

The last temptation

The art of Ken + Julia Yonetani

CHECKLIST

At the time of the exhibition all works are courtesy of the artists except for *Japan*. We would like to sincerely thank Belinda Piggott and David Ojerholm for their loan of this work. We are also very grateful for the support of the Australia–Japan Foundation for their kind and generous assistance to this project.

Abbreviations have been used for height (h), width (w), length (l) and diameter (d). Measurements are height before width and diameter unless otherwise specified.

Grape chandelier 2011

salt, metal
200 (h) x 150 cm (d)

The Last Supper 2014

salt
900 (l) x 72 (w) x 122 cm (h)

Five Senses 2011

*Sense of Vision, Sense of Taste,
Sense of Hearing, Sense of Touch,
Sense of Smell*

salt
92 x 123 x 6 cm each

The chandeliers in the exhibition are part of the series *Crystal Palace: The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nuclear Nations 2012–13*. The chandelier *France* is on display in the main NGA building.

France 2013

uranium glass, antique chandelier frames and electrical components, ultraviolet lights
234 x 141 x 141 cm

Belgium 2013

uranium glass, antique chandelier frames and electrical components, ultraviolet lights
68 x 55 x 55 cm

Bulgaria 2013

uranium glass, antique chandelier frames and electrical components, ultraviolet lights
42 x 50 x 50 cm

Japan 2012

uranium glass, antique chandelier frames and electrical components, ultraviolet lights
64 x 55 x 55 cm
Collection of Belinda Piggott and David Ojerholm

Russia 2013

uranium glass, antique chandelier frames and electrical components, ultraviolet lights
144 x 90 x 90 cm

Sweden 2013

uranium glass, antique chandelier frames and electrical components, ultraviolet lights
64 x 70 x 70 cm

Switzerland 2013

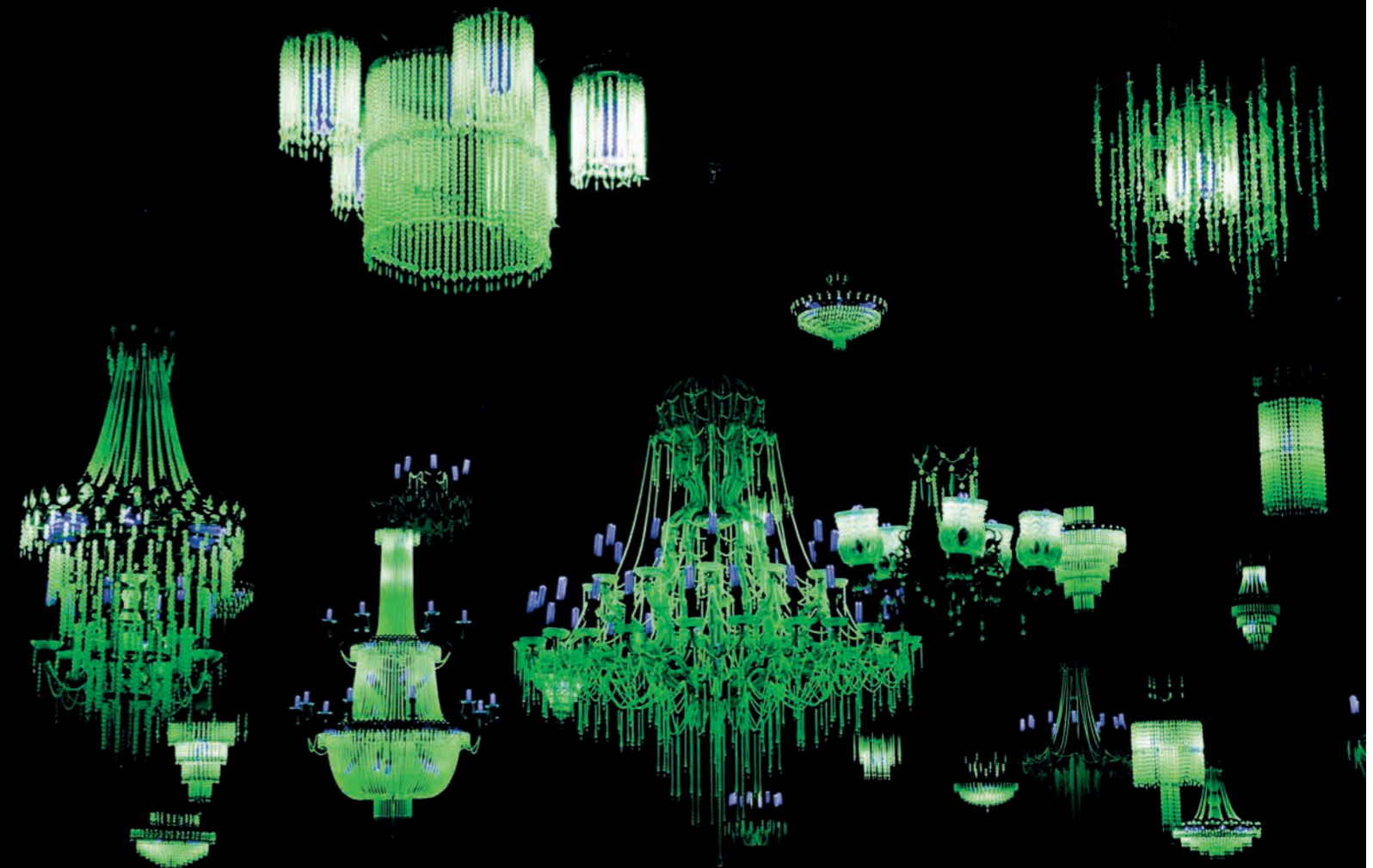
uranium glass, antique chandelier frames and electrical components, ultraviolet lights
64 x 70 x 70 cm

