

# Dwelling

# Jessee

# Lee Johns

Dwelling  
Jessee Lee Johns

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Goolugatup Heathcote  
TILT Commission 2025  
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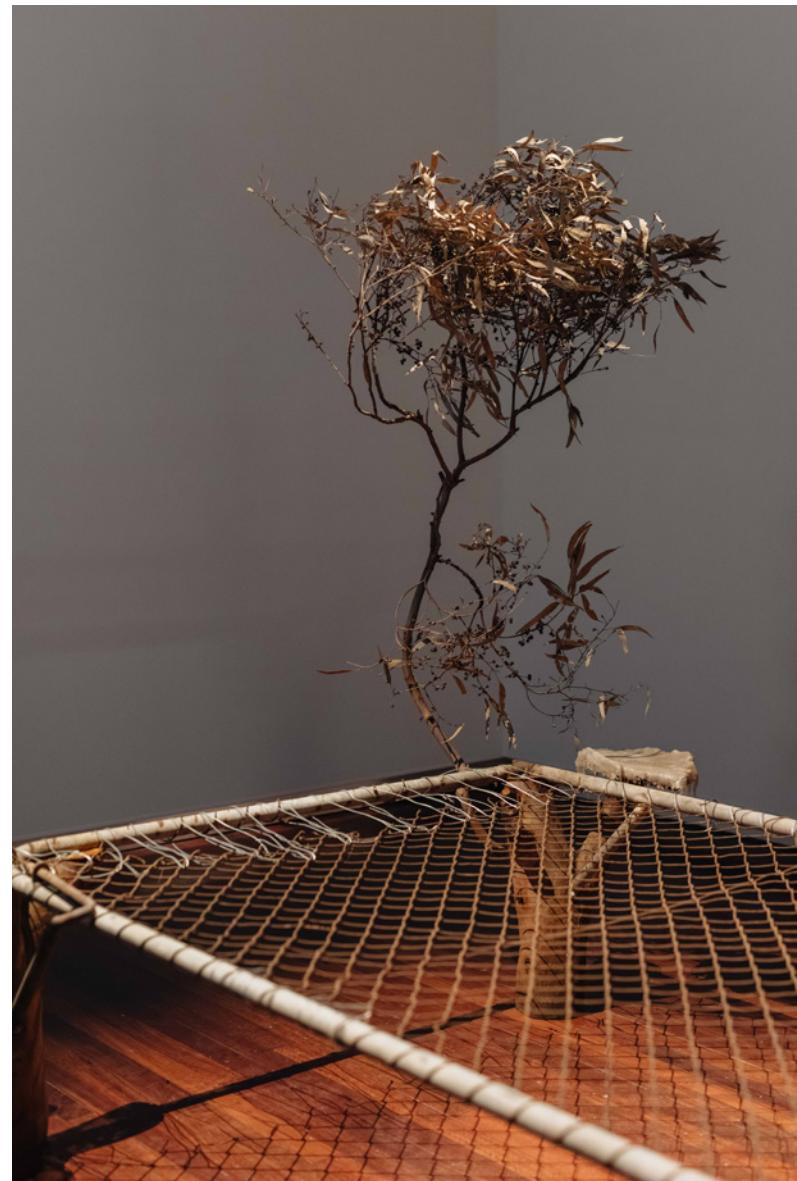
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# if you lived in your heart

## Elizabeth Smith



*Goolugatup* is the Noongar word for ‘place of children’. It is a lookout, camping and fishing ground, and a place to tell stories. As it forever will be.

*If you lived in your heart, you’d be home right now*

Instead of embracing you, the bed looms over you like a beast. The promise of rest is slowly consumed by sensations of unrest, of something having gone terribly wrong. Like Dorothy exclaiming “we’re not in Kansas anymore”<sup>1</sup>, the realisation dawns that you’re not at home anymore. Or at least, you’re not at the home you expected. A dead gum tree has been sawed and quartered to make crude legs. Upon these legs, an old piece of metal gate is grafted with a series of large semi-rusted screws. On one side of the headboard, the curled and browned leaves of the gum tree have been retained and they span outwards in furls and points. They still glisten when light is cast on them, but instead of freshness, they conjure aromas of a dry and cracked wilderness ripe for a fire. Twisted spikes of rusted barbed wire sit at one end of the bed. At the other end, the galvanised wire mesh has come unstuck from the frame at some point, evidenced by pieces of wire looped through like sutures closing a wound. There is no mattress, but there is a small side table below the leaves. Made of fibreglass and resin, it is the colour of fogged glass after milk is drained from it, and drapes over the protruding wooden stump like cowhide draped over an armchair.

