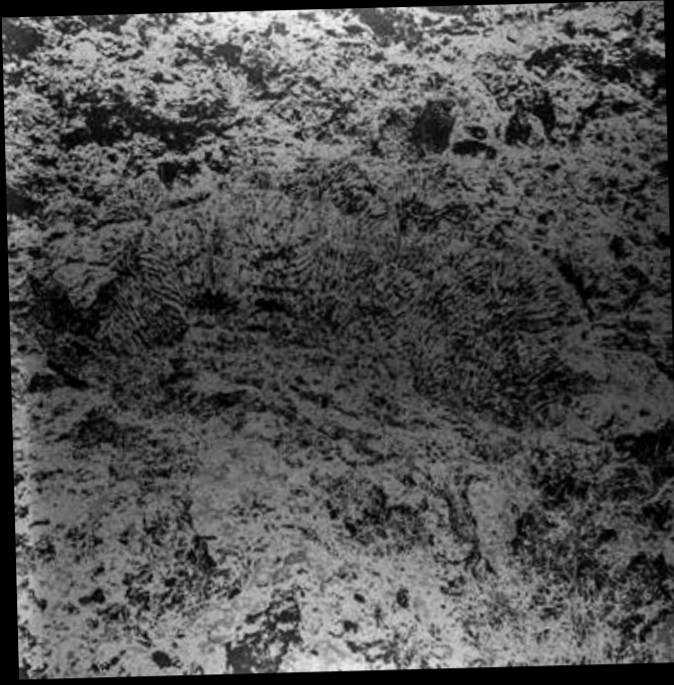


# IZABELA PLUTA VARIABLE DEPTH SHALLOW WATER

5 MAR — 11 APR 2021  
SPAZJU KREATTIV  
VALLETTA MALTA



## VARIABLE DEPTH SHALLOW WATER

Our lively discussion, on the bank of Maiwar / the Brisbane River, Australia, in 2019, zigzagged between drones, map making, representations of the Australia landscape, artworks that go awry and our shared passion for Regina Pilawuk Wilson's artworks. Although it was the first time that Izabela Pluta and I had the opportunity to chat at length, we were soon swapping names of inspiring artists and writers at rapid speed.

Izabela had a new project in development and it would be the first time that she would be using drones to film footage in an artwork. She was buzzing from her Marr'gu residency with Pilawuk Wilson at the Durrmu Arts Centre at Peppimenarti in Central Northern Australia; and philosophical about the near loss of all her footage in Dwejra, Malta. Using an aerial point of view, she was soon confronted with the issues of the militaristic gaze and the trope of the overhead travelling shot that has become ubiquitous with drone cinematography. Izabela had dropped me a line as I had recently grappled with similar questions when curating an exhibition and cinema program on vertical perspective. Our discussion centered on how to subvert the militaristic and colonial gaze when using material produced from these lines of sight.

Aerial mapping can be a way to condense the landscape into a concept or to inscribe an image with information about a place. Just as aerial photography was honed during World War One, satellite imagery and drone footage dominate the recording of contemporary conflicts. Warfare and resource extraction have been the main drivers of the growing sophistication in technologies that entwine cartography and surveillance.<sup>1</sup> Google Maps GPS reference points are specified by an information architecture established by the US Government. Moreover, the intensification in the digital monitoring of city streets edges public spaces in non-conflict zones ever closer toward militarised sites. These types of surveillance imagery are often presented as impartial, running the risk of mistaking the disembodied God's-eye view of being synonymous with power.

When looking at clear, crisp maps, photography, and video, our attention is drawn to the content rather than the medium. Yet, it is in the glitches and errors that these images often divulge their material basis and author. The slow and disciplined overhead pans in Pluta's, three-channel video installation, *Lines of sight* 2020 suggests a spectral eye. Suddenly, the oceanic sweeps of Dwejra and tropical scrubby scenes at Peppimenarti are interrupted by jerking movements and abrupt changes of direction that highlight the mechanised movement of drone flight.<sup>2</sup> What these movements make abundantly clear is that while drones may be unmanned, they are still controlled by someone. Unable to completely disentangle drone vision from its military origins, the work is also a timely reminder that although drone footage is often passed off as objective it remains a subjective point of view.

