

SAMSTAG / SPRING SEASON

Amos Gebhardt / Small acts of resistance



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SMALL ACTS OF RESISTANCE

It's easy to typecast the crab as an isolated and solitary creature. Enclosed in the armour of its exoskeleton, the crab appears defensive and impenetrable, its pincers primed against potential attack. The stereotype is also species-specific. Hermit crabs seek out portable homes for self-protection, like an empty mollusc shell or, distressingly, a discarded piece of plastic. They retreat, curling into themselves, at any sign of danger. We interpret this insularity as a personality trait. The term 'crabby' is shorthand for 'spiky and irritable'.

The crabs we find in popular culture reinforce this idea. *The Little Mermaid's* Sebastian is a lone ranger, and *SpongeBob SquarePants's* Mr Krabs is myopic, authoritarian and obsessed with money.

But these kinds of character profiles are unfair. Crabs, by and large, are collaborative and communal. They rely on intraspecies companionship, work together to find food, and protect each other. They seek community and social connection.

We realise this within the first few frames of Amos Gebhardt's *Small acts of resistance*. A cast of crabs picks its way across the forest floor. They move together: a tentative yet coordinated choreography.

The red crab is a land crab endemic to Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. On Christmas Island, nearly 50 million red crabs migrate from the forest to the ocean each year to spawn. They travel en masse in a slow collective crawl. During this journey they cross several high-traffic roads. In spite of the obstacles of human occupation, the crabs have never redirected their route. Undeterred, they pursue the path of their predecessors.

Following years of fatalities and punctured tyres (the exoskeleton carapace is nothing to fuck with), bridges have been built over some of the roads so the crabs can traverse safely.

It's a sad irony that, in this place, the migratory movement of crabs is valued more than the migratory movement of people.

Christmas Island was first used in 2001 as a detention centre for asylum-seekers. The refugees that were detained there were held captive in inadequate facilities, with inadequate care, stripped of their freedom—for years. There were deaths, there were hunger strikes, and there was gross political negligence. In 2020 the island was used as a quarantine facility during the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak. The experience of those in quarantine on the island bore no resemblance to that of the asylum-seekers. (The army, we hear, even organised birthday cakes for children.)

The keepers of the keys seemed intent on ignoring the obvious—and sinister—symbolism: the same structures used to keep out disease were also used to keep out refugees.

Disease and people, both unwanted and othered. Restrained and repressed in a landscape through which the crabs roam free.

The practice of isolating individuals deemed ‘undesirable’ has a long, oppressive history. This is a history frequently entangled in disease prevention.

In the Middle Ages, leprosy sufferers had to wear identifying clothing and ring a bell of warning upon approach. The sick were feared and shunned. Without a cure, isolation in a leprosarium was often a life sentence.

The collective noun for leprosy sufferers is colony—a loaded word, as we in Australia know all too well. Colonies are predicated on disenfranchisement and dispossession. They are engineered through the act of othering.

Colony is also the collective noun for bats.

We’re conditioned to fear bats. They only come out at night and the semi-translucent webbing in their wings is weird. But bats are the unsung heroes of environmental upkeep. They pollinate, fertilise and protect plants. In our unease with the unfamiliar (the nocturnal, the inverted) we overlook all this.

In recent months, attempts have been made to cull and dislodge local bat populations in Indonesia, Cuba, Rwanda, India and elsewhere. They’ve been gassed and burned and blasted with water cannons. But are the bats vindictive, or are they victims?

The recent rise in zoonotic diseases is the direct result of deforestation, reduced biodiversity, wild-life trade and human interference within natural ecosystems and the wild-life trade. It’s easier to blame what we already fear.

Our aversion to bats is culturally encoded. Bats, as we learn from a young age, are often symbolic proxies for vampires.

In Bram Stoker’s 1897 novel *Dracula*, we’re introduced to the titular character as a Transylvanian nobleman who has recently purchased a house in London. With his aquiline nose and excessive wealth, this Eastern European is often read as a Jewish stereotype – a point drilled home in Tod Browning’s 1931 film, where Bela Lugosi’s *Dracula* wears a Star of David. In *On Immunity: An Inoculation*, a winding study of the metaphoric and pragmatic history of vaccination, Eula Biss draws parallels between the undercurrent of anti-Semitism in Stoker’s novel and the entwined fears of immigration and contagion, treating Dracula’s blood-sucking as a plague parable.