As the grip of unrest subsides, another realisation comes into focus: all the materials used to construct this bed are taken from the world you have just left. Offcuts, the broken, dead, discarded, and things devoid of use in your world, are all useful here. A dead tree is not just fuel for a homely fire, neither is a gate only something that protects from external threats. In this other world, these items have been reimagined and reshaped; no longer are they things to be cast aside because they no longer function within conventions for intended use. Resting here may be no easy feat, but you know in your heart it is possible.

This bed is a component of the installation entitled *Dwelling*, by Jessee Lee Johns. Nestled within Goolugatup Heathcote, *Dwelling* is a slight departure from Jessee’s usual approach, which often sees his worlds materialise fleetingly in in-between, disused or abandoned spaces.<sup>2</sup> Like with his other projects *Commonwealth of New Bayswater* or *Prestige Bricks*, experiencing a world constructed by Jessee is akin to the sensation felt when a threshold is crossed or when the simple turning of a corner reveals another reality; drawn from the very stuff in which our world is made of – systems, materials, and ideologies. *Dwelling* functions the same way. Comprising core aspects of a home such as a kitchen and living area, each component is constructed from degraded and wasted materials.

<sup>1</sup> Vidor, King, et al. *The Wizard of Oz*. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), 1939.

<sup>2</sup> Hayward Philip. “Secessionism, Submergence and Site-responsive art,” in *Shima*, vol. 12, No. 1, 2018, p.165.

The encounter with these homely parts generates a ‘feeling’ of reality rather than just an “illustration of its narratives”<sup>3</sup>. Rather than functioning assets geared to assist in living, they are rendered strange, and you have to work hard to reckon with them. At times, they feel discomfiting, at other times, comforting. Furniture that we’re used to bruising our shins on suddenly has the ability to jag and cut. And with the absence of a human proponent, the furniture itself also becomes unsettled and exposed, crumbling like an old building. In *Dwelling*, living becomes speculative and radical, charged with the potential for imagination. The outside not only comes in, but it also comes into a gallery, a space designed for display, not living. As ideas of home are rendered strange, so too is the gallery. Experiencing through the lens of estrangement, things split and crack, creating an unstable reality; the bed is not purpose-built to contain all the messy, spontaneous and private ways of resting, and neither is the gallery purpose-built to contain the same aspects of living. It’s something to grapple with, akin to the way the emergence of mold signals a fragility in the structure of a wall.

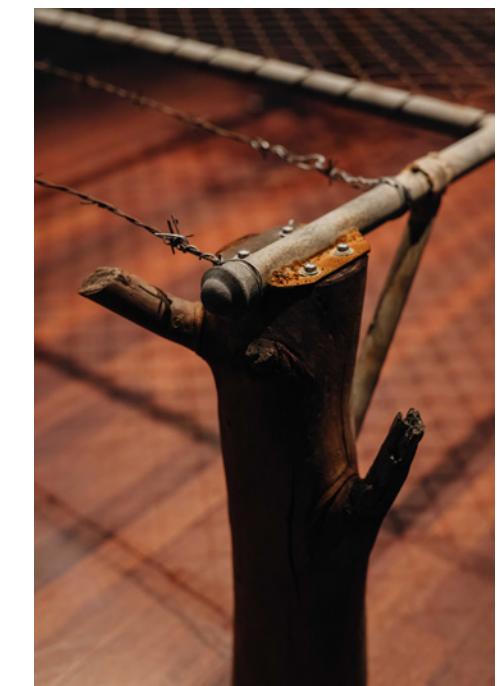
The bed is nestled in the installation which is nestled within the gallery which is nestled within the affluent suburb of Applecross. As much of Applecross is a suburban sanctuary, it is also a lucrative real estate investment, a vessel for market speculation for housing developers hungry for a profit, and an opportunity for an exclusive living experience for those wealthy enough to secure it. It is no secret that our housing system is now our housing crisis, converted from being the “Great Australian Dream to the Great Australian Nightmare”<sup>4</sup>. Following successive decisions by our governments to prioritise home ownership and investment, this has disoriented and degraded other ways of living and the human right to housing in the process. Today, Australia has the “highest level of home ownership debt in the world”<sup>5</sup> owing a total of \$1.4 trillion in loans<sup>6</sup> all in the name of homes as assets, rather than places to live. It doesn’t require much thought to conceptualise that the owners of the homes in Applecross would also make up part of this collective debt.

