

Cameron Robbins
Aeolian Beacon

MPRG

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Independent Curator

Aeolian Beacon is a major work commissioned in 2023 by MPRG. Created in response to the specific topographies and atmospherics of place, this monolithic sculpture can extend to 14 metres in height and features three kinetic vanes that move independently in the wind. This Beacon is a warning, a signaller, and an invitation for contemplation and reverie.



For more than thirty years Robbins has explored and refined the intertwining threads of art, design and science that are fundamental to his work: astronomy, engineering, mathematics, and physics. He creates highly innovative, technical, and resourcefully composed kinetic sculptures that make visible the beauty and flow of the natural forces that shape our world. Available energy such as wind, water, and sunlight power the instruments as they track and trace these phenomena in different ways, bringing them into our conscious awareness. Robbins celebrates their mystery and magnificence while highlighting their potential to address the climate crisis.

The word Aeolian (eolian) has Latin and Greek origins, both referring to deities of wind. In geology, Aeolian sedimentary processes involve the movement and deposition of earthly material by the wind. Almost all Earth's surface is influenced by wind, particularly sandy beaches - a defining and much-loved feature of Mornington Peninsula here on Bunurong and Boon Wurrung Country. This is seen most distinctly on the South coast where the back beach meets Bass Strait. In music Aeolian is a diatonic scale, known as a natural minor scale. It also refers to the sighing sound of the wind and wind-like murmurs in music. Aeolian speaks to the generative energy of the wind – its musical reverberations and its ability to move and sift matter and enact change both fast and slow.

W A R N I N G

Weather is witnessed and recorded in playful and unexpected ways, sometimes revealing a pattern of systems going off script. The Beacon is engraved with markers on its vertical axes indicating approximately 52 metres above sea level alongside the date of installation. A day may come when this marker is used to gauge rising seas. It is understood that if all the ice in Antarctica and Greenland were to melt, seas would rise by more than 60 metres[1], completely submerging the beacon. In this increasingly likely future, all of Mornington Peninsula would be under water except for the upper reaches of what in Bunurong and Boon Wurrung culture is known as the mother mountain, Wonga/Arthurs Seat, and sister mountains Mount Martha and Mount Eliza. In Robbins' work the political is a whisper not a shout.

S I G N A L L E R

While a beacon typically uses artificial light as a method of transmission such as a lighthouse or flare, Robbins' Beacon transmits through movement and light, as sunlight bounces off its polished surfaces and shadows are cast by the material structure. The sculpture's two six-metre-long marine composite fibre arms/masts, move independently and in syncopation on a horizontal and vertical axis as they are propelled by the wind. The masts are counter-balanced by hand machined bronze weights, allowing them to respond to the most powerful and the most subtle of shifts in the air. From rapid, jagged movements associated with storm cells to delicate shivers and quivers prompted by small eddies of air – Aeolian Beacon articulates the presence/absence of wind and its qualities as weather systems move through.

A polished stainless steel circular vane throws pure sunlight as it moves. It is carefully designed to allow enough clearance to the two main vanes in their vertical action as all three move in concert. The cylindrical tailfins at the ends of the horizontal wind masts are designed to capture the wind's energy. Their wavy and serrated form recalls the fins of whales and the cowlings of jet engines that are designed to streamline airflow.

Time is material and multi-temporal as it is measured, highlighted, expressed, and absorbed as the work endures. The Beacon's masts interpret the unspooling atmospherics of now, while the long thin shadow of the central mast acts as a sun dial, tracing the days of the year across the ground and marking both the summer and winter solstice and the spring and autumn equinox[2]. Robbins explains: 'Each of the 4 fins on the mast point to the four cardinal points – but it is True North, 11° west of magnetic north that gives us cosmological time because it aligns with the earth's rotational axis.'[3] The Beacon sits within a landscape design by local ecologist Gidja Walker, featuring endemic flora and large stones placed to receive the shadows during significant planetary moments.



R E V E R I E

Aeolian Beacon invites the viewer to come into presence. Like a super-sensate divining instrument, it is a connecting force. In sharing ground, you, the viewer are drawn into a highly specific somatic participation with the sculpture and surrounds. Perhaps you lie on the grass as the Beacon's shadow passes across your body. Perhaps there's an awareness of the breath, an intermingling of moving air. The Beacon's arms move overhead. Your gaze shifts to take in clouds moving at a higher velocity above. What a perfect way to answer the Beacon's call – becoming present to the living world around us.

[1] <https://sealevel.nasa.gov/understanding-sea-level/global-sea-level/ice-melt>

[2] The summer solstice occurs once a year in December when the Sun's track across the Australian sky reaches its highest point. It is the day that has the most daylight hours of any in the year. The summer solstice usually occurs on 22 December, but can occur between 21 and 23 December. The winter solstice is the day of the year that has the least daylight hours of any in the year and usually occurs on 22 June but can occur between 21 and 23 June. Source: <https://www.ga.gov.au/scientific-topics/astronomical/summer-and-winter-solstice>.

[3] Email correspondence with Cameron Robbins, 18 November 2023