

PROFILE



Covenant (2019) Linocut and woodcut, 1080 x 785 mm, unique

## World on Fire

Are we powerless in the face of raging forest fires? **Nan Mulder** interviews Australian book artist **Dianne Fogwell**

**W**hy does everything fly through the sky? Why do uprooted trees fly about, while birds escape red and black clouds? What is happening to that peaceful world of plants and dragonflies she created in the past? What is happening to her country?

Dianne Fogwell (b.1958) is one of Australia's most respected printmakers and artists' books practitioners. In 2019 she was the winner of the Megalo International Print Prize with her intriguing artist's book of linocuts and perforations, *Pollen Musica Continuum – Infinite*. The book she says, is 'a continuous ribbon in a random arrangement' and had been inspired by 'the intrinsic



Diane Fogwell, photo-Jack Lewis

beauty and poetic dance of the process of pollination.' The interlinked pages are printed with the carved blocks from her 'alphabet of images' – drawers full of flora and fauna, made over a period of 15 years. The perforations in the pages are like a musical score, which can be heard in the mind or felt through the fingers

while watching the pollination-dance on the flowing 'ribbon'. Behind the beauty there is however always the concern: what would happen if one of the three – pollen, polliniser or pollinator – was lost? She decided to close the book in 2018 when the world's bees were dying at an alarming rate.

DIANNE FOGWELL

Portent (2018) Linocut, 1090 x 4770 mm, unique



In 2017, Fogwell started to contemplate another loss: the devastation of natural and unnatural disaster through fire or the hand of mankind. From the broader environment her vision focussed on the immediate neighbourhood, as a sample of global concerns. It was here, in 2003, that the Canberra bush fires raged and burned terrible memories into the minds of the locals. Australia is prone to bushfires and according to the Australian Institute of Criminology 50% are suspiciously or deliberately lit and arsonists are responsible for up to 30,000 bushfires yearly.

*Precious Renewal* was also made in 2017. In the book, birds are still building nests,

but some of the pages are also filled with menacing black and red clouds. A devastating fire is encroaching on the fragile natural world so innocently unaware. In *Fire*, one side of the concertina is printed in black and grey with trees and birds, while the other side is covered in red and orange shapes and sparks.

The following year she made the books *Black Saturday – Inferno* and *Ash Wednesday*. This last book is about the fire of 16 February 1983, which happened on Ash Wednesday, a holy day in the Christian calendar. She starts the book with the biblical words 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust' and continues with red and orange

pages of bare trees, interlinked with white pages with pieces of burned wood. That day, within 12 hours, 180 separate fires destroyed large parts of Southern Australia. The fires became the deadliest in Australian history until the Black Saturday bushfires of 7 February 2009, in which 450,000 hectares burned, 173 people died and it is estimated that more than 1 million wild and domestic animals were killed. The book she created to commemorate the tenth anniversary of this fire is made with white and black images on a grey background. It starts with the words: arson/environmental terrorism. It is kept, in a black presentation box with a simple red ribbon as a hinge on the book.



