

Hari Koutlakis: Moving Mountains
Ethelton & Mansfield Park playgrounds
South Australia



The genesis of Hari Koutlakis' temporary site responsive project *Moving Mountains* is a long way from the open-air space of Ethelton and Mansfield Park's playgrounds. In 2018 in the privacy of his home, the artist painted all the surfaces of his bedroom – floor, walls and ceiling – in what is now considered his distinctive fluid, rhythmic monochrome style. Covered in intersecting lines, filled in to articulate positive and negative spaces, the room shimmered with perceptual vitality. As a final touch, the artist turned his attention to replicating the approach on bed sheets which he draped over himself. The effect was total. Visitors to the informal viewing and pop-up presentation encountered a kinetic, unexpectedly pulsating, warping, hallucinatory optic art installation.

Since then, Koutlakis has been refining his painting technique, working on canvas and paper, but also spreading his web of lines across buildings for public and private art commissions. In 2022, for a solo exhibition at Goodbank Gallery, the artist completed an ambitiously scaled-up iteration of the bedroom work in the adjacent vacant shopfront.

On invitation from the 2024 Nature Festival, Koutlakis has developed *Moving Mountains* in partnership with OSCA, as part of their state-wide artist commissioning initiative PROJECTS OF THE EVERYDAY. This dynamic program supports artists to create and present experimental and explorative forms of artistic engagement and participation in the public domain. For this project, Koutlakis has expanded on the optic play that is a vital feature of his art practice. Bringing together the scale of his wall-based artworks, and the tactility / expressive material potential of canvas, the artist has set out to transform suburban playgrounds into dynamic sculptural sites.

To create the work Koutlakis painted 100, two by two-metre canvases, sewn and connected together into a patchworked sheet. Draped over the armature of park playground equipment and bolstered by a small number of struts designed to enhance its structural form, it appears from a distance like a strange, compelling apparition, popping out against the natural textures of the surrounds as a monochromatic mountain range.

On closer inspection, I was entranced by the gentle undulation of its fabric surface, responsive to changes in wind strength and direction, as it extended sharply from tan

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bark to a peak several metres from the ground, before leveling out in a jagged horizontal line. Here the taut fabric gave way to baggy sections before cascading to the ground. More intriguing, was the point at which the sheafs of material overlapped, creating an invitation to enter the cubby structure itself. Inside, the work becomes a hushed, warm and protective tent. Immediately I was transported back to my own childhood and the hours spent sitting under our family dining table, which when draped with bed sheets, turned into a private oasis.

By purposefully setting out to destabilise location and identity, Koutlakis' provocative intervention, successfully reconfigures the park setting into a cultural zone of interest, as it transforms the social space of the playground into a large-scale artwork. And in the process, this aesthetically staged performative event, temporarily redefines the purpose of the playground, enveloping both children and adults in its web of imaginative, physical play.

Interventions such as this have a rich history. Art designed specifically to interact with an existing structure or situation emerged in the 1960s as a way of connecting the creativity of art with real life. For Koutlakis connecting the creativity of art with real life is about being with people, sharing what he knows and loves, artistic and otherwise. To make *Moving Mountains*, the artist has engaged those in his orbit in conversation and participation, drawing a myriad of collaborators into his flow state of experimentation and invention.

"I've always liked taking on challenges" he reflected. Viewing playgrounds as the first mountain that a child will climb, beset with challenges and requiring courage and sometimes physical feats at the edge of individual capacity, Koutlakis would like to inspire a sense of potential in visitors of all ages and encourage them to learn and explore. Ever expansive, *Moving Mountains* invokes both inside and outside, the public and private sphere - a place of play and a site of artistic display.

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