

Dangling in the romp



The Tromp family home, Silvan, East of Melbourne.

23 December 2016 – 28 February 2017

Pet Projects is pleased to present 'Dangling in the Romp', a group exhibition featuring the works of:

Anonymous
Brian Fuata
Marc Kokopeli
Megan Plunkett
Zac Segbedzi
Amy Yao

Organised by George Egerton-Warburton

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From the Sydney Morning Herald, Saturday, September 10, 2016:

Tromp walkabout was no picnic, more a fresh entry in grim Australian storybook

Chris Johnston

Among the many images gleaned from the Tromp family's ill-fated car journey from outer Melbourne into the wilds of NSW – a long, 1500-kilometre road to nowhere – one remains more frightening than the rest.

The finer details of it are thin because the man who found Riana Tromp, 29, the eldest child of the successful berry farming family from Silvan, has opted not to elaborate beyond the basics. But what we know is Keith Whittaker, of Goulburn, got in his ute to drive to Canberra last week and felt a kicking on the back of his seat.

Mr Whittaker found Riana huddled in the back, "catatonic". That is, not moving, staring straight ahead, unresponsive. He called the police and she was taken away and remains in Wangaratta, back in Victoria, in the care of mental health workers alongside her similarly affected mother Jacoba, who had also walked out on the trip.

Out there somewhere was father Mark Tromp, tailgating a random driver in Wangaratta late at night before vanishing himself, into dark parkland on the regional city's fringe, the keys left dangling in the ignition.

When news of the Tromps' disappearance first broke, it already felt familiar. It felt like a variation on the Netflix show *Stranger Things*, itself a pastiche on missing-people stories from the 1980s. The strange gaps in the information also read like something out of the 1990s TV show *X-Files*, with its protagonists fleeing from technology but tracked just the same.

But the real echoes are much closer to home.

Return to Riana dazed and mute in the back of a stranger's ute, unable to say who she was or what had played out – this narrative is straight from an Australian horror story, the road-trip gone wrong.

It has been a common trope in Australian storytelling since Europeans first arrived, starting with the bush tales, the Victorian gothics, the movies. From the many retellings of Bourke and Wills to Patrick White's *Voss* to those 1970s classic films *Walkabout* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, the premise remains the same. City folk head into the bush and get lost, metaphorically and physically.

"Australian roads are hunting grounds," wrote Katherine Biber, a legal scholar, criminologist and historian from the University of Sydney, in 2001. She was writing about masculinity in Australian cinema but of course femininity is challenged out there in the beyond, too – the female victims of *Wolf Creek*, the "girl" in Nicolas Roeg's *Walkabout*, even the cross-dressers of *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*.

The hunting grounds, wrote Biber, are "stages upon which elaborate pursuits and counter-pursuits are played" but the roads lead nowhere, instead acting as stages for "the performance of a series of cultural rituals".

This new drama, she says, takes place in the car, or the vehicle, a "micro-habitat."

In Rianna Tromp's case she was in the original Tromp car that set out from Silvan, a grey Peugeot wagon owned by her sister, then she was in the vehicle that her sister allegedly stole, then she was found in Kevin Whitaker's ute.

Like so many Australian road trips before them, it starts as a journey to destinations unknown. The Tromps didn't know what they were looking for or where they were headed, son Mitchell told the media, just that they had to flee.

As the white boy says in the film Walkabout, "I don't suppose it matters which way we go".

Mitchell, who was the first to leave the trip in Bathurst, threw his phone out the window at Warburton, not far from home. The explanation given here is that the trip was supposed to be technology-free, he bought his phone and, when urged, chucked it out. From then the family were off-grid.

The irony is that by driving away into the Australian bush there were more people looking for them and tracing their movements than ever before.

Members of the family stuck in Wangaratta delayed their trip back to Silvan this week, telling friends they were intimidated by further feelings of surveillance by the TV crews camped in their driveway.

In Picnic at Hanging Rock, all the girls' watches at the doomed picnic party stop, at noon, foreshadowing what was to come. In some ways Mitchell Tromp throwing his phone out the car window while going through the Warburton forests was the Tromps' final and very equivocal farewell to the world they wanted to escape for a while and, for this trip, the end of common sense and logic.

In all, it lasted five days, but time appeared to shift for the Tromps, as if they had all entered some kind of temporal zone far away from normality and the usual chronologies of family life.

The Tromps were turning into urban legends even before they were all found.

While they were still whereabouts unknown, witness reports came in, various family members seen here or seen there.

A man with a pup-tent was seen walking into the coastal town of Bega and police swooped, thinking it was Mark. It wasn't, but it could have been. Cabins and huts along the Hume that showed signs of disturbance were combed for clues- a muesli bar wrapper could speak volumes.

The one verified sighting came with its own pop culture reference – the young couple in Wangaratta who said Mark Tromp tailgated them after 10pm were out catching Pokemons on their mobile phones in the local reserve.

It culminated in the news photographs of Mark, after he had been found after three days wandering, flipping the bird to media outside a police station, from inside a car, the stress and isolation of what he had been through showing. It was misread as defiance, but friends say he is not an angry or defiant man.

Thankfully, this is a story with a happy ending, an Australian gothic in which everyone returns to civilisation and their their families. But it's still a mystery, even to the Tromps themselves.

Standing outside the family home, expressing their joy and relief that their father had been found safe and well, Mitch and sister Ella struggled to say what happened.

"There's no one reason for it," Ella said, when pressed. "It's bizarre."

In time, there may be an explanation for what triggered this trip into the unknown. But perhaps there won't be.

As the gardener says at the end of Picnic at Hanging Rock: "Some questions got answers and some haven't."

Anyone needing support can contact Lifeline: 13 11 14 www.lifeline.org.au; or Beyondblue: 1300 224 636 www.beyondblue.org.au.