



Peter Wegner, *Disbelief* and *The Wake I*, *Black Saturday* series, 2010, bronze sculptures (approx. 18.5 x 10 x 9 cm), Pictures Collection, H2012.135/4 and H2012.135/3. Photographs by Bernie Phelan

Peter Wegner, *Black Saturday* series

Pictures Collection H2012.135/1-5

Acquired 2012

Bushfires are a recurring theme in Australian history. Our hot, dry climate and dense eucalypt forests combine to create the perfect environment for the devastating bushfires that have punctuated our history, often with tragic consequences.

At more than three metres in length, one of the State Library's largest and certainly most valuable paintings is *Black Thursday* by William Strutt, depicting the catastrophic bushfire of 1851 and the terror and panic experienced by those trying to escape it. This epic work is a dramatic historical painting in the European tradition, and its impact on the viewer is largely attributable to the scale of the work.

In contrast to *Black Thursday* is Peter Wegner's *Black Saturday* series, five small bronze figurines based on images of people at funerals and wakes following the tragic 2009 Victorian bushfires. Born in New Zealand, Wegner is now a Melbourne-based figurative painter, sculptor and draughtsman. He has a national and international reputation for figurative and portrait works, and his awards include the Doug Moran National Portrait Prize in 2006 and the Gallipoli Prize in 2013; he is also a four-time finalist in the Archibald Prize.

The 2009 Victorian bushfires were the worst in Australia's history. They devastated nearly 80 communities across the state, destroyed more than 2000 homes and damaged around 430,000 hectares of land. By the time the fires were contained, 173 people had lost their lives and many others were seriously injured.

The five figurines that comprise the *Black Saturday* series are small, the tallest being only 18.5 centimetres high; they can either stand alone or as a group. The expressions and gestures of despair are made more evident as a result of the raw application and surface treatment of the material used by Wegner. They may not be grand like *Black Thursday* but they are just as evocative.

The *Black Saturday* series, acquired with support from the State Library Victoria Foundation, featured in the *Bushfire Australia* exhibition at the TarraWarra Museum of Art near Healesville in 2010, together with Strutt's *Black Thursday*. In his artist's statement accompanying the figurines, Wegner wrote:

I went out to St Andrews carrying my small sketchbook and made copious drawings of the ravaged landscape. It wasn't until we went to the funerals that I realised that it is not the exterior – the landscape – that I wanted to express, but the interior of the human experience.¹