

Telling *Histories*

SEVEN HISTORIES OF AUSTRALIA

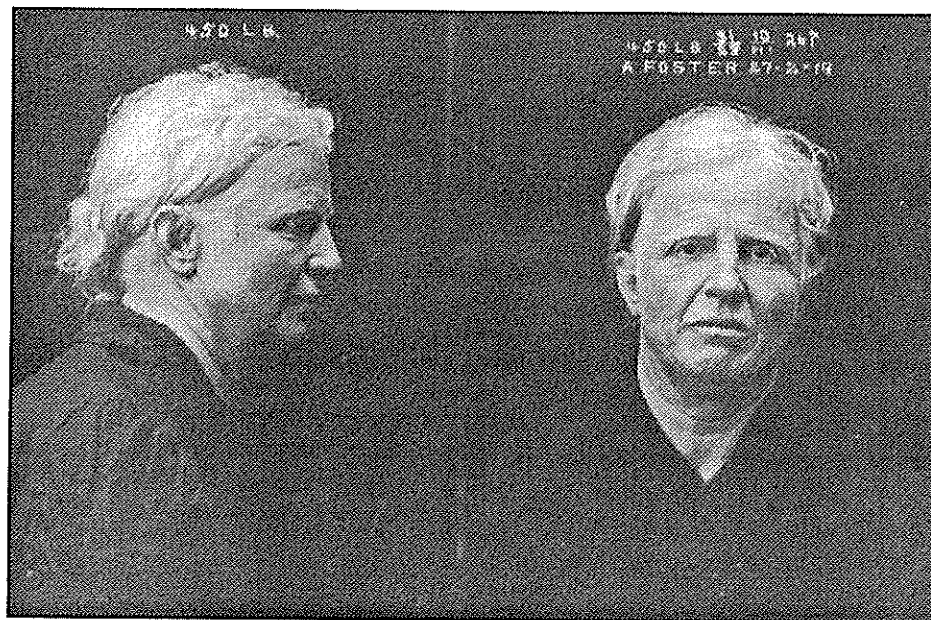
visual arts

review by
ross moore

Seven Histories of Australia, a Fringe event curated by Clare Williamson (ACCA until Oct 29), invites us to enter into contemplation, even though it's festival time.

Based on the notion that history is cultural narration rather than objective fact, it offers the personal reflections on identity, time and place of seven contemporary artists.

Gordon Bennett is strongly represented. Apart from his emotionally powerful *Big Romantic Painting: Apotheosis of Captain Cook* 1993, he also offers a series of pungent small watercolours combined with diaristic text. Entitled *Home Sweet Home*, they deal with his experiences of the great Australian dream. "Leanne and I own our own house in the outer suburbs of Brisbane" he writes. Then drolly adds: "I think it was the barbecues that got me in the end." But the humour is pained. "The subject of Aborigines always came up. It was then that I felt an outsider." The accompanying cartoon images of suburban houses would be quaint if it weren't for the twisted distorted bodies of white hoons and bashed or sexually abused children floating above them. These facades mask not only racist violence. Bennett's position is shot through with ambivalence—he



Images from *Doing Time* by Anne Graham

at once desires and loathes to be suburban.

H J Wedge, a Sydney based Wiradjuri artist, also unravels the apparatus of colonialism. But his vividly coloured and intense small paintings articulate more than just a fury against the desecration of the landscape. One work, *Gangbang*, focuses on how men can function "as fuckin' dogs". "Maybe respect for their mothers or sisters or daughters" his accompanying text muses. Wedge, like Bennett, is committed to a psychological realism.

Lauren Berkowitz's *Woven Histories* ap-

proaches urban identity via archival remnants. She has built an ingenious tower of rolled-up photocopies of local council records. Here social organisation is seen manufacturing itself as architectural edifice and the material is none other than assorted fragments of memory, forgotten documents, the usual fragile detritus of human lives.

Anne Graham's installation *Doing Time* (researched with Jacqueline Clayton) is based on archival 'mug shots' of women prisoners. As a commemoration of a "200

year experience of women in prison" it makes a moving polemical statement. We just have to 'read' the wall of harrowed, tortured, bewildered, even crazy faces to invoke into the domain of the known this suppressed history of incarcerated women.

Elizabeth Gertsakis's *Three Devotions* explores how American suprematism launches itself on the back of popularist dreams of sugar-sweet Utopia. This blond Jesus, appropriated from 1950s evangelical propaganda, wandering around a manicured lawn with blond babies and lambs, and supported by thunderous Biblical phrases, clashes awesomely with Bennett's and Wedge's narratives.

Both Fiona MacDonald and John Wolseley utilise botanical themes to explore continental histories. Wolseley exhibits the finesse as well as the mania of a scientific illustrator. His wall installation revolves around the humbling notion of geological time and floating tectonic plates on which piggy-back migrating plant species. But MacDonald wants to dismantle even the romance of nature. Her series of cut-out montages based on photographs of the Rockhampton Botanical Gardens are cunning in their mimicry of museological practices.

Here are photographed "aboriginal inhabitants of the area" cut with scissors into insect form and then pin-mounted back onto their photographic duplicate so that they only stand out at a certain angle. Isn't this process of bricolage, this sleight of the eye, the very mechanism of historical fabrication? Don't miss *Seven Histories*. Especially in this time of Demidenkoes. *

Ross Moore, 'Telling Histories' (Seven Histories of Australia), MSO/Spinout, week beginning 13 October 1995, p.3