notes on the projects

Over the 1998 spring equinox, the first in the "Carbon Cycle" of works was executed. Since that time Richard Thomas has executed numerous works in various countries focussing on carbon related ecologies, materials, and systems in art and non art contexts. These projects, some of which are re-presented in the current exhibition, tackle deforestation, the coal industry, charcoal production, alternative energy, and climate change as well as questioning the role of artists and their activities in the breakdown of global ecosystems.

*Carbon Cycle 1 (1998)* was constructed on a property near the Grampians as part of the "Resourceful" Project (Curated by Anna Claburn, Ararat Art Gallery). The work was a visual representation of an ecological equation known as the carbon cycle. A 5 m high tower of decaying firewood, built at the same scale as surrounding 500 year old redgums, was constructed and surrounded by a planting of 8 redgum saplings. The work proposed an imagined "carbon equilibrium" between carbon emitted as the firewood decayed, and carbon absorbed as the saplings grew.

*Carbon Cycle 2 (1999)* was realised as part of the "Natural Disasters" exhibition at Monash University Museum of Art (Curated by Zara Stanhope). Three metal trays presented the three primary materials providing energy and transforming terrestrial carbon into carbon dioxide, these being coal, oil and wood carbon.



*Carbon Cycle 3 (2000)* is from a series of paintings made during and after a residency in Belfast, Northern Ireland. A series of works drew parallels between the natural and social history of Ireland, with particular reference to the deforestation and partition of the landscape. Much of the deforestation of Ireland was a result of providing fuel charcoal for smelting. Many of these works were made using coal dust, and wood charcoal as a pigment.

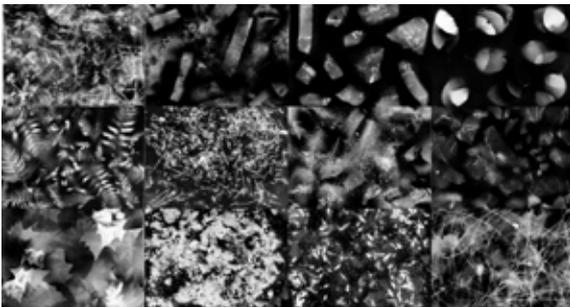
*Severance (2003)* was a 20 minute video produced for the Wilderness Society as part of the campaign to save the Tarkine Wilderness. The video was filmed in May 2003 and shows the extensive destruction of the Tarkine wilderness, the second largest remaining tract of temperate rainforest on the planet. It is estimated that over 20-25% of global carbon emissions are directly related to the loss of carbon stored in primary forest for logging, woodchipping and clearing for agricultural land. It is estimated that Tasmanian old growth forests contain some of the most carbon dense forests on earth.

*Anthropogenic Flux (2006)* was a performance and installation for the Lodz Biennale in Poland which explored relationships and exchanges between light and matter, energy, work, the carbon cycle, consciousness, and the flux of art, life and nature. The performance begun in darkness. A heap of black coal was removed by hand to reveal hidden lights, the power source of which was coal fired electricity.

*Hydrocarbon Rundown (2007)* as part of the "Contamination" project at Gasworks Arts Park referenced Robert Smithson's iconic 1969 work "Asphalt Rundown", a key work in which Smithson orchestrated a truck full of asphalt to tip its load down a degraded quarry slope near Rome. Its documentation shows a moment of dynamic poise, a "readymade" of modern industrial machinery, landscape and material in a dialectic moment of impending entropy. In the replicated work asphalt is replaced by brown coal; coincidentally the truck used is a 1969 model. Smithson regarded the artist as being complicit in ecological destruction, referring to the artist as a "geologic agent". His approach to environmentalism was ambivalent. "The view of the earth polluting itself out is a death fear" he noted. The (non) aesthetics of global warming, peak oil and the slew of other impending eco-catastrophes have yet to be fully defined but Smithson's work is seminal in its scale, form, and Nietzschean ambivalence.

*Cambodia Carbon (2008)* is a series of 15 small paintings executed by a sign writer in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, under the artist's instructions. The images are a sample catalogue of carbon fuels, mechanisms, commodities and effects, in three groups of "carbon categories".

*Who's Afraid of Red Green and Brown (2008)* is series of small abstract works analysing colour theory and symbolism, and the relationship of studio based practice and the "real world" beyond. These paintings focus on the phenomena of "optical grey" or "optical brown" created by mixing opposite colours on the colour wheel, in this case red and green, colours with strong associations in the contemporary world of colliding economies and ecologies.

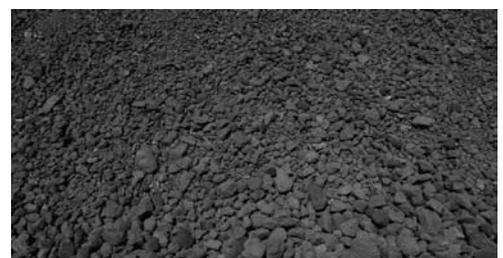
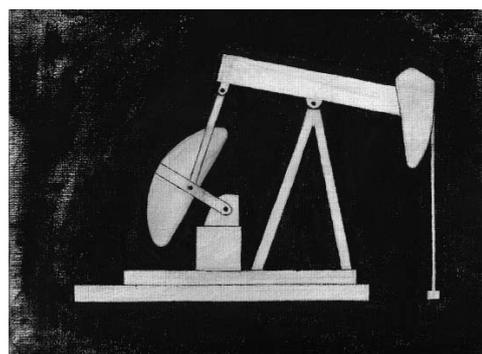


*“Prestige” Oil spill (2002):* This video shows the cleanup of one of Europe’s worst oil spills when the “Prestige” lost thousands of litres of bunker oil in 2002 and despoilt hundreds of kilometres of the Spanish coastline. The video was filmed, produced and kindly lent by Tom Budd, Director of the Australian Maritime Oil Spill Centre.

*Brown Out (2008)* is a simulated coal face, using brown coal from the Mattingley coal mine near Bacchus Marsh. Brown coal is being burnt in real time to generate the electricity which lights the installation. The artist acknowledges the Mattingly coal mine and its Manager Gavin Kalleja in providing the coal and the assistance of Jack in sourcing and transporting the coal.

*Carbon Ecologies (2008)* is a series of photographs documenting aspects of the carbon ecology/economy, from forest fires to coal mining in Victoria’s Latrobe valley, a coal yard in Poland to the charcoal industry and deforestation in Cambodia.

*Carboniferous (2008)* is a series of aerosol works using leaf matter, charcoal and coal fragments as stencils to suggest a layered carbon residue and “phase transition” between solid and gaseous states. The terrestrial and atmospheric carbon systems originated in large part during the “carboniferous period” when massive quantities of plant carbon were layed down. The bracken fern is an example of a plant species which has not evolved since that era 300 million years ago.



**For more information go to: [www.richardthomas.com.au](http://www.richardthomas.com.au)**

*The emissions from this project including all transport, electricity and embodied carbon in materials used will be calculated and offset by Treecreds carbon offsets. Treecreds is a “profit for purpose” organization aiming to reduce the impact of climate change through the promotion of “carbon funded” avoided deforestation and habitat regeneration projects. For more information go to [www.treecreds.com](http://www.treecreds.com)*

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