



# **RADIANT TIMES**

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# **NICHOLAS MANGAN**

**By Pedro de Almeida**

**“May you live in interesting times,” as the saying goes, appears**

to be a blessing, but in fact is meant as a curse. The expression is commonly purported to be an ancient Chinese aphorism that was drolly paraphrased by the British during the tumultuous 1930s in China. By today’s standards of accelerated technological means many might well say that the English understatement needs to be reconsidered. The present is much more than merely “interesting”: it is at once splendidly and anxiously radiant in its possibilities. And yet our planet, seemingly spinning ever faster on its axis, is showing worrying signs of not coping with humanity’s hubris.

Over the past decade, Australian artist Nicholas Mangan has produced complex installations, sculptures, collages, photographs and videos investigating natural and human-made systems that simultaneously govern and disrupt our world, including ever-present yet often inscrutable phenomena such as the weather, energy and financial markets. Since the emergence of his mature works circa 2006, Mangan’s artistic practice has been principally characterized by his fascination with investigating the physical properties of earthly matter—especially substances revered for their God-like capacity to confer power and riches—in service of visual allegories that illuminate the fraught relationship between humanity and its expedient appropriation of the natural world. It is a big topic, not least for exposition in aesthetic form, and one that Mangan tackles by addressing the ethical dilemmas that confront societies caught in the double bind of survival and extinction amid the pursuit of progress.

Visiting Mangan’s West Melbourne studio on an unusually warm winter’s day in August, I arrived at a point in the artist’s schedule between the unveiling of his new film installation *Ancient Lights* (2015) at London’s Chisenhale Gallery in July and its subsequent presentation as part of his solo exhibition “Other Currents” at Sydney’s Artspace in late September. Located within a complex of artists’ studios in an industrial estate on the Maribyrnong River, the site is delineated by rail tracks and wide roads, and bounded by stacked shipping containers and petrochemical storage tanks at the terminal on nearby Coode Island that create an ominous steel range shutting out the city’s skyline. Mangan greeted me with an affable charm that flowed casually, yet I could sense in both the measured way he carried himself and his subtle scrutiny of my presence a more phlegmatic disposition. As his art attests, Mangan casts a steely, critical eye on the manifold delusions and compromises of past and present civilizations even as ecological disaster looms.

The studio that Mangan has occupied for the past three years resembles a mechanic’s workshop, with assorted automotive components, tools and oily rags spread across a concrete slab floor. Harsh fluorescent lighting revealed a diesel engine sitting idly atop a steel frame. Reconfigured by the artist to run on coconut oil, the generator is the beating heart of *Progress in Action* (2013), an installation made up of various machinery parts, tools, coconut shells and 44-gallon oil drums. The work reflects on the Bougainville Civil War (1988–98) between Papua New Guinea and the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, which stemmed from protracted violence after the opening of the Panguna copper ore and gold mine in 1972 and messy political wrangling in the wake of PNG’s independence in 1975. This reconfigured contraption powers a projector that screens the artist’s Dziga Vertov-inspired montage of archival footage juxtaposing mining operations and guerilla activities during the conflict. In one incisive edit the grainy Kodachrome footage shows a mining representative doling out bundles of Australian currency, followed by a close-up that frames illustrations of the monarch’s head on the paper notes and then scenes depicting the washing of copper ore. The coconut-oil-powered engine, an otherwise perfectly banal appliance from the last century, is thus manifested as an industrial totem that enables Mangan to depict humanity’s oscillation between the reach for materialistic grandeur and the grasp of compromised retreat.

(Previous spread)

**SOME KINDS OF DURATION** (detail), 2011, HD color video, concrete, fluorescent light, steel, carbon. Photo by Andrew Curtis.

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**PROGRESS IN ACTION**, 2013, coconuts, makeshift coconut oil refinery, converted diesel generator and video projector, dimensions variable. Installation view at the 9th Mercosul Biennial, Porto Alegre, 2013.

Unless otherwise stated all images courtesy the artist, Labor, Mexico City, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, and Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland.







