PROMISED THE MOON
1969 * 2019

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Shortly after 9.30 am US Eastern Daylight Time on July 16, 1969 the Apollo 11 mission began its journey. Its objective, to land an astronaut on the Moon and return him safely to Earth, had been extensively planned and tested over the course of the 1960s. But its possibilities had been contemplated much earlier; just how long humans had been envisaging such an endeavour is, of course, difficult to speculate, but artists have been imagining space travel for centuries.

Perhaps as a result of such imaginings, and because the Moon is a constant presence in our lives, the wonder of actually setting foot on the Moon captivated millions of people on Earth. Amongst those watching Apollo 11’s progress most intently were personnel at tracking stations across the globe, including Australian stations at Honeysuckle Creek and Tidbinbilla (Australian Capital Territory (ACT)), Parkes (New South Wales) and Carnarvon (Western Australia).

The ACT holds a special place in the Apollo programme’s history. Honeysuckle Creek was purpose-built for Apollo and received the television footage of Neil Armstrong’s first steps on the Moon that was broadcast to the world. The Station remained a vital node in the global network of space exploration facilities, along with Orroral Valley Tracking Station and Orroral Observatory, until each was decommissioned, in the 1980s and 1990s respectively. Together with Tidbinbilla, which continues to operate today (as Canberra Deep Space Communication Complex), these places tangibly reflect the ACT’s significant involvement in world aerospace history and contribute to an expanding space heritage resource on Earth.

On the 50th anniversary of Apollo 11, Promised the Moon provides a special opportunity to reflect on this historic event, the meaning its imagery carries and the role of space exploration in our past and future. The curatorial premise underpinning this exhibition was not only to remember and commemorate but to stimulate the creation of art and activate heritage in the present.

Increasingly, cultural heritage practitioners are recognising the capacities of creative practice to interpret historic places and events, arguing that in some cases art may be more effective than conventional heritage communication strategies. Artists have a distinctive aptitude for generating new perspectives and thus are ideally positioned to explore the complex potential of cultural heritage, particularly by conveying what
John Schofield calls ‘intimate engagements with place’. Moreover, artistic insights remind the viewer that it is healthy to discuss, reassess and question what it is that makes a particular place or event meaningful and urge us to be attentive to how and why we commemorate the histories that we hold dear. Creative practice is thus a powerful tool which may be applied to remembering, reflecting, and remaking heritage values and discourse.

In seeking to activate heritage through creative practice, there lies a recognition that individuals, communities and institutions are collectively enmeshed in processes of place-making and that the past is actively constituted in the present. Hence it is important to acknowledge, as the phrase ‘from Ngunnawal to NASA’ succinctly articulates in relation to Namadgi National Park, Australian history and heritage is deep, diverse and multi-layered. In celebrating the 50th anniversary of Apollo 11, and the people and places in the ACT that facilitated its success we recognise also the footsteps of Ngunnawal/Ngambri people who came before and remain today, as well as the lives of those who will follow us all in the future.

Each of the artists in Promised the Moon has developed new work in response to the anniversary. Beyond their appreciation as art, these works shed light on the first moon landing through the eyes of artists who have a deep understanding and experience of the Canberra region. The artists provide insight into how
such a globally monumental event may be reflected through the lens of local experience and ‘intimate engagement’. In this sense, the exhibition might be read as a kind of contemporary re-enactment of that original Honeysuckle feed from space. Each artist has been faced with the challenge of grappling with an occasion of mythic proportions in an effort to channel a thought-provoking encounter, via their own talents, skills and labour. We, as an audience, encounter iconic ideas, images, words and artefacts albeit mediated through the individual and embodied creative practice of each artist. Such lively intersections of art, science, and heritage – meetings of Moon and Earth, past and present and the very atmosphere between us – are truly things to celebrate.

Dr Ursula K. Frederick is the Curator of Promised the Moon


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For those who ventured into space, 
and those watching and waiting back home.