Fire (2017) Linocut, concertina artist's book, 195 x 270 x 30 mm, unique

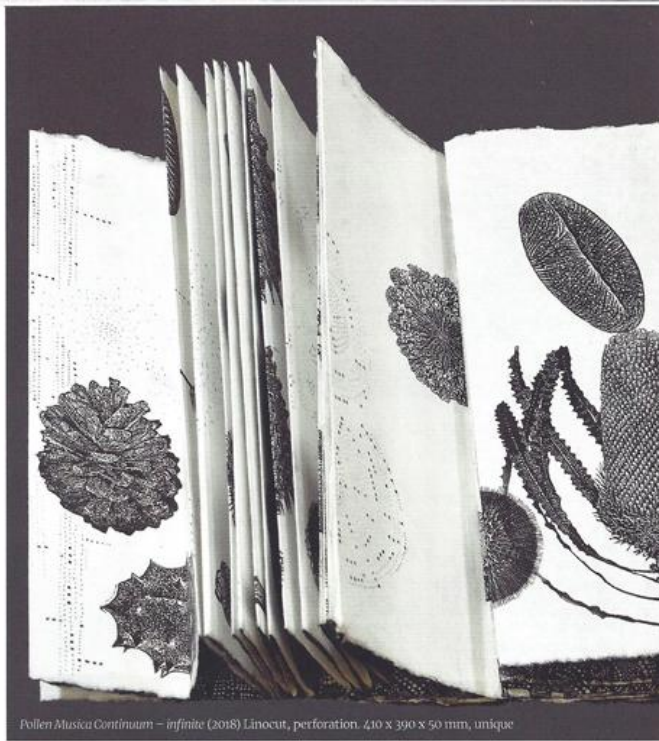


## PROFILE

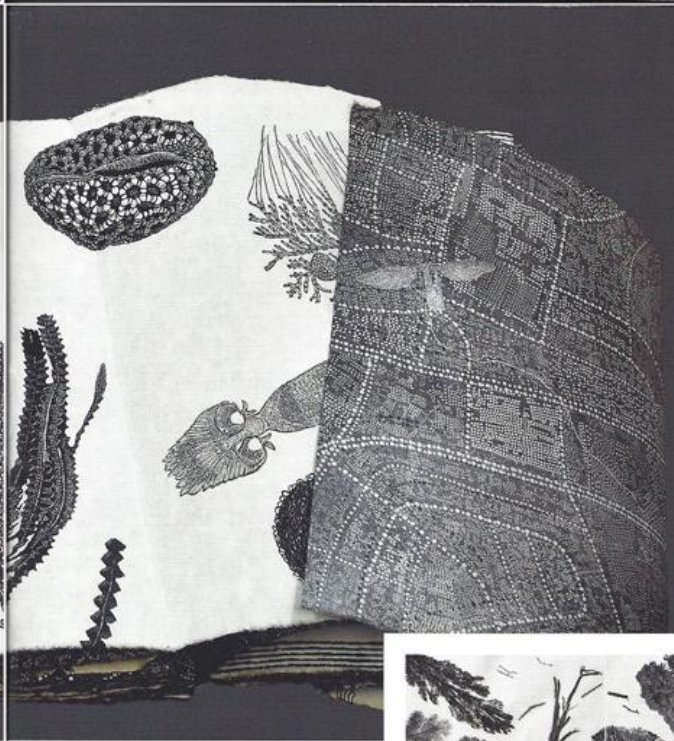
And still the fires burn: in Australia, in the Amazon, in Siberia. On television, Dianne heard a victim of a more recent bushfire say 'I thought I was in a war zone', which led to another book with that quote as the title. Using linocuts and burned drawings, it took her to a deeper level of contemplation, towards the devastation of war. For her, war and fire have much in common.

### Before, during, after

Fogwell seeks to understand not only the moment of destruction, but also the time before and after it. She tries to enter that world on fire, and places herself in the position of the tree, of the bird that loses its habitat, of the insect-ridden earth, which is suffocating under a dust cloud that covers it like a blanket. Her prints of the following year show that moment in nature just before the fire destroys it all. In the huge linocut *Portent*, birds scatter in panic, while the trees lose their colour. On the left of the print, the ominous sign



*Pollen Musica Continuum - infinite* (2018) Linocut, perforation. 410 x 390 x 50 mm, unique



## DIANNE FOGWELL

The title of the last seems to imply some hope: Against all odds what? Are those seemingly destroyed trees still scattering seeds in their flight? Is there hope that even after all that destruction nature will be able to regenerate new life?

This brings us back to her interest to understand not only the moment of destruction, but also the time before and after. At the 2019 Sydney Paper Contemporary Art Fair the Australian Galleries invited her to present a solo exhibition of her unique state linocuts. Here she presented a series of prints under the title *Divided World*, where she explores the impact of fire on flora and fauna. It became a collection of prints of hope. The birds that in earlier prints flew away in panic are now exploring their new bare habitat.



*Above Against All Odds* (2018) Linocut, 1440 x 2250 mm, unique



*The Fallen* (2019) Linocut and woodcut on hanji paper, 1450 x 1500 mm, unique

of things to come is visible in the form of the growing dust clouds of loose topsoil, which are sometimes seen the day before a bushfire.

Fogwell is a true master printer and much-loved educator, who shares her expertise in workshops home and abroad (most recently in Greece and Morocco). An early Canberra School of Art graduate, she later became acting head of the Graphic Investigation Workshop and lecturer in charge of the Edition + Artists Book Studio at the ANU School of Art. She was the co-founder of Studio One print workshop and founder/director of the Criterion Press and Fine Art Gallery. Her technical virtuosity combines linocut and woodcut with many other complex relief techniques, which she describes in her *Printmaker's Cookbook* (reviewed in the spring issue of *Printmaking Today*). She feels a connection with her material, which relates to her concerns: linoleum, made of pine rosin, ground cork dust and wood flour; handmade hanji paper made from the inner bark of the paper mulberry trees. This sturdy Korean paper, which, like the lino and the wood that can be carved and cut, embodies both the fragility and the strength of trees.

### But why are trees flying?

The Wilderness Society reports that Australia is one of the worst of the developed countries in the world for broad scale deforestation – killing tens of millions of native animals (including threatened species) and wiping out endangered forest and woodlands. In *The Fallen*, fire and deforestation by men belong to the same category. But in other prints just trees fly, their trunks axed, as in the large print *Against All Odds*.



*Precious Renewal* (2017) Linocut, concertina artist's book, 340 x 380 x 20 mm, unique

Between the black, charred trees, other trees can be seen. Some are still vague, like ghosts waiting to materialise, but others are coloured with life and offer shelter to the exiled birds. The ground has become green again and in the front of these prints a large magpie stands guard over an altered landscape, while the forest rejuvenates. These latest prints express all that sharp beauty her work often eradiates, in which despair and hope travel together.