## The Postindustrial Pacific

Born in 1979 in the traditionally working-class port city of Geelong, located southwest across the bay from Melbourne, Mangan draws parallels between his hometown and the preoccupations that have become the subjects of his work. “I grew up in a town lurching toward the postindustrial present,” he said. “There was Alcoa, the multinational aluminum producers; a Shell refinery; Ford’s Australian manufacturing plant, originally set up in 1926 to assemble the Model T, scheduled for closure next year; and the quarry where my grandfather worked. And then, of course, there’s the port itself where, interestingly, a good portion of the phosphate scraped from Nauru was received and processed by Pivot Fertilisers, in Geelong, going on to sustain agricultural production in Australian and New Zealand farms throughout the 20th century, feeding the Empire as it were.” His remarks referenced his most well-known body of work, *Nauru: Notes from a Cretaceous World* (2009–10), in which he employs sculpture, video and historical photographs and print material in a multifaceted exploration of the devastating ecological and economic impact of more than a century of mining on the tiny Pacific island nation. “Essentially, what I’m interested in is an idea of working through making; trying to understand the way the world is made and the way infrastructure and systems operate, understanding where that starts and following its progression,” the artist explained.

Mangan’s earnestness for crafting objects dates back to his time under the tutelage of artists Ricky Swallow and Callum Morton at the Victorian College of the Arts in the late 1990s. “As a student I created small sculptures that resembled quarries made out of cardboard that I had found in people’s recycle bins,” he recalled. “I was influenced by art that dealt with ideas of the commodity and the ways the

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(Opposite page)

**THE MUTANT MESSAGE**, 2006, banksia nuts, boxbrush hardwood, nylon rope, plastic gardening mesh, plastic funnels, set of speakers, beeswax, processed wax, oiled string and weed retardant tarp, dimensions variable. Installation view at Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, 2015. Photo by Andrew Curtis.

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**DOWIYOGO'S ANCIENT CORAL COFFEE TABLE**, 2009, coral limestone from the island of Nauru, 120 x 80 x 45 cm. Photo by Nicholas Mangan.

economy gives form to things.” Upon graduation in 2001, Mangan landed a studio residency at Gertrude Contemporary that led to solo exhibitions in Melbourne. One of the works from this time, *The Mutant Message* (2006), in which he repurposed banksia nuts, beeswax, wooden spikes and nylon rope into assemblages in the guise of objects of colonial exploration such as a surveyor’s tripod and kerosene lantern, garnered critical attention for its distinctive approach in framing objects, culture and natural phenomena. Challenging the intersections of the signifiers of Aboriginality, colonialism and commercialism, the work marked a point of distinction between Mangan and many of his non-Indigenous peers.

A postgraduate scholarship took Mangan to study at Berlin’s Universität der Künste from 2007 to 2008, where he fondly recalls meeting New Zealand artist Michael Stevenson, who became an artistic mentor. In hindsight, there are recognizable similarities between Stevenson’s works at that time and Mangan’s subsequent ones, particularly in their shared intellectual curiosity for the circulatory activity of social and economic relationships and the whole question of how to approach the artist’s task of object-making in relation to both familiar and arcane historical facts. One such example is Stevenson’s *The Fountain of Prosperity* (2006), a sculptural reimagining of the peculiar machine engineered in 1949 by economist AW Phillips that came to be known as the MONIAC (Monetary National Income Analogue Computer). Assembled mostly from war-surplus materials, including parts from a salvaged Lancaster bomber, Phillips’s machine used fluids and hydraulics to model the flow of money through Britain’s Keynesian national economy—the beginning of part of a tale that led Stevenson into the shadowy history of the acquisition of a MONIAC by Guatemala’s Central Bank in 1953, just one year prior to the CIA-backed coup d’état.