Ukraine 2013

uranium glass, antique chandelier frames and electrical components, ultraviolet lights
95 x 73 x 73 cm

USA 2013

uranium glass, antique chandelier frames and electrical components, ultraviolet lights
200 x 160 x 160 cm



NGA
National Gallery of Australia



The last temptation exhibition is supported by the Australian Government through the Australia-Japan Foundation of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade as part of its celebrations in 2016 marking the 40th anniversary of the Australia-Japan Foundation and the 1976 Basic Treaty for Friendship and Cooperation between Australia and Japan.

NGA Contemporary



Artists Ken and Julia Yonetani present a sumptuous visual feast this summer at NGA Contemporary. In two major installations, *The Last Supper* 2014 and *Crystal Palace: The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nuclear Nations* 2012–13, a sense of plenty is underpinned by the notion that, although the world appears rich in natural and material resources, the wellbeing of the planet is held in precarious balance.

In the awesomely beautiful *The Last Supper*, made entirely out of salt sourced from the Murray–Darling Basin, the Yonetanis have created a work rich in symbolism. Drawing its title from Leonardo’s great Renaissance mural of the same name, this work plays with the idea of the final meal—the endgame of how we utilise our natural resources. The artists’ use of salt came out of a residency working with scientists at the Murray–Darling Freshwater Research Centre, where their research focused on the question of how to deal with rising salt levels in the water irrigating crops in a region regarded as a food bowl. Their initial concerns broadened, however, to include the impact of salinity in a global sense, noting that the subject of salt has been fraught since

the beginning of human existence.

On a practical level, the medium of salt posed great difficulties for the artists due to its solubility. They experimented with a range of binding agents, making more than a hundred moulds with little success until, finally, they broke one open to find their first intact salt work. It was an emotional moment that set the scene for what was to follow. After their initial smaller works, the creation of a nine-metre salt banquet table replete with an array of foodstuffs and objects—oysters, lobsters, bread, lemons, grapes, cutlery, crockery and candelabras—was a labour of love and a great challenge. It connects with a long tradition of still-life and banqueting subjects in the history of art, as well as alluding to different religious traditions. As Julia noted in a 2014 video for Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre:

Although the work isn’t necessarily a religious comment, *The Last Supper* is obviously connected to biblical stories, and salt is very much connected to not only the bible but a lot of religions, including in Japan—it’s seen as a very sacred material.

