Navigating Tensions: Fraught fictions and fragile facts

Julie Montgarrett
Julie Montgarrett is a Lecturer in Art and Design in the School of Communication and Creative Industries, Charles Sturt University. Her background as a visual Artist and Designer over three decades has included over 50 solo and group exhibitions in Australia and internationally, public art commissions, site specific installations, costume design and production and community arts projects. Her main interests are in the areas of drawing and embroidery/textile. She has extensive experience in tertiary education having taught Design, and Drawing at RMIT, Swinburne TAFE Art and Design and has undertaken numerous Artist-in-Residencies across Australia and overseas including Harbourfront, Toronto, Canada as one of 2 Australia Council Exchange representatives; Crafts Council – Northern Territory; Curtin University, Perth; University of Tasmania and the Victorian Trades Hall Council Arts Workshop among others. Her work is represented in various private and public national art collections: Queensland Art Gallery, Victorian State Craft Collection (3), Tamworth Gallery (3), Ararat Gallery (4), Powerhouse Museum and Aberdeen Art Gallery Scotland. Julie is currently undertaking PhD research at Charles Sturt University entitled ‘Temporary Alignments: fraught fictions and fragile facts hidden in plain view.’ These works are the first stage of research in progress towards my PhD.
A Kind of Glorious Measles

Gilbert Spencer² writing of his brother Stanley³ said that, “His work at the Slade was orthodox; the ideal of draughtsmanship as enunciated by Tizzi⁴ was based on Ingres. But Stan was learning only the words, not the sentences, which were going to be his own. In the realm of ideas he had only on his own way of thinking and de three dimensional world. In terms of trying to capture things in two dimensions, I found it interesting to have this trace of a real experience in the paper rather than trying to draw representation of the change. It is like being true to the materials which are also the subject.⁵

With Parker’s works including wire drawings, a silver dollar drawn into a fine wire⁶, and an installation of charcoal retrieved from a church struck by lightning⁷, drawing can no longer be considered simply as a two dimensional representation of a three dimensional world. This blurring of the boundaries and the questioning of drawing as a process is further extended with Julie Montgomeret’s⁸ drawings on cloth and paper, machine and hand stitched from direct observation; a confluence of two art forms, embroidery and drawing, not separated by process or tradition but instantaneously one, a seamless juncture.

The sketchbook, the visual diary, the journal all hold and document those most private and personal of visual thoughts and are not normally presented for viewing and consumption, they are the repository of visual thinking.

The actual first things are more important to me now more often than the finished things… So I always kept these notebooks and thought that they were really important⁹.

However in the new works from Montgomeret the sketchbook or journal has evolved into a major vehicle to carry powerful imagery where each page interacts with its closest neighbours. Where pages are carried to carry a personal and deeply evocative vision; each page adding to a chapter in history. Montgomeret, like Spencer, has always exhibited his own language and way of expressing his vision of place, her sentences have always had shape and form, her visual words clear and concise, shaping academe rather than being shaped. The four journals are like dance hall mirror balls reflecting history into the future and casting the future into the past; casting shards of light onto a long hidden and in some part dismissed and unliftable histories. By shining a light on these Histories a narrative has been exposed that allows some of the truth to worm its way to the surface and to correct the balance. The truth like history is never a pure and balanced reflection of the past; whilst stories that unfold may not be comfortable and whether they tell the whole truth Montgomeret has remained truthful to her ideals. These journals are not private they demand public scrutiny and consumption. They are as important to cultural history as Cookham was to Spencer. As drawings, they add a new dimension to the graphic novel; Montgomeret’s drawings exhibit a passion that ensures that the truth cannot remain hidden and shay away from the light but unlike the novel there is no ending until balance in history is restored.

David Green
CSU Emeritus Professor

1. Gilbert Spencer PA 1910-1979
2. Dr Stanley Spencer HCS CBE RA 1913-1959
3. Stanley Spencer 1891-1959, Slade School of Art 1906-1920
5. Ibid p112
6. Originally the Accademia dei Desiderosi; the Academy of those Desirous of fame and learning later to become Accademia degli Incamminati, Academy of the Progresive established by Lodovico Caramelle and his circle the brothers Andrea and Agostino Carracci. Taking as its motto “The school of those who regret the past, despise the present, and aspire to a better future.” The Great Artists part ET 20 11 March Cavendish 1948
7. Jan Sensberg 1996
8. Elizabeth Cross 2000, Jan Sensberg Drawings, Ballarat Art Gallery Victoria
9. Beer Street and Gin Lane 1731; A Harlots Progress 1732; A Rakes progress 1735. Drawing projects
10. Jacaranda Acquisitive Art Award; Grafton Regional Gallery, New South Wales 1999.
12. Measuring Liberty with a Dollar 2007. Silver dollar melted and drawn as a fine wire the height of the Statue of Liberty
13. McBean, Jude. 2012 judge commented; the winning work
14. 5
15. 4
16. 3
17. 2
18. 1
19. 6
20. 5
21. 4
22. Egan, No. 2
23. 3
24. 2
25. 1
26. 0
27. 9
28. 8
29. 7
30. 6
31. 5
32. 4
33. 3
34. 2
35. 1
36. 0
Salt Ash + cold cold winds 2012
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Amanda Vanstone, the former Howard Government Minister, recently claimed on National Television that Australia is a nation created in peace. Her words reiterate a wilfully insidious national delusion embedded in cultural memory sustained for too long. Many voices since the 18th C British invasion of ‘the great south land’ have called unsuccessfully for an acknowledgment of Aboriginal sovereignty, and recognition of the sustained brutality and dispossession the first Australians have suffered since the onslaught of the orchestrated Colonial era destruction of their ancient high cultures. More than 200 years later this project that actively ignores the events of our era.