Mangan’s period of study in Berlin saw an important shift in his thinking, from counterfactual imaginings to necessarily more sobering and complicated confrontations with history. He confessed, “Living in Berlin I realized I wasn’t very interested in European history compared to our region of the world, which is full of such amazing stories and events—trade, commerce, war—that inform who we are.” A commitment to excavating real regional histories drove Mangan to undertake two adventurous expeditions to Nauru in 2009 to document the island, itself an accomplishment given the difficulties in obtaining a visa for entry to a politically sensitive island, due to the operation of Australian immigration-



detention facilities there since 2001. The resultant body of work, presented in various configurations, from an installation modeled on a museology display to a stand-alone sculpture, is exemplified in *Dowiyogo's Ancient Coral Coffee Table* (2009), crafted from sliced sections of a coral limestone pinnacle that once graced the forecourt of Nauru House, which was Melbourne's tallest building when it was erected in 1977 during the Pacific nation's phosphate-mining royalties boom. The inverse proportion between the domestic scale of these objects—or "conversation pieces," as Mangan likes to refer to his tables—and their grand historical trajectory sustains their peculiar objecthood, marking a transformation from their origin as the result of sediment accumulation over millions of years, to aesthetic objects of contemplation that were in turn shaped by their economic exchange value as raw phosphate commodity.

Similarly, in his work Mangan quite literally turns the world—or a tiny piece of it—to dust in his atomization of an actual sample of the oldest material of terrestrial origin found to date: zircons, minerals taken from Western Australia's remote Jack Hills, 800 kilometers north of Perth, which are 4.4 billion years old. In its combination of video, photographs and sculptural components, *A World Undone* (2012) sees the artist play God in a tiny universe invented for his own amusement: "I was conscious of pursuing a disaggregation of the crystallization of this thing that sits between the Big Bang and the formation of the earth, pulverizing it and filming it in airborne flux, then putting it in reverse by pouring its remains back into a vitrine that resembled a sand timer. I wanted to re-stratify this thing."

Mangan's balancing act between a boundless inquisitiveness and a more practical application of complex ideas within objects is evident in *Some Kinds of Duration* (2011), a mournful installation comprising two films and several sculptures, most notably the sepulchral form of a commercial photocopier cast in concrete and standing idle in a darkened gallery, like a sentinel watching over an era lost in time. Prompted by his intrigue with an image of the Pymont Incinerator—the artist happened upon it while sifting through the archives at Sydney's Powerhouse Museum—which once stood over Sydney Harbour until its demolition in 1992, Mangan learned that the building had been designed in the 1930s by Walter Burley Griffin, the architect and master planner of Canberra, and his wife Marion Mahony Griffin, who were seemingly inspired by

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**A WORLD UNDONE**, 2012,  
still from video: 12 min.

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**ANCIENT LIGHTS**, 2015, off-grid solar  
power supply, dimensions variable.  
Installation view at Artspace, Sydney, 2015.