Disease is easy ammunition in the xenophobic arsenal. Jews were blamed for the Black Death in the 14th century; the English called syphilis the ‘French Pox’ in the 16th and 17th century; Trump pushed the phrase ‘China virus’ to weaponise the current pandemic for political ends. The reflex is virulent and vile – an ongoing violence that needs to be rejected and re-narrativised.

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Gebhardt understands this kind of ethical imperative. *Small acts of resistance* is an antidote to intolerance.

The bats in *Small acts of resistance* aren't scary. They're tender. They play, they embrace, they look into the barrel of the camera with a knowing, sympathetic stare. It might be my own projection, but there's a sense of shared affinity here.

A mother hugs her baby and I break. Maybe because I haven't hugged my own mother in months.

These bats aren't vampiric villains. They resist the narratives thrust upon them. There's a beauty in their care and their community, in their tender tranquillity.

Tenderness and resistance / tenderness in resistance. That's what we find in this work. In each of the episodic fragments there is a rejection of the poisonous impulses that drive isolationist ideologies. The people in Gebhardt's filmic portraits set themselves against the structures of division and dogmatic normativity that define our world all too often. They are depicted building their own communities, their own systems of belonging. These are communities that are defiant and diasporic and queer and caring. This kind of community-building isn't simply a social impulse, it's an act of survival. It shifts the ground you're standing on.

A figure, their face masked by their hair, dances out the front of a suburban home. The scene is flanked by talismans from the dancer's—Raina Peterson—childhood and contemporary life – kitsch Australiana intercut with markers of their Fijian-Indian heritage. Ngiyampaa, Yuin, Bandjatang and Gumbangirr artist Eric Avery plays the violin while singing in language, and soars, quite literally, above his Country. A woman nurses a baby kangaroo as if it were her own child. Each act, each gesture, a kind of suturing. A way of negotiating difference through connection.

Two fathers cradle their child in a neo-Baroque tableaux vivant, surrounded by their chosen family.

The red crabs on Christmas Island form their own family, too. That's how they survive. They're protected by their kinship – by their status as a shared, sprawling mass.

In the midst of catastrophe, one crisis rolling into another, this resilience is a comfort. It's a soft blueprint, perhaps, for our own endurance.

— Isobel Parker Philip



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Amos GEBHARDT, *Family portrait triptych*, archival inkjet pigment print,
from the series *Small acts of resistance*, 2020.

Around October/November each year, the red crabs of Christmas Island migrate in the millions from their forest homes to the coasts. Over about a week, they traverse not only natural terrain but terrain that is human-made – dirt roads, paved asphalt, manicured lawns – and, once by the water, begin their reproduction rituals: the males creating burrows in the sand, the females releasing their eggs as high tide recedes between the last quarter and the new moon.

For millennia, humans have been fascinated by the cycles of nature – the seasons, rainfall, the tides – and the cycles of death and rebirth, so much so that we have mimicked them in our own fabricated cycles: rites of passage, routines around bathing and food, matrimonial and funeral customs. Even to our primeval ancestors, there was an understanding that within these repetitions and rhythms were to be found the structuring principles of life itself.

It's fitting, then, that *Small acts of resistance* returns, again and again, to these red crabs. Amos Gebhardt's three-screen, multi-channel video installation is a meticulous, meditative tapestry of intimate scenes on a grand scale. Witnessing the crabs marching among foliage, rock and cement, enveloped in the thrumming of insects and birdlife, viewers can't help but feel the inescapable expansiveness of the natural world. This sense of immersion permeates many images within the work: grey-headed flying foxes roosting, in the hundreds, in suburban trees; eastern grey kangaroos huddling in a paddock near houses. Also emphasised is cohabitation, these creatures intermingling with the architectures of society: freeways, skyscrapers, powerlines, rooves. The animals reclaim the land much as humans have colonised their habitats.