The increasing refinement of mapping technology can give us a sense of control over our place in the world; however, anyone who has been lost in nature will have experienced how quickly the scale of the sea, desert or the forest can overwhelm us. Pluta uses cloudy underwater imagery alongside crisp overhead and inverted views, reminding us of the limits of perception. These confounding land and sea-scapes completely fill the frame and the lack of horizon line or other obvious markers make it increasingly difficult to grasp any sense of scale. By splicing between multiple points of view in each channel as well as using three channels, the artist negates a singular perspective that can be easily consumed by the viewer. The work is permeated by a sense of destabilisation, shaking off the assumption that we can claim to fully understand the disparate spaces presented on screen.

Like Pluta, I have sought to connect human vision, cartography and surveillance to encompass broader aesthetic histories and ways of conceptualising the landscape. The impetus for one exhibition was a frustration with the way that contemporary art discussions about the recent spate of drones vision art projects were restricted to military and filmic innovation.<sup>3</sup> Yet, a quick flick through art history provided numerous examples of the view from above. This lack of a secure footing is richly represented in Chinese and Japanese landscape painting traditions, with vertiginous mountain-scapes filling the frame and breaks in the clouds revealing interior scenes below. Here in Australia, Western and Central Desert painters—such as Doreen Reid Nakamarra and George Tjungurrayi—are world renowned for their aerial paintings that capture the vast distances over which their songlines stretch. Looking to the different cultural traditions in art history that use overhead perspective reveals the profuse and intricate stories bound up within a global overview of art.

These divergent approaches to representation remind us how concepts of mapping change our perception of a place. Depending on the way we approach the world, the landscape can be read as teeming with information or reduced to abstraction. The establishment of so-called Australia—beginning with the New South Wales colony in 1788 by the British—was based on the misreading of this country as a barren and unpopulated; yet, for 80–60,000 years the First People knew it as a cosmopolitan multi-nation island filled with abundant markers for water springs, food sources, and the ever-present spirits. Thus, depictions of the Australian landscape are intimately bound up with declarations of sovereignty.

The interrupted and confounding viewpoints in Pluta's artworks reflect the position of an unstable visitor moving through the land and connected waters of Australia and Malta. These unpredictable pictures remind us viewers to be suspicious of clean images, and what they have smoothed over and falsely declared. Moreover, Pluta shows that an attentiveness to accidents, glitches and blurriness can reveal other alternative ways of relating to the world.

Ellie Buttrose, Curator, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Australia

1. That have become increasing common ways to track and predict consumer behaviour.

See recent discussions about the use of audio surveillance and use of facial recognition in Australia: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/feb/13/queensland-police-say-they-will-not-investigate-councils-audio-surveillance>; <https://theconversation.com/facial-recognition-technology-is-expanding-rapidly-across-australia-are-our-laws-keeping-pace-141357>, viewed February 2021.

2. Pluta sought the permission of the Ngan'gikurunggurr people to use this footage in *Lines of sight* 2020.

3. 'Limitless Horizon: Vertical Perspective', Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2017–19.

## PUBLIC PROGRAMME

**10 March 2021, 19:00**

Panel discussion with Moderator Ranier Fsadni, and panel Izabela Pluta, Jon Banthorpe, and Margerita Pulè.

**2 April 2021, 19:00**

Art Additives programme of short films by artists including Charles & Ray Eames, Jananne Al-Ani, Ben Thorp Brown, Raquel Ormella and Lynne Roberts-Goodwin. The film screening has been curated in collaboration with Ellie Buttrose, Curator, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Australia, the exhibition curators and artist.

## LIST OF WORKS

*Variable depth, shallow water* 2020  
silver gelatin photographs, pigment prints on aluminium, dye-sublimation prints, polyester waddling straps, two-way acrylic, aluminium, polyester resin  
600 x 200 x 150 cm (overall installation)

*Lines of sight* 2020  
3 channel digital video with sound, polyester waddling straps, two-way acrylic, aluminium  
06:25 minutes (loop)  
Editing: Vera Houg Productions  
Sound Design: Ant Bannister and Tobias Gilbert  
Filmed in Gozo, Malta with the assistance of Dive Smart Gozo and in Peppimenarti, Australia with the permission of the Ngan'gikurunggurr people

*Apparatus* 2020  
Vinyl, neon, polyester resin  
dimensions variable

*Freefall* 2021  
single-channel audio  
06:32 minutes

## Curators

Nicole Bearman and Francesca Mangion

## Essay contributor

Ellie Buttrose

## Design

Suzanne Boccalatte

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Izabela Pluta is represented by Gallery Sally Dan-Cuthbert, Sydney

Top left and on reverse: *Variable depth, shallow water* (detail) 2020  
digital prints on aluminium

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PHOTOGRAPHY  
BY IZABELA PLUTA