Perhaps all this evidence demonstrating the being-in-a-state-of-crisis can be useful. It forces you to reimagine and reshape and “not accept the world as it is”<sup>7</sup>. Because rather than an installation in a gallery, *Dwelling* unfolds as a “principle of engagement”<sup>8</sup> helping us to question the policies and platforms upon which our systems are built, reimagining the crisis of housing and living in a productive way, conjuring its spirit.

The truism contained in the title of this piece captures something of a reality and that strange promise afforded by cliches. The deteriorated and stale policies of the Australian housing system mean that more of us have to live by this kind of dissonant affirmation. It’s apparent from report after report, and commission after commission, that our housing situation is rather dire.

Home ownership is privileged and prioritised at the same time as housing supply and access to housing dwindles. Fewer and fewer of us will ever own a home in our lifetime, instead opting for private rentals with tenuous tenancy rights, social housing, or even forced into homelessness. Yet, this aphorism also reminds us that the notion of feeling and being at home at all is as much a state of mind as it is a physical place made of the joining of bricks and mortar. What do you do when faced with a harsh reality that isn’t going to change any time soon? You make do, get on with the “real business of being-in-the-world”<sup>9</sup>, and you reimagine that home really is where the heart is.

Liz Smith is an arts writer, curator, and arts worker based in Boorloo / Perth, Western Australia. Her practice spans writing, curating, and community-engaged arts work. Her writing practice is informed by the ways language can bring audiences closer to artworks, artists, and experiences of art. Alongside her independent projects, Liz works as a Project Officer with the Aboriginal Art Centre Hub of WA (AACHWA). She has also worked for local institutions including the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, the Janet Holmes à Court Collection, the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, and the artist-run initiative Pig Melon.



<sup>3</sup> Barikin, Amelia and Helen Hughes. *Making Worlds: Art and Science Fiction*. Surplus, Melbourne, 2013, p.10.

<sup>4</sup> Bell, Kevin. *Housing: The Great Australian Right*. (1st ed.) (In the National Interest), Monash University Publishing, 2024, p.2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.48.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Barikin, Amelia and Helen Hughes. *Making Worlds: Art and Science Fiction*. Surplus, Melbourne, 2013, p.11.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.



# TILT: Reflecting on Site, Story and Transformation

## Jana Braddock

Since its launch in 2008, the TILT program at Goolugatup Heathcote has invited artists to look closely at place, memory, and history, and to tilt our perspectives on what this site is and what it might become. Now entering its eighteenth year, and with its twentieth anniversary on the horizon in 2028, TILT has grown into one of Western Australia's most significant commissioning programs, sustaining ambitious, research-led projects that reflect deeply on Goolugatup Heathcote's layered histories.

From the outset, the program has been anchored in the particularities of place. Goolugatup is a site of ancient and ongoing significance for Noongar people, and the cultural, spiritual and political weight of this riverbend cannot be understated. It is also a site of profound colonial transformation, most visibly in its legacy as a mental health hospital. These histories—of care and control, resilience and trauma—remain embedded in the site's buildings, its landscape, and its public memory. TILT positions artists within this charged context, offering the time and support to produce new work that is responsive, challenging, and deeply connected.

Over nearly two decades, TILT has built a remarkable lineage of artists who have taken up this invitation. Olga Cironis (2008), Caitlin Yardley (2009), Paul Caporn (2010), Tom Muller (2011), Eva Fernandez (2012), Holly Story (2013), Merrick Belyea (2014) Andy Quilty (2015), Jon Tarry (2016), Sandra Hill (2017), 10 Year Retrospective (2018), Jo Darbyshire (2019), Erin Coates (2020), Curtis Taylor (2021), Emma Buswell (2022), Lisa Liebetrau & Shannon Lyons (2023), Abdul-Rahman Abdullah & Anna Louise Richardson (2024) is the list of those who have transformed the galleries and grounds of Goolugatup Heathcote through their Tilt response. Each has tilted the lens differently—foregrounding hidden stories, reframing ecological and cultural entanglements, or revealing the structures that shape our collective lives. Together, their works map a trajectory of sustained, context-specific experimentation.

The program has also shifted in tone and urgency across its two decades. Early projects laid the foundation by establishing methodologies of care, memory, and re-interpretation. More recent commissions have been marked by a responsiveness to contemporary pressures: climate crisis, decolonisation, housing insecurity, shifting identities, and the ongoing assertion of First Nations sovereignty. TILT remains a program that is never static; its relevance is sustained by its ability to adapt, and by the artists who bring imagination, critique and empathy to the site.

