Eloquence Art Prize 2026
OUR FORESTS IN DANGER

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SELF-PRESENTATION

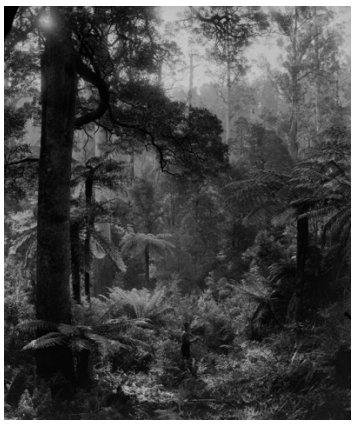
I am a Fine Art PhD candidate at the ANU.

- I hold an MA in Cultural Materials Conservation from the University of Melbourne and a BFA from the Victorian College of the Arts.
- In 2020, I received a University Research Scholarship.
- In 2023, I was an American Slovenian Education Foundation Junior Fellow.

THE FOREST AFTER THE LIVING WHOLE

Nicholas Caire, François Méchain

1. François Méchain, *La Rivière Noire*, 1990 Parc des Laurentides, Québec, Canada tirage original de l'artiste diptyque argentique noir & blanc sur Dibond, lettres et chiffres blancs 300 x 115 cm



2. Nicholas Caire, *Condon's Gully, Healesville* (c. 1903-1910). Gelatin bromide, 30.4 × 25.2 cm (image and support). National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Gift of John Cato, 1990.

Photography has a long tradition of organising forests as continuous pictorial environments: spaces whose depth and tonal coherence invite imaginative entry. Nicholas Caire's Condon's *Gully, Healesville* (c. 1903–10) belongs to this tradition and to the late-colonial and early Federation landscape photography that rendered the Victorian bush as scenery. François Méchain's *La Rivière noire* (1990) sits on the other side of this tradition. Produced from an ephemeral in situ sculpture made during a Canadian residency from debris left by industrial clear-cutting, Méchain's monumental photographic diptych confronts us with a forest reorganised by extraction. Placed in dialogue, these photographs give form, through subject matter and composition, to a crisis facing forests in our time: the loss of the living whole.

In Caire's image, the forest appears as an enveloping world, heightened by the warm tonality of gelatin dry-plate photography. At the centre of this wild scene stands a young figure, his expression of youthful wonder offset by the axe resting on his shoulder. What Caire presents, perhaps unintentionally, is the obvious colonial-settler danger of the axe and another, arguably more forceful danger: the tool rests comfortably within the same compositional harmony as the surrounding forest. Colonial photography absorbs settler wonder and extractive capacity into a totalising image of nature, rendering forthcoming destruction as continuous with the landscape.

Méchain's work begins after this extractive possibility has become a material fact. In the photographic documentation of *La Rivière noire,* felled trunks occupy the foreground and block the viewer's entry. The gathered and arranged debris forms a temporary sculpture so that, from the camera's selected position, its contour repeats the distant ridge. A forest already reorganised by industry is reorganised again through sculpture and photographic perspective. An alphanumeric sequence records Méchain's body, the timber he moved and the duration of his labour, presenting pictorial coherence as the result of exertion, measurement and viewpoint.

In presenting us with the image of *La Rivière noire*, Méchain offers a powerful proposition: the remains produced by the extractive relation prefigured in Caire can be rearranged so that the history of extraction becomes perceptible. A new whole emerges, but, importantly, it carries — and, as Méchain shows us, must carry — the irreversible transformation of the forest within its form. After extraction, Méchain suggests, wholeness returns as evidence of the living relations that have been broken; and only by confronting that evidence can we begin to imagine forms of repair.

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