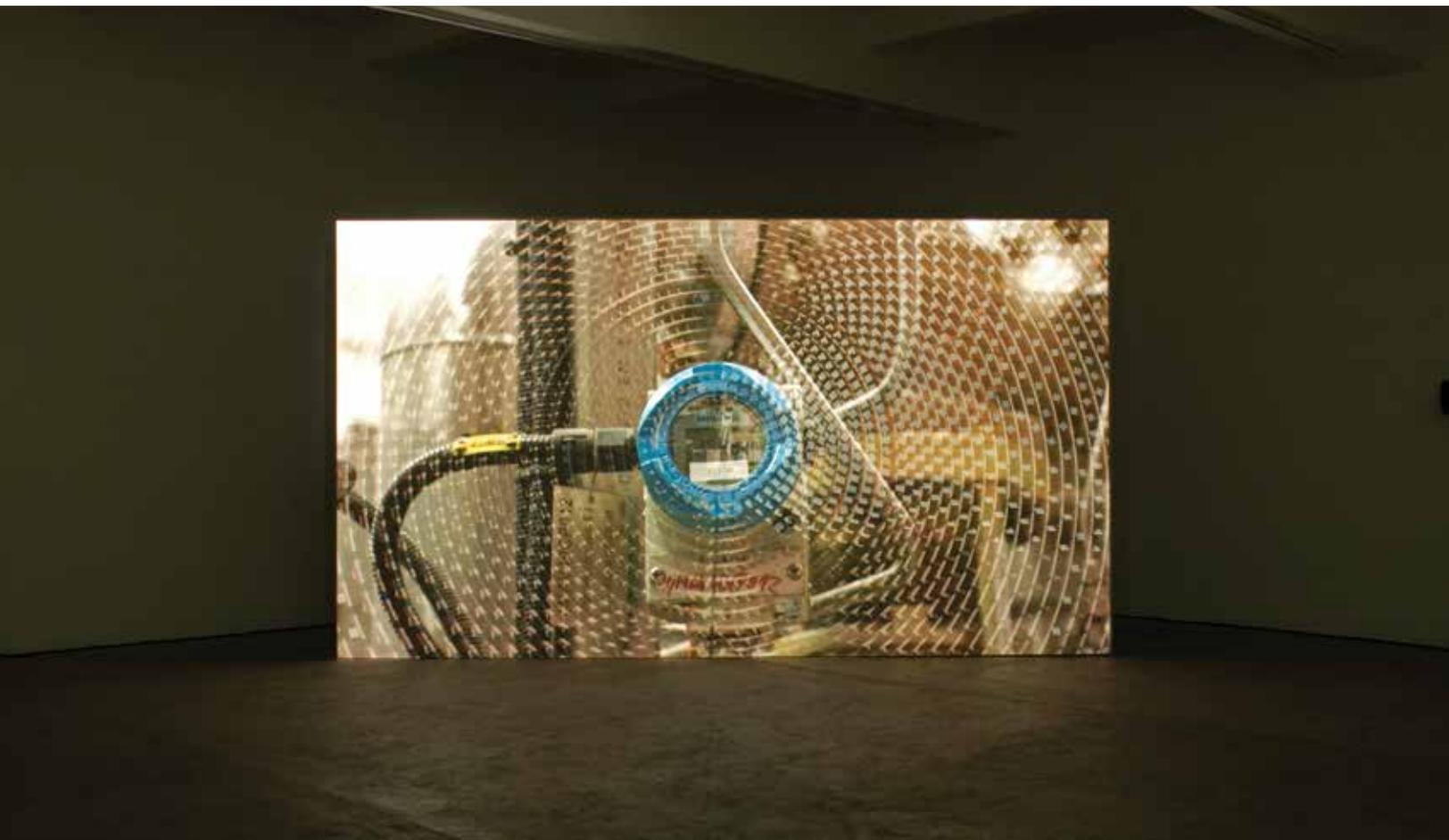




forms and motifs of the Mayan Palace of the Governor of Uxmal, which the couple had seen on a field trip to Mexico's Yucatán. During his research Mangan was particularly enamored of the few remaining ornamental tiles, salvaged by the Powerhouse staff in the final moments before demolition, and the mystical allure of their worn frieze of triangular patterns. In parallel with a photocopier's operating process Mangan scanned each tile with his video-camera's lens to create a ghostly gray, moving image of the shell of the once-splendid architectural embellishment. He then paired this footage with images reproduced on the actual photocopier used to cast his sculpture.

In his statement published in the artist's book to accompany *Some Kinds of Duration*—itself an aesthetically brutalist compendium of grainy imagery, bound in the appropriated cover design of Canon's NP6030 Copy Machine Operator's Manual—Mangan observed: "A story was emerging that framed the demolition of the Pyrmont Incinerator through photocopies, drawing connections through carbon: the incinerator reducing matter to carbon, the photocopier using carbon to reproduce. Parallel cycles of destruction and reproduction." Containing a hollow central core, and thus signalling both copier and makeshift incinerator that resembled the many homemade varieties that once burned in backyards across Sydney, *Some Kinds of Duration* considers the relationship between form, mass and memory—in both structural and symbolic terms. Stare long enough and one is compelled to accept that while carbon, the element that forms the basis of all known life, retains a practical usefulness even in its ultimate decay, the same does not hold true for the human mind, even less for its sparks of ingenuity like those that created architectural beauty in the form of an incinerator.





## Celestial Currency

In its conjuring of the most colossal universal phenomenon of all—the sun—Mangan’s major new installation *Ancient Lights* is distinguished by its conceptual and practical integration of an acute sensorial experience with modern technology’s impersonal logic. Incorporating moving image, photography and sculpture, *Ancient Lights* considers the star’s potential as both cosmic powerhouse and ultimate primeval symbol of life and its cycles, while the title comes from the eponymous doctrine of English common law that gives a landowner the “right to light” in their domestic space from potential obstructions if the property has enjoyed uninterrupted use of that light for more than 20 years. The work was conceived by Mangan in late 2014 as a way of working through certain preoccupations in relation to structuralist film, as well as the question of how to express concepts around energy and its role in affecting equilibrium and disruption on human actions.

The timing of the work’s unveiling in London at the height of summer was dictated by necessity: two constituent video projections were powered by batteries on view in the gallery space that in turn fed on the electricity generated by photovoltaic (PV) panels on Chisenhale’s rooftop—as Australians never tire of pointing out, England is not regularly blessed with blue skies and sunshine, even during balmy days. “The idea was that we could have two days reserve on the batteries; it was a calculated risk,” says Mangan of his contingency planning for the exhibition in the northern hemisphere. “We calculated the wattage draw for all of the equipment that we used against how much we were consuming, building a lean PV system that was cost effective, but could accommodate bad days in the week for weather.” This simultaneously obvious and novel resolution to the question of energy consumption faced by ethically minded consumers in the 21st century—why don’t more galleries and museums do this?—is precisely the contradiction Mangan craves. “This is old technology now. It’s not a new idea. What’s more important to me is that this is something that is very practical; it’s just not as prevalent as it could be.”

In September, I was invited to observe Mangan’s solar panels shortly after they had been installed on the roof of Artspace, a three-story red-brick edifice originally erected at the beginning of the last century as a bulk store for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and later appropriated by the Royal Australian Navy. Kneeling down to touch the warm tempered glass overlaid on a grid of cobalt-blue solar cells, sparkling in their silent absorption of the sun above Sydney was an experience that prompted me to consider the special confluence of technology and environment at this specific site. The solar panels will remain after Mangan’s exhibition as a permanent fixture, aiming to give back to the grid within two years. In this sense, one of Mangan’s strengths as an artist is his acute understanding of how context inflects engagement with his ideas through his use of materials, as well as the reverberations of their perceived and actual function through time. Indeed, to take in *Ancient Lights* in tandem with *Progress in Action*, whose coconut-oil-fueled exhaust is pumped out into the atmosphere via a pipe slotted through a conveniently placed window in the gallery, is to mark the real-time transference of energy in the lived experience of the gallerygoer.

The development of the two interrelated videos in *Ancient Lights* took the artist to several key locations in pursuit of firsthand engagement with his subject. For one of the video works Mangan traveled to Mexico City, intent on filming the sun’s path over the metropolis as a visual hymn to the Aztec Sun Stone rediscovered at the Zócalo, the ceremonial center of the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan. But his plans were thwarted by overcast weather. While he was mulling this over in a bar, with loose change clinking in his pocket, pragmatic inspiration prompted him to realize that the symbolic potential he was pursuing was literally at hand in a ten-peso coin. Made from a copper-nickel-zinc center in an aluminum-bronze ring, the coin depicts the National Arms on one side (an eagle atop

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**ANCIENT LIGHTS**, 2015, still from two-channel video installation: 13 min 41 sec.

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**ANCIENT LIGHTS**, 2015, two-channel video installation and photovoltaic off-grid system. Installation view at Chisenhale Gallery, London, 2015.

a cactus with a snake trapped in its beak), with the circle of the Sun Stone representing the Aztec sun god Tonatiuh wearing a fire mask on the reverse side. Exploiting the mythological, political and economic threads of this ideogram encapsulated in a small metallic object of currency, Mangan created a filmic sculptural study of a single coin spinning on its axis. Using footage from a Phantom Flex4K camera that shoots at 2,500 frames per second, the video has a crisp clarity and is a slow-motion marvel, showing the continuously looped rotation of the ten-peso coin in eerie silence, creating a highly charged metaphor that melds representations of monetary value, national identity and thermodynamic inertia.

