

FAR AWAY FROM THE BLUE MOUNTAINS*

This piece contemplates the strain on resources we continue to put on the planet and the impact this exploitation has on climate change. It draws inspiration from two contemporaneous but unrelated events. On 26th October 2013, huge fires were reported in the Blue Mountains in Australia. At the same time, the Grangemouth petro-chemical plant, Scotland's largest industrial site, was threatened with closure.

Jim Ratcliffe, the Chairman of Swiss-based Ineos, the third largest chemicals company in the world and the second largest manufacturing company in the UK, brought the trade union, Unite, to its knees. In order to reverse the imminent plant closure, the union were forced to accept job cuts, a wage freeze, an end to worker's final salary pension and a promise not to strike at the Grangemouth site for three years. The management team were looking to restore the loss-making plant to profit, including investing £300 million to complete an export terminal for shale gas. Shortly before the Scottish referendum, the Scottish and Westminster governments hastened to secure the deal providing Ineos with a £9 million grant from the Scottish government and a £150 million UK loan guarantee.

At the same time, on the other side of the world, widespread bushfires engulfed the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney, in Australia. Tony Abbott, the then prime minister, dismissed talk of a link between climate change and the fires as 'complete hogwash', although concerns were raised by the UN climate change chief Christiana Figueres. She drew a link between the two stating it was 'absolutely clear' that there are 'increasing heat-waves in Asia, Europe and Australia and that these will continue in their intensity and frequency'.

These two events provoked questions about the future of our planet. At a time when capital is unrestricted, neoliberalism reigns and production can rapidly be shifted to access cheap labour, organised labour now holds very little power. The arm-wrestling between Jim Ratcliffe and the trade-union resembled a 19th century battle, where fiercely acquired workers' rights were effectively given up.

While 1,300 jobs were saved at Grangemouth, deemed by many as a short-term success, what is the long-term future for the site? Relying on cheap US-sourced shale gas, the plant could remain profitable for the next fifteen years. Jim Ratcliffe is lobbying strongly for the commencement of fracking in Scotland with the hope of sustaining the site with cheap local supplies once production begins. In 2014, Ineos bought the rights to explore fracking for shale gas in a 127 square mile area around Grangemouth and the Firth of Forth.

The Scottish government imposed a moratorium on hydraulic fracturing from January 2015, however it remains strongly supported by David Cameron across the rest of the UK. In a world where shale gas costs half the price of North Sea gas, even after transportation costs, how long will this position prevail?

* Acrylic on canvas, 600x200cm, 2015