

Penelope Cain explores history of coal power in artwork *Interregnum*

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The infamous lump of coal that found its way into the Australian parliament in 2017 courtesy of then treasurer Scott Morrison has become the centrepiece of a new artwork looking at the history of coal power.

Sydney artist Penelope Cain explores the past and present role of coal in her work ‘*Interregnum*’, which launched at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre at the weekend.

A 12m-long line of flags depicting Mr Morrison brandishing the lump of coal is the main feature of the artwork, which also makes reference to the Casula Powerhouse’s former life as a power station.

The now iconic lump of coal was used by Mr Morrison as a prop in a debate on energy policy.



Then Treasurer Scott Morrison looks at a piece of coal during House of Representatives Question Time at Parliament House in 2017. Picture: Lukas Coch

“The gesture of policy and power by bringing that lump of coal into Parliament House and I think in representing that image in the Casula building — I hope that it opens up a whole lot of discussion about policy (and) power generation,” Ms Cain said.

She said the Casula Powerhouse represented “a past that can be taken into the future”.

Built in 1951, the powerhouse was one of four power stations erected to supplement electricity production and meet growing demand in the post-war period.

It was decommissioned in 1976 and stood derelict for years before being redeveloped as an arts centre in 1994.



Interregnum by Penelope Cain. Picture: Chantel Bann

Ms Cain said her research showed the majority of coal used at the powerhouse most likely originated from the Illawarra Coal Measures, part of the Permian coal deposits extending along the Sydney basin.

The Permian period ended in the planet’s worst mass extinction to date and resulted in extreme climate change.

“The idea that the coal that was burnt at Casula was made as an outcome of a previous climate change many years ago — that’s what I find most important about it.

“It shows that it happened before and it can happen again,” Ms Cain said, adding this time, humans were “more implicated”.

“Coal has been very useful to humanity and now it’s time to move forward.”

Power used in the exhibition has been offset to carbon reduction programs via carbonfund.org.

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