The sustained brutality and dispossession the first Australians of ‘the great south land’ have called unsuccessfully for too long. Many voices since the 18th C British invasion of ‘the great south land’ have called unsuccessfully for an acknowledgment of Aboriginal sovereignty, and recognition of the sustained brutality and dispossession the first Australians have suffered since the onslaught of the orchestrated Colonial era destruction of their ancient high cultures. More than 200 years later this project that actively ignores the events of our era.

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**Place settings: of country, circumstance and consequences hidden in plain view.**

These works are in progress – a first stage of creative practice as research that concerns the beginnings of settlement of Van Diemen’s Land. I aim to question this distant past – a time of great but fragile possibility and lost opportunity for a different future. A brief few years before the entire island was transformed into a war-zone as more settlers ‘took up land’ seeking to create a different sense of these lives and experiences and by comparison perhaps aspects of our own.

I aim to explore a process of visual/material ‘re-telling’ of fragile circumstances and dramatic change, to challenge assumptions about the cultural landscape of the past and present that has been shaped and imposed by blind dominant cultural knowledge of non-Indigenous Australians. By ‘unpicking the seams’ of these characters’ discourses, they might be recognised as contributors to an imagined polyphonic narrative rather than remain largely absent from the Colonial era master narratives. We may recognise relationships between past and present via images of culturally familiar settler objects and circumstances, and visible damage upon fragile materials. And perhaps in the negative spaces between these culturally known images, arranged in odd sequences, displaced in defiance of a logical narrative and clear meaning, a perception of something else, something not clear or complete might arise. The absence of a conventional narrative sequence and thus an absence of a clear fixed ‘meaning’ might encourage the viewer to imagine another different story. An incomplete, even erratic narrative may suggest something of the fragile, indigenous tenuous lives lived in the cross-fire of this frontier war-zone that have been erased from history. A way toward making the invisible visible in the past, but the past lives in us. Charles Perkins.
someday present, if never fully imagined, recognised or known. Remembering, as Alison Ravenscroft says, that these imagined characters are always silhouettes shaped by our non-indigenous cultural perspectives and expectations. Like Ravenscroft, I too am interested in the gaps in representation, in the silences and ‘places where representation may be said to fail, and crucially… in the stitches that non-indigenous Australian readers of Indigenous textuality tend to make to cover over these gaps.’

The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence

Both Ravenscroft and James Boyce identify the need for us to acknowledge the extent of what we do not and cannot know of both the historical and the indigenous cultural landscapes. As W.E.H. Stanner reported many decades ago, there are things in Aboriginal cultures that cannot be known, that representation is only partial and incomplete: some things escape representation. ‘A silence and gaps must be allowed to remain, the silence into which things must fall, places of unknowability.’ Thus, current attempts to erase difference between settlers and indigenous cultures are indeed, flawed. Further, non-indigenous cultural perspectives assume that colonising and settler impulses and perspectives remain only in the past. That as a result, Ravenscroft observes, indigenous cultures ‘remain in significant ways profoundly, even bewilderingly strange and unknowable within the terms of (these) settler epistemologies.’ Boyce also suggests, that those who don’t share the constraints of history’s empirical practice and who can bring an imaginative response to the relationships – ‘artists, storytellers, community builders have perhaps the more important calling. Ravenscroft argues in similar ways to Boyce, for ‘aesthetic practices that allow such strangeness to be… that an imaginative response might possibly accept and navigate difference as a stranger or foreigner might, not to trespass or colonise as versions of self but instead acknowledging radical difference – even sovereignty?’

In these ways, I aim to make drawings and embroideries that are like unfinished sentences, that remain strange and incomplete. To acknowledge the extent of what we cannot know for the first twenty-five years of Van Diemen’s Land has left little more than fragments and scraps from the historic record. What ‘facts’ and testaments remain are mainly found in ‘books’, shaped by the spy-glass lens of the powerful settler’s view. Other voices are silent or close to whispers between the lines and in the spaces inscribed by this spy-glass circle – hidden in plain view. By way of an index of images and materials I aim to re-present multiple viewpoints, albeit also subjectively ‘selected’ by my non-Indigenous postcolonial eye. I hope to raise doubts about the historical record, to suggest other unconfirmed events and possible circumstances rather than simply re-telling singular stories. As Paul Carter says, in The Road to Botany Bay, to avoid re-staging events about a few powerful individuals based on fragmentary histories from the past. These characters endured lives of poverty and neglect on the colonial frontier in fraught circumstance; their survival consistently in doubt.

As an artist, I aim interested in the ways that art-making might fold back across time, not because the moments of past and present are the same but because visual and material links between them may reveal worthwhile aspects of the present from shadows of the past. These connections and links can be questioned visually by artists as Boyce and Ravenscroft suggest, to create contemporary meanings in ways that historians are denied without falsifying history.

“never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one”

John Berger

Repetition of visual elements and motifs drawn from fragmