

Stephanie Holt, 'Seven Histories of Australia', World Art, Issue 1. 1996, pp.92-93

From political rhetoric to private commemorations, retro fashions to impassioned social debates, the past continues to hold us in its thrall. Confronting its legacy requires more than just insistent declaration of the postcolonialism, postmodernism, postfeminism of our age. Making sense of the past, in its partiality and contradiction, takes more than a blank stare at its traces; it needs active construction of connections, narratives, resonances.

Seven histories. Seven artists. Premised on history as a mutable, multiple domain, neat equivalence suggested that these "Seven Histories of Australia" would be personal stories. These well-established artists from diverse backgrounds – including Aboriginal (H.J. Wedge, Gordon Bennett), British immigrant (John Wolseley, Anne Graham), and Greek-born (Elizabeth Gertsakis) – are known for works that often mine their own pasts to speak as Outsider. Yet "Seven Histories" displayed a refreshing breadth of concerns, going well beyond personal stories or a reductive politics of identity to document some unexpected and under-examined aspects of Australian history.

Appropriately, given white Australia's genesis as a penal colony, imprisonment and incrimination formed one recurrent theme. Women prisoners were Anne Graham's subject. Fiona McDonald conflated images of hothouse butterflies, women and weddings, producing an eerie sense of entrapment. Even her technique, literally weaving photographs together, seemed to cage her images, evoking at once the violence of their cutting as well as the strong but artificial unity of their warp and weft. Gordon Bennett's *Death of the A Historical Subject: Up Rode the Troopers A,B,C* (1993) took its subtitle from Australia's de facto national anthem, "Waltzing Matilda," though his colonial policemen were black. Other motifs recurred too. Plants, trees and flowers. Circles that might have been targets or waterholes, framing devices or focal points. Such resonances enriched the exhibition.

There was much to be learned from "Seven Histories." But if its predominant tone was didactic, its full appreciation reliant on extensive placards, artist-appended texts and curator Clare Williamson's thorough catalogue essay, then did it offer any more than a book or a museum? Or to ask a broader question: How does art engage with history, and is it adequate to the task?

I became frustrated in the wider musing these questions prompted. Not just a generic term for

the past or its authorized stories, 'history' is also an active engagement, a practice, a discipline. Experimental writers, filmmakers and performers have proved adept at this work – perhaps it suits their temporal, intimate mediums. But visual artists often fail to take up the challenge to read and tell the past; to traffic in its connectedness to the present.

The fetishized fragment. The cabinet of curiosities. These are the leitmotifs of much contemporary visual art that purports to address history. Each, in its own way, shirks the challenge to construct a critical history, offering instead the teasing purity of the enigmatic object or the elusive whiff of an absent collector. The irony is that, despite the arrogance implied in positing a corrective, this is a deeply nostalgic tactic, not

least because the target of its alleged critique is a model of Modernist history – static, linear, unarguable – that owes more to the textbooks and museums of remembered schooldays than to contemporary museology and historiography. Its assumptions collapse coherence into exclusion; narrative into finality.

Deliberate obscurity is as problematic as any potentate's history; the author as willfully present and the viewer as frustratedly remote. Using incoherence to signify its opposite's deconstruction is as narrowly dualistic as any 'us and them' myth-making. The white cube of the gallery may still constrain contemporary visual artists, but the orderly vitrine of the museum has largely given way to interactivity, discursivity, the experiential and multiplicity.

"Seven Histories" offered a cumulative vision of neatness, discreteness and authority; a pristine space, in which works rarely left the safety of the wall or the reassuring orderliness of the grid. I longed for mess, unruliness, something that might – literally as well as figuratively – trip me up or stop me in my tracks.

