

*Global Photography Now: Asia Pacific, Tate Modern symposium, 2006.*

I feel very privileged to be presenting my work in this symposium.

I'm beginning with a very recent video work that's made by overlaying still photographs with text. The piece is called *in the ground on the air* and it was finished earlier this year. It screens as a 75-minute continuous loop. Altogether there are 715 names. An occasional one makes it all the way across the screen but most stop before they get there and gradually fade away entirely. I'll say more about why they do this in a moment.

The images in the video are ones I took at a place called Ross, which is a small village in rural Tasmania. I've worked a lot in Tasmania because it's a part of Australia where the colonial past is still close to the surface. For a time in the mid nineteenth century Ross housed a prison for convict women and their children, known as a female factory. At that time there were a number of such prisons in Tasmania. They were built as places of punishment for women who had committed a further offence after they arrived in the colony. Often that crime was to get pregnant. So the female factories housed nurseries as well, for infants up to two or sometimes three years of age. Today the Ross site is a bare paddock (you'd probably call it a field) with some oddly uneven ground. In 1999 I became interested in the Ross site and another one in Hobart, about an hour's drive away. I've since built up a substantial archive of these rather austere black and white photos of the ground at Ross.

I should say something here about this work's title, *in the ground on the air*. It is my – unresolved – answer to the question of where the past disappears to: *in the ground*

makes reference to the material residue that reason tells you must be there, even if you can't see it; while *on the air* means the entirely intangible side – the rumours, the uncorroborated stories, the feelings people report having in places where they know something sinister or melancholy has happened.

The restraint of the **imagery** in this work strongly appeals to me. I like it for its own sake, but it's also valuable as a reminder of how in Australia people have actively desired the past to disappear. Out of shame at our convict origins or our treatment of indigenous people, or both. I think this wanting not to know (which itself can go unacknowledged) has helped create the cultural predicament we are in now: where the convicts suffered the calamitous or catastrophic destiny, we're spared that – our lives are easy by comparison – but we're left trying to piece our history together out of the unhelpful and non-illustrious shards that have survived that period of willed forgetting. For me as an artist working in photography, this subject is charged in another way as well, since the impoverishment of the material seems to decree that I should have a particular kind of relationship with it. That's to say the difficulty in extracting imagery from it resonates with the difficulty of the history itself – I think in a productive way.

Until 1995 I had very little interest in my country's history. I think that might have changed anyway as I got older, but as it happened in that year I was offered an artist residency that meant I had to think about it. I'll say more about that project in a minute. Now all my work is motivated – partly at least – by a sense of unease with ways in which the past is selectively closed to us, coupled with a feeling that it goes on affecting our culture in powerful ways. Our history is full of holes...

Another constant in my work is being drawn toward the lives of women and children. Which is consistent with what I've just said since the holes or gaps in the historical record often line up squarely with where the women and children would be if anyone had thought their experiences worth recording.

So now I can tell you that the names in this work belong to all the children who were born to convict women in those two female factories and who died in their first year of life. Even at that time, when infant mortality was so much greater than it is now, the number of deaths in the Hobart factory in particular was considered scandalous, but for years nothing was done, or too little, to stop it. The screen also serves as a graph or grid to plot the life spans onto. So the place where each name stops and fades is determined by the length of that child's life. People have remarked to me that these names look and sound like they belong to adults, not to very young children. That simple mistake somehow underlines the wastefulness of what happened. It's been especially sobering for me to find that imprisoning children and neglecting them has been a part of our way of life from the beginning. This is particularly so because, as I was researching this work, debate was raging about the treatment of asylum seekers who kept taking to leaky boats to try to reach Australia and who, if they made it, were being confined in detention centres, for years in many cases—adults and children alike.

Practically everything I'll be referring to in this talk is a pointer to some kind of absence from the historical record. I should say though that I define absence quite broadly, to include not just what is lost but also what is broken, worn, incomplete, unidentifiable, anonymous, hard to interpret, mislaid in storage and so on. I came to this elastic definition via the first museum collection I ever worked with, the Hyde Park Barracks archaeological collection. (Hyde Park Barracks in Sydney was built in

1817 as a barracks for male convicts, and subsequently adapted to other uses, including as an immigration depot for young women arriving in the colony, and an asylum for aged, infirm and destitute women.)