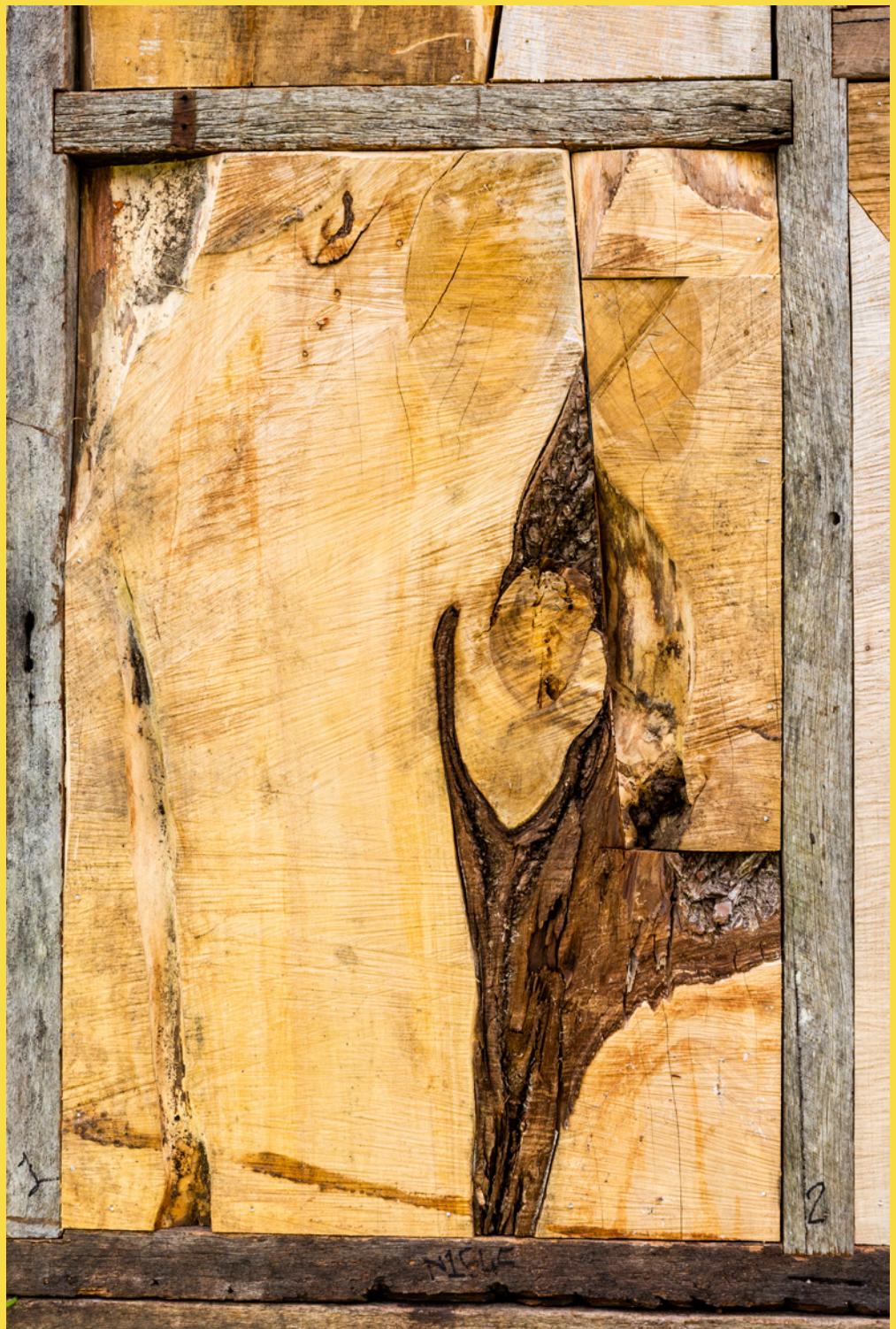
### Jessee Lee Johns: Dwelling

The 2025 TILT commission is undertaken by Jessee Lee Johns, a Perth-born artist whose practice traverses architecture, satire, and social commentary. Known for projects that range from establishing a self-declared micro-nation to running a tongue-in-cheek brickworks business, Johns interrogates the systems—both physical and symbolic—that shape how we live. We are delighted to have Jessee as the 2025 TILT artist. He was selected for the program because of his bold, inventive practice and his ability to reframe familiar systems and spaces in ways that spark new conversations. His work exemplifies the spirit of TILT—pushing boundaries, challenging assumptions, and creating ambitious, site-responsive projects that resonate well beyond the gallery. We congratulate Jessee on this commission and sincerely thank him for the extraordinary imagination, energy, and generosity he has brought to the program.