The Yonetanis were interested in the potency of salt as a preserver and taker of life. While

the idea of banqueting implies abundance, the whiteness of the food table also suggests purification and ascetic beauty. Looked at another way, Ken and Julia have described it as ‘a kind of Armageddon’, a work for the twenty-first century, laden with the anxieties of the current age. As the exhibition title ‘The last temptation’ suggests, to tempt is to entice, and the consequences—as for Alice in Wonderland travelling down the proverbial rabbit hole—may lead us into a world of danger and enchantment, opening up many questions and paradoxes.

Beauty, desire and uncertainty are interwoven in *The Crystal Palace: The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nuclear Nations*. The impetus for it came out of the Yonetanis’ concern about the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant disaster in Japan—both their immediate anxiety for Ken’s family and the wider implications for many locals. As in their more recent work on *The Last Supper*, their research broadened to include the global arena. They conceived of an installation in which the size of each chandelier corresponded with the output of nuclear power plants in each of the thirty-one

nuclear nations of the world, the two largest chandeliers being the USA and France. The design elements also correspond aesthetically with the country in question.

The idea of using the chandelier was sparked when the Yonetanis were entranced by displays in shop windows while on a bus ride in London. Tempted by the beauty of antique chandeliers and their history in the evolution of electric light, they envisioned a contemporary take on *The Great Exhibition* of 1851 in the Crystal Palace, which aimed to showcase the world’s latest technologies (those of the Industrial Revolution). This set the stage for the artists’ idea of nuclear nations. Faced with the challenge of how to represent radiation, they hit upon using uranium glass beads and ultraviolet light bulbs that make the green of the beads fluoresce in the dark. While their chandeliers are entirely safe, the idea of recycling a uranium by-product that glows in the dark appealed to the artists.

Life and death, fullness and emptiness, are recurring themes in their work. In *Five Senses* 2011, ornate salt frames sit empty on the wall, questioning the impacts of a

lifestyle of abundance. The work, inspired by Jan Brueghel the Elder and Peter Paul Rubens’s painting *The five senses* 1617–18 (also known as *Allegory of the senses*) in the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid, focuses on sight, touch, taste, hearing and smell in sumptuous detail. As Julia wrote in recent correspondence:

Brueghel the Elder and Rubens’s work depicts a new world based on consumption of luxury goods, at a time when expanding markets, colonisation, and agricultural revolutions were feeding the increasingly lavish and abundant tables of the European upper class. In our work *Five Senses*, in place of lavish depictions of a vast variety of agricultural produce and foodstuff, we find only ornate frames that have turned to salt. The viewer is invited to question the impacts of a lifestyle of abundance, the unsustainability of transferring this system on a global scale.

As with their other works, the artists remind us in diverse, inventive and multilayered ways to engage mindfully with the precarious beauty of the natural world and to be aware of our place in it. For, in the end, the future is up to us.

Deborah Hart, Exhibition Curator

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NGA Contemporary
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Cover: *Crystal Palace: The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nuclear Nations* 2012–13, uranium glass beads and crystals, metal structure, UV lighting © Ken + Julia Yonetani. Image courtesy the artists and Mizuma Art Gallery, Tokyo. Photo: Catherine Brossais

Opposite: *The Last Supper* 2014, salt Photo: Silversalt. © Ken + Julia Yonetani. Image courtesy the artists and Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre, Sydney

Above: Ken and Julia Yonetani with their *Crystal Palace: The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nuclear Nations* at NGA Contemporary, 2015 Photo: David Pang