

EXHIBITION DATES: 12-20 MAY 2021
MAIN GALLERY—GEORGE PATON GALLERY



The Language My Mother Speaks:
Elements (iteration ii)



Samantha Bews theatre artist

Denise Martin video artist

Neil Harrison special effects, lighting

Voice Over: Bridget Haylock, Samantha Bews

Acknowledgments: text for the lemon tree audio adapted from *Thus Spoke the Plant* by Monica Gagliano North Atlantic Books, California 2018, JS Bach 'Goldberg Variations' Glenn Gould 1955, Yom Kippur Torah Reading by Rabbi Weisblum. All other text by Samantha Bews

The Language My Mother Speaks (TLMMS 2019) was a theatre installation exploring consciousness in a person with advanced dementia, and sought to express the ongoing connection and 'aliveness' of this person within a multi dimensional, inter-connected reality.

In this second iteration of *TLMMS*, the artists bring their attention to the quiet, ever-changing relationship between the person with dementia and the elements. The installation becomes the poetic expression of the material, metaphoric and psychic resonance of this relationship: a relationship that pertains to all human beings, no matter the 'level' of their cerebral function.

Elements (iteration ii) is presented as part of CARE Exhibition Program

Find out more about Care Project at <https://www.contemporaryartandfeminism.com/care>

With thanks to Sandie Bridie at GPG, Jacqueline Millner, Davide Michielin, Danni Moore, Graham Hudson and Jim Coad.

The George Paton Gallery would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land, the Boonwurrung and Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations. We acknowledge their elders past and present and pay our respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in attendance. We would also like to acknowledge that this is stolen land and the sovereignty over this land was never ceded.

GEORGE PATON GALLERY
Level 2 Union House, University of Melbourne
Gallery hours: 1-5pm Monday to Friday T:



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Artist's Notes

The inspiration for the original installation of *The Language My Mother Speaks (2019 Language)* developed from the time I spent sitting beside my mother as she lived with advanced dementia. At that stage in her life she could no longer feed, dress, or toilet herself; stand, see or speak. However in the quiet of her room at the end of the corridor in a dementia specific hostel, I came to understand that she lived within consciousness in ways not readily admitted by modern Western society. The installation's aim was to express something of the multi-dimensional, interconnected reality in which she continued to live, and to give voice to how she spoke within it.

The *Language* installation expressed a complex reality, dense with interconnecting notions of time, diverse intelligence, alternative modes of consciousness and care. For our second work, *Elements (iteration ii)*, we have taken one aspect from the rich texture of the original work to probe, tease out, and listen to within the George Paton Gallery. Earth, fire, air, water and the chemical elements CHNOPS are what I have come to describe as the 'substratum' of my mother's consciousness. This installation explores the materiality of my mother's being, and how the elemental parts of that materiality play out within her consciousness.

We are all made of star dust may be a hokey New Age aphorism but it is also true. It is commonly held scientific knowledge that most of the elements in the periodic table come from supernovas and are the component parts of every living thing on the planet. We are all made of the same stuff. All cells, plants, animals, microbes, the soil, water and air are made with various iterations of the same chemical compounds. These compounds speak in and through us, manifesting life and decomposing to death. At our most basic, we are no more and no less than any other being on the planet.

My mother too, continued to participate in this complex web of interconnection, despite the limits of her cortical function. At the simplest level her body continued to speak the language of compounds: blood cells taking nutrients from the gut and oxygen to the lungs; skin drying, flaking and being remade. She spoke the language of tiny things: beetles and ants, microbes and bacteria – vital components of our earthly existence. In fact, in many ways my mother spoke with more honesty than most of us about the reality of our materiality. No longer able to construct an identity, she lay on her bed simply as she was – a being given life for we don't know what reason. Her heart continued to beat in time with a lazy lizard on a rock. She took in water like the pale-yellow moss on a tree. She lived a life within consciousness that spoke a quieter, humbler way of being. She was grounded in that humility like a pebble in a stream. She changed daily as that pebble changed, she was one thing one day, and slightly different the next. My mother was grounded in the humility of star dust. *From dust you were made and from dust you will return*. She was at once a teeny tiny speck, and equally, part of the astonishing chance of all creation. The chemical elements are one example of how my mother continued to 'speak' despite the limitation of her cerebral functions. The elements – material, metaphorical, and symbolic – continue to play within and around her, inviting her into a continuous discourse with the world.

In a society that prizes economic value above all else, sitting with my mother as she lived with advanced dementia was an act of radical attention. What 'use' is it to sit with someone who can no longer 'think'? And yet it was exactly my mother's 'lack' that drew me into this enquiry of consciousness beyond the limitations of the brain. If we are open to it, 'lack' or loss invites difference rather than diminishment. Such 'foolish' care may very well open our minds to different ways of understanding the world. And in a world hurtling toward ecological collapse, new ways of thinking about and relating to the world are an utmost priority.

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