Anne Brennan, a Canberra-based artist, and I were invited to do an artist residency there in 1995 (as I said) and we chose to focus on the women, especially the asylum women, who were considerably more elusive as subjects than the convict men. It turned out there were two places to look for evidence of them, one being the official registers where their movements in and out of the barracks had been recorded, together with a few remarks – often poignant in their economy – about their lives; and the other being the Barracks archaeological collection. Of the two I found the archaeological material by far the more compelling, though that quality wasn't obvious straight away.

This 'archaeological collection' was the result of a chance discovery in the 1980s by builders doing renovation work. When they lifted the floorboards they found that all the spaces between the floors and the ceilings were packed tight with matted rags. They were the remains of hundreds and hundreds of rats' nests. I don't know if you can imagine what they're like: filthy, smelly, discoloured clots of matter.

Now bagged and labelled, stored in its own air-conditioned room, this material includes many fragments of cloth that are still recognisable as parts of pockets, sleeves, waistbands; often they have been meticulously patched and darned or roughly cobbled back together. Other fabric pieces have been hand-rolled and sewn into long narrow strips. The theory is that these were the menstrual belts of the immigrant girls. It took us a long time to come to terms with all this, and for it to

acquire the eloquence it eventually did. Today, in the same situation, I'd gravitate to it immediately; it's given me a confirmed taste for other bedrock layers of evidence, including the convict ground.

To my knowledge no photos were taken of the women and children in the female factories. But as you come closer to the present there's much more likelihood of finding a photographic record. I've also been working with a small archive of female psychiatric patient photographs from the 1940s, 38 of them, that I came across some years ago in the NSW State Library pictures collection. These are images that seem to have lost none of their power to disturb and confront. We know the name of the hospital where they were taken – Gladesville Hospital in suburban Sydney – but nothing about who the women were, who took the photos or why. The NSW Health Department considers them psychiatric records and on that basis tightly restricts their access and reproduction. Luckily for me the library was not so strict and agreed to make copies for me. After a long time of not finding a way to use them, I decided to make a second or shadow archive, one that would be a kind of reproach for the complete disappearance of names and life histories, and at the same time might encourage people to see the images in a more sympathetic light.

So I made four books: one that shows the mid-sections of the patients' bodies; one which shows their hands; another for the nurses' hands; and one for the patients' faces. They all have the same title, *1-38*. The visual devices I used to make them are simple ones: enlarging, cropping, adding a little colour. Susan Best, writing on this work, likened it to the serial practices of 1960s and 70s conceptual art, but with an added infusion of expressiveness or feeling – an interpretation I agree with.

For the exhibition I set up a room that was empty except for four tables, a few chairs and the four felt-covered books. For the duration of the exhibition the door to this room was kept closed. You had to ask an attendant sitting beside the door to let you in. The hope was to encourage a more sustained, slow kind of looking, as an antidote to the other more intrusive kind that the women and their images would surely have been subject to. When it came to showing this work in a commercial gallery, which I've done a couple of times, that option of enclosure wasn't available, and so the presentation of the work in those shows had to take other forms.

Other works I've made have been created to supply images where there hadn't been any before. Historian Joan Kerr described this as "finding ways to picture the dead who were never photographed". With these images I've consciously tried to make something strong enough to lodge in the memory. The *Soft Caps* made for the exhibition at Hyde Park Barracks were the first of this kind of image. They came about after someone showed me a photograph of a group of women in another aged and destitute asylum. It was taken in the early C20th but the clothing hadn't changed. They were all wearing very simple cloth caps that, in the harsh sunlight, tended to cast their faces into deep shadow. Every inclination of the head had produced a different shape in the cloth, which struck me almost as a kind of semaphore, as if they were trying to signal something that couldn't come through.

That's perhaps fanciful, but it helped me to arrive at a group of photographs that play with the idea of the portrait as a profession of identity; each one is distinctive in its way but still entirely anonymous. A bit later it occurred to me I could make a photograph of one of these caps. When I did that, I noticed that the image suggests a face, though you couldn't say it resembled one. That was quite important as it

subsequently led to a much larger body of photogram work, but not before I made some more works with the caps.