In the second video, Mangan presents an essayistic montage comprising both filmed and sourced imagery that offers a counterpoint to the coin video by drastically widening its scope of inquiry. Beginning with close-ups of strange, almost hieroglyphic markings plotted against a graph on a piece of paper, the film progresses through a cycle of vignettes and low-frequency sounds. This includes audiovisual data gathered by NASA's Solar and Heliospheric Observatory project; slowly rotating views of dissections of tree trunks that Mangan filmed at the University of Arizona's Laboratory of Tree Ring Research, established in 1937 by visionary American astronomer AE Douglass, whose investigations into the correlation between tree rings and the sunspot cycle formed the basis for the founding of dendrochronology; and beautifully meditative scenes of Gemasolar, the world's first commercial-scale solar power plant to use molten salt to enable production of energy even at night, located in the Spanish province of Seville. The latter is especially spectacular as Mangan's lens focuses on a field of heliostat mirrors that concentrate light on a central tower receiver—itsself a graceful architectural form reminiscent of a royal scepter—where a boiler unit burns bright as it transfers the sun's power to the molten-salt heat-storage system at its base. The overall effect is strangely emotional, sparked by instinctual responses. "I had planned for the film to be narrated and I had written a text, but I felt that it somehow closed the work down," explained Mangan. "Instead, I think it's important that what people become more aware of is this visual and physical experience through the sound and the light. I felt that produced a transformative effect that was more akin to what the sun is capable of."

Expanding on *Ancient Lights* as a conceptually holistic enterprise, Mangan further explained: "I was interested in the Aztecs' belief that human sacrifice was needed in order for the sun to keep appearing,

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**ANCIENT LIGHTS**, 2015, two-channel video installation and photovoltaic off-grid system. Installation view at Chisenhale Gallery, London, 2015.





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and thinking about this in relation to my reading of [Georges] Bataille’s *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy* (1949) and his idea that all energy is bound to sacrifice; in all acts moving forward, or in the production of something, there is inevitable loss somewhere. Bringing the coin into it was an interesting way to anchor the work and to understand it as a general system in the way that energy is harnessed and allowed into a certain closed circuit, raising the question of surplus and how that is eventually spent.”

The myriad influences on Mangan’s thinking are reflected in the connections proposed by his works. For instance, Mangan reveals that the aforementioned graphical chart that opens the second video is the hand-drawn mean curves of solar cycles of the past two millennia plotted by Belarusian biophysicist Alexander Chizhevsky. In his 1922 book *Physical Factors of the Historical Process*, Chizhevsky theorized that the history of collective upheaval and unrest—including the Russian Revolution of 1917—is affected by recurrent peaks in ions (or excess charge) in the air caused by geomagnetic storms resulting from sunspot-related solar flares. “The appearance of Chizhevsky’s graphs are important in the work because he used, along with other data, Douglass’s tree-ring records in his postulations. I’m also interested in discussions among more recent speculative economists that have looked at correlations between financial recessions and the downturns of sunspot activity between the cycles that Chizhevsky identified.”

As the will to power from Akhenaten until now testifies, it takes a special combination of seductive doctrine, strategic drive and expedient maneuvering for individuals and civilizations alike to navigate their always shifting fortunes. Like a skillful politician’s instinct for assessing whether the times will suit them, the art of Nicholas Mangan has never seemed more pertinent and revelatory than it does now. At the moment of writing this, I need only glance at the news to witness Australia’s Minister for Immigration and Border Protection disgracefully mock the existential threat of rising seas, at the expense of our Pacific neighbors, alongside corporate media groups’ largely sanitized historical appraisals of the significance of the 40th anniversary of Papua New Guinea’s independence from Australian control. But that, after all, follows the central paradox proposed by Mangan’s work: today’s developments, which seem to somehow always catch us by surprise, are merely the effect of the cyclic return of our atavistic instincts, fears and desires. As the sun rises and falls—as it did yesterday and will again tomorrow—perhaps we have always lived in radiant times. 🌀