Colonisation itself is a concern in *Small acts of resistance*. In its most conspicuous incarnation, Ngiyampaa, Yuin, Bandjalang and Gumbangirr violinist Eric Avery plays his instrument barefoot in the desert, then sings in his father's language. The elegiac melding of strings and song creeps under our skin; we apprehend, viscerally, that this is a defiant act of reconnection with country, with ancestry.

Elsewhere, gender non-conforming individuals perform choreography against water, their movements and identities matching its fluidity; while a collection of queer, gender-diverse and multicultural figures pose, Renaissance-style, in theological arrangement around a nativity scene of sorts. Both emblematised the insidious interweaving of culture, colonisation and normativity: as gender was policed in Christianised settler-colonial states, so did art reinforce norms through ideological representation. Yet these scenes brim with ambivalence: gender-diverse individuals have historically been ascribed shamanistic talents, while the queered pantheon is surrounded by both Christian iconography (a cross, a heart held Christ-like, a halo) and mystic symbols (a third eye, a blood moon, a pentacle).

In colliding history and multiplicity, reference and reimagining, Gebhardt highlights the significance of time, place and time-and-place in the natural and human worlds, as well as the spiritual thread connecting both. Frequently, the soundtrack, an adaptation of a composition by William Basinski and Lawrence English, gives tangible form to this phantasmic glue. Linking several scenes are swells of ambient sound that hold and release moments of emotional tension – tonal vibrations that seem to channel the ethereal within the elemental. The silence after Avery's delivery is punctured by the caw of crows and the warble of magpies, as if in psalmic response. The screeching of bats at dusk is blended with cars roaring, wind whirring and waves crashing, into one movement of an unfathomable planetary symphony.

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In another scene, Fijian-Indian dancer Raina Peterson – topless but swaddled in their own hair – performs in front of a suburban home, almost haunting it like a ghost. Like Avery, Peterson’s artistic act is unnerving; it breaches the tenets of ‘appropriateness’ that demarcate visionary from vulgar, acceptable from abhorrent. Peterson is also flanked by items of personal significance; these trinkets box the dancer in, attempting to contain the foreignness that has tainted this place of sanctified sameness. Yet, as with all of *Small acts of resistance*, it’s scale that proves most affecting here: as the camera tracks out and context seeps in, the confronting figure soon appears infinitesimal.

Among Peterson’s possessions are pieces of kitsch Australiana that allude to their experiences as a second generation migrant. Indeed, Gebhardt’s work takes in various settings in the Australian nation-state – island, city, suburb, town – and is preoccupied with how gender, faith, family and heritage are at once societal constructions and self-serving identifications. In a subsequent parallel scene, two kangaroos stand watch in front of a house. Like the spectral dancer in suburbia, or the First Nations violinist in the colonised desert, or gender-diverse individuals in cis-heteronormative societies, can these animals re-seize land to which they’re deemed outsiders, which no longer ‘belongs’ to them and in which they do not ‘belong’?

Seen throughout the work are lines, both organic and built: rivers, tree trunks, fences, roads. While lines can divide, they likewise serve to connect – a fact hinted at by moments wherein the trisecting vertical lines are transgressed horizontally, or when the illusion of continuity is created by movements across, against or around. The triptych fragments space; through this formal choice, Gebhardt invites reflection on the fallibility of rigid human conceptions of being – on their incongruence with the more encompassing, ephemeral choreographies of nature.

Two images linger upon finishing *Small acts of resistance*. One, glimpsed for but a moment, is of an abandoned railway, now overgrown with ferns, vines and moss. The other is of an elderly woman nursing a joey, her cradling position recalling the nativity scene. In the biblical creation myth (another colonial artefact), our species is granted both dominion and stewardship, tempering command over ‘lesser’ life-forms with responsibility for their welfare. In a planet inched towards ruin by human action, care – for the world, for one another – has gained increased urgency, challenging the impulse to use and subdue that has defined much of the Anthropocene. Seemingly, humans have fashioned another cycle, one around destructive exploitation, but there is, perhaps, a chance still to break out of it.

— Adolfo Aranjuez

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Cover image: Amos GEBHARDT, *Family portrait* (detail), archival inkjet pigment print, from the series *Small acts of resistance*, 2020. Courtesy the artist and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne.