Rather than talk about that I'll discuss one of these photogram projects in a bit of detail. The context was another museum, called Rouse Hill Estate; it's on the outskirts of Sydney. The reason it's a museum is that the family who occupied it for seven generations, which is a long time in Australia, were hoarders. They kept everything, including all their clothes. They weren't a particularly distinguished family. They were given land and made a lot of money in the early days of the colony and then lost it again. I didn't find them compelling in the way the unknown asylum women had been. I was more interested in their things: hidden away in drawers, never used and rarely seen. I started taking them out of their hiding places, exposing them to light, making photograms.

The photogram process is a simple one of laying an object directly onto photosensitive paper and briefly exposing both to light. The image that results is a negative, like an x-ray. It's also necessarily life-size. There were a lot of clothes so I made a lot of images, as if I was taking an inventory. Not a complete one though. For practical reasons I could only use clothes that were not too heavy, and not too light, so the right amount of light could penetrate. This meant I worked chiefly with petticoats, bodices, lightweight children's shirts and jackets, babies' dresses – everyday generic things. This was good because it made it possible for the work to reflect on daily life, its lived routines. It's often possible to see some of the history of the garment in the image, what Geoffrey Batchen described as, "the small and skilful acts of home economy – the labour of women – usually kept hidden from public gaze." An example would be patches under the arms of a bodice where the fabric had rotted out and been replaced, in some cases over and over again. However in

spite of this physicality the images are quite ethereal, almost ghostly, floating in a black void, seemingly untethered to any particular time and place.

But possibly their most compelling attribute, or it was for me then, is the illusion of three-dimensionality. While I was making the photogram the garment would necessarily be lying flat and still on the paper, but in the image it looks as if there's an invisible body inhabiting it. It's a powerful illusion that can lend the image a lot more presence than the actual garment. This is particularly true of a smaller group of colour photograms I made using clothes from the 1970s and 80s, a time when the family was in very reduced circumstances, that were particularly shabby and worn.

The importance of touch gradually impressed itself on me as I was working, how the image exactly maps the contact between the paper and the cloth – blurred where the fabric lifts away from the paper, sharp and clear where it's in contact. That dimension of touch is stronger I think than in any other form of photography, certainly any form that I've practised. I've written about this previously in terms of short memory / thin skin, both being metaphors for our short time of European occupation, and ways to signal a yearning for something else, which would probably be a surer stronger connection to place than the one we have now.

Getting access to museum collections has only fed my anxiety about what happens to our things when we die. When objects come into a museum collection they pass out of their old lives – their lived reality – into a kind of afterlife in the artificial space of the museum. To make things worse, I've discovered that museums have a tendency to neglect or forget their own objects, to put them in some deep box or dark storeroom and lose track of them. During an artist residency at the Settlers Museum



in Dunedin NZ, for example, I found dozens of old christening gowns languishing in the collection, 10 or 12 to a box, worn, stained and yellowed, all of them too fragile for either wear or display.

I think it's true to say that some of my photos are like the objects in museum collections, in that you can look and look but the knowledge will never come to complete them. I've tended to value that insufficiency in them. When Kyla McFarlane wrote, of my photos of the ground at Ross, that in my work photography fails, I thought she was being extremely perceptive. I'm aware though that's there's a risk in this insufficiency, which is that the melancholy past stays in its pained and frozen state forever.

The last image I'll discuss is called *Twice Removed: Kaylene at Phoenix Park*. The project *Twice Removed* was another collaboration with Anne Brennan. We researched a nineteenth-century migration of machine lace-makers from Calais in France to Maitland in rural NSW. The extravagant bonnet Kaylene is wearing in the picture is a replica of the one traditionally worn by the women of Calais. I'd like to finish by saying something about the diverse elements that this image brings together. First the title: Kaylene is the real name of the rather bolshy-looking girl portrayed in it, and Phoenix Park is the name of the farm in the background. As far as I can tell the name Kaylene is most popular in two parts of the world – the American mid-west and Australia. This Phoenix Park on the river flats near Maitland was almost certainly named for Phoenix Park in Dublin, in a form of borrowing that is entirely familiar to anyone brought up in a colonised country.

It makes sense to me end with an image where the foreground and background are trying to meld but can't quite manage it, and the lace bonnet is strikingly out of place

(and time), but it sort of holds in place anyway. And with Kaylene who turns out to be the perfect model. She has an outlandish lace object perched on her head and is doing her utmost to ignore that obstacle. By doing this I think she stands in beautifully for all of us who want to believe that the past can't touch us, especially when it does.

Anne Ferran