As the program approaches its 20th year, Johns's commission affirms TILT's enduring ethos: to support artists who tilt perspectives, unsettle narratives, and transform how we understand this remarkable site.

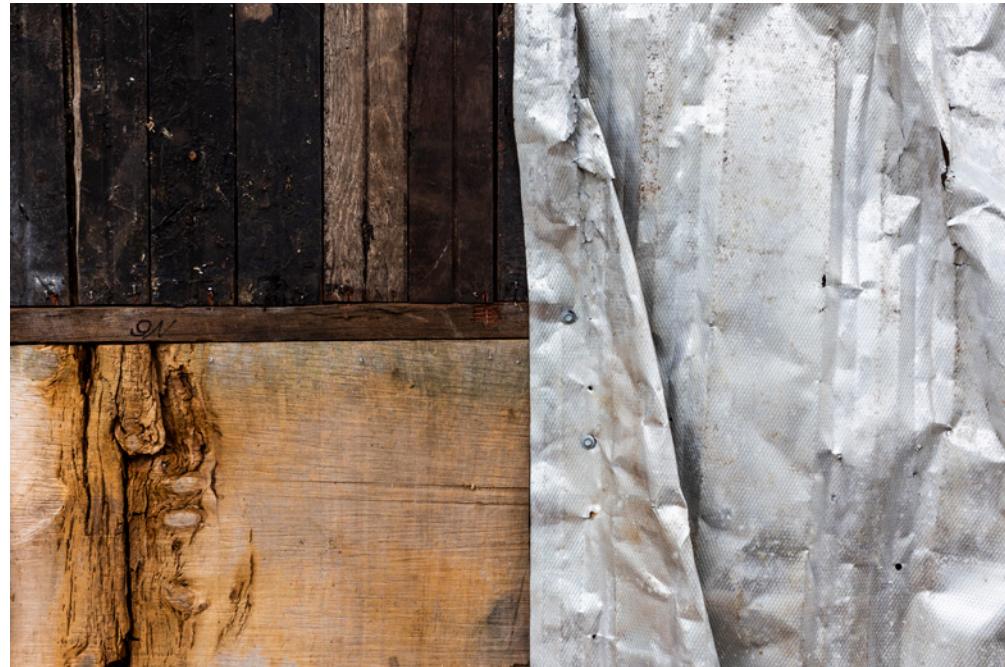








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# Biography

## Jessee Lee Johns

I was born in 1980 in Boorloo/Perth, and more or less hang about and make work there.

At some stage I muddled my way through a bachelor's degree in fine art at Curtin University, but didn't really seem to understand what was going on. This led to a fairly lengthy sabbatical from the practice of fine art.

I am the proprietor of Prestige Bricks, a store that makes feature bricks, repairs bricks that have seen better days and somehow addresses the housing crisis. I recently completed a brick repair that may be the best thing I have ever done.

At some stage it struck me as a good idea to make some paintings, but not knowing where to show them, I decided to make a gallery in a popular fly dumping spot in Perth's outer suburbs. After putting on a couple of shows there, someone moved in, and it was subsequently demolished. The gallery, CIOMA, went on to be rebuilt in a variety of contexts, most notably in an alternate future in the year 2020, from which I summoned it and myself back to 2018 in order to prevent WA's secession and collapse.

In 2017 I established a small nation called the Commonwealth Of New Bayswater, of which I and a friend are the only citizens. And just in case you, the reader of this bio, feel as though you have been overlooked and your citizenship should be made official, it is probably the case that the paperwork is currently making its way through the bureaucracy and will be granted in due course. The Commonwealth appears from time to time, establishing its borders when conditions are favourable, fading as they turn. Kind of like an algal bloom, but instead of phosphates from agricultural runoff, it's mining money in one way or another.



# Image Library



Ronald Courtney Institute.  
Courtesy of the artist.



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The Ville, 2025.  
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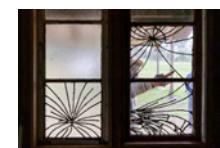
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# Acknowledgements

This show is dedicated to all the wonderful friends and family whom I love dearly. And to all those having a rough time putting a roof over their head.

## Colophon

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