At times, as with Gertsakis' triptychs, the artists seemed to offer found images as if their juxtaposition was comment enough. The impact of Anne Graham's work was similarly reliant on her original sources, early-20th-century photographs of women prisoners (from Sydney's Justice and Police Museum). These were powerful, even poignant: diversity rendered uniform by institutional photographers, expressions defiant, confused, knowing; poses sometimes coquettish, sometimes prim. Repetition, surveillance and standardization were all evoked as strategies of mitigation, but their machinations went unexamined. Below the wall of photographs, associated vitrines held a range of carefully placed objects. They were all, as the placard spelled out, a part of this history, but without the elucidatory text I would have been little-the-wiser as to how. Lauren Berkowitz's installation *Woven Histories* (1995), constructed of rolled photocopies of archival documents, produced a similar effect, aestheticizing the unreadable, uncontextualized fragment. Why, I wondered, did the transition from public space to art gallery (her research was undertaken for an installation in a local library, a wonderfully appropriate site-specific work) necessitate the replacement of legibility with illegibility? Despite their visual intrigue or iconic mystique, these works lacked complexity – like drinking a beer that tantalizes the tip of the tongue and then slips straight down the throat without a trace.

The gallery's setting – a former greenkeeper's cottage set in retrieved swampland beside Melbourne's 19th-century Botanic Gardens – provided a cue to two more-engaging works, which used plants, botany and 'natural' history to create three-dimensional maps of place through layerings of geography, time and cultural meaning. Berkowitz's *Heart's-ease* (1995) was an arrangement, in the concentric circles of dots used to signify waterholes in Aboriginal desert art, of indigenous shrubs and variously colored pansies, those most-symbolic of Victorian flowers. On the gallery's enclosed back lawn, it grew shaggier as the exhibition progressed. The unnatural vigor of its nursery-bred blooms, the odd colonizing weed flowering among them, contrasted increasingly with the scrubby melaleucas.

John Wolseley's *Concerning the moving apart of Gondwana and the present position of Australia and Patagonia and how the great tree genus Araucaria evolved and was named and celebrated followed by its radical depletion* (1995) incorporated samples, sketches, annotations and artifacts relating to the tree genus *Araucaria*, one of which was viewable in the parkland beyond. Wolseley's investigations, often incongruously presented – cut-out photographs standing in as botanical samples; items encased in plastic sandwich bags; leaves embedded in handmade paper – encompassed earlier ideologies and serendipitous, portentous events. Among the attached objects: a photograph, in all his Victorian correctness, of Allan Cunningham "His Majesty's

Botanist," who gave his name to *Araucaria cunninghamii*, and one of a young man sitting propped against an example of the same tree, this time given its common name, inscribed simply "Dad 1938, Monkey Puzzle, Somerset England."

Wolseley's foregrounding of his story's construction provided one model for 'painting' history. Another, perhaps the most resonant being produced in contemporary Australian art, was that of Gordon Bennett. The ambition and scope of Bennett's oeuvre speak of a restlessly provocative intelligence, always marked by an incisive understanding of the contexts and connotations of his found images, and adroitly manipulating a received visual vocabulary.

In *Big Romantic Painting: Apotheosis of Captain Cook* (1993), Australia's 'discoverer' is lifted into the ether by classical victories even as a figure – of indeterminate race, but startlingly blue-eyed – drowns in the expanse at the painting's center, staring desperately toward a dot-worked waterhole that marks the central vanishing point. Silhouetted images of aborigines – 'noble savages,' surely, in their original contexts – look on. The drowning man throws out a frenzy of Pollock-style splashes, while the whole canvas is pawed over, both reclaimed and defiled, in a flurry of black handprints. For Bennett, the 'authenticity' of the artist's hand, then, is but one more strategy in the lexicon of contemporary art.

As is his own voice. The dated diary-style pencil texts of *Home Sweet Home* (1993) each begin with an ironic disclaimer, "Please excuse me I don't mean to offend": These stories are uttered in full knowledge of Australian history's silencing of Aboriginal testimony, but, equally, of the complicit and negotiations that this impels, and of the odd sort of privilege contemporary art bestows on the artist.

As the 2001 centenary of Australian Federation approaches, Australia seems poised to sever ties with Britain and become a Republic, giving renewed urgency to the pursuit of reconciliation and reparation between black and white. In this putatively 'postcolonial' culture, engrossed by questions of identity and destiny, it is no surprise that artists are busy trawling the archive. It is Bennett, with his knowing negotiation of personal and public, art and history, Aboriginality and Australianness, who comes closest to drawing from it a history painting for an age that is as wary of History as it is beholden to the past.

STEPHANIE HOLT