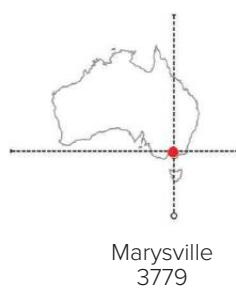


In her fine-art photographic series *Mountain Ash*, depicting the forests around Marysville in Victoria's High Country, Christine Goerner uses a telephoto lens to select areas of the landscape where the bleached dead trunks of mountain ash trees, killed by the Black Saturday bushfires, are still standing *en masse*. There's a strange, haunting beauty to this image, rendered in a pink colour palette; all those bare trunks are a stark reminder of the death and destruction wreaked in those terrible few weeks in 2009, and yet if you look closely you'll see young regrowth pushing up everywhere among the corpses. Is this an image that shows Mother Nature reasserting herself, then? The answer to that question is rather nuanced, it turns out.

No one knows the forests around Marysville like the ANU's Professor David Lindenmayer, whose ecological studies there go back 40 years. One key thing to know, he says, is that old-growth forest always burns much less severely in a bushfire than young forest. And around Marysville only a tiny proportion of old trees remain, thanks to the commercial logging of old-growth that



ended only in 1991. Those massed bare trunks, which he estimates at 50m tall? They belonged to trees that were only 70 years old – teenagers, in mountain ash terms – when they were killed by the Black Saturday bushfires; that surge of regrowth is only 14 years old. When he looks at this landscape, what Lindenmayer sees is a vulnerable, flammable young forest. "We can only hope it doesn't burn again in the next few decades," he says. "If it does, it's likely to be very severe, and the mountain ash around Marysville will be lost altogether – the system will just collapse into an acacia woodland."

The mountain ash, *Eucalyptus regnans*, grows phenomenally fast, and in old age can top 100m in ideal conditions. The future of these young Marysville forests may be uncertain, but Goerner, 58, will be along for the ride. She has loved these trees since she played in their shade as a child on family camping trips. This image is from the upcoming second instalment of her acclaimed *Mountain Ash* series. Next, she's going to photograph the place in winter. "I'm hoping to capture it in snowfall," she says. "Imagine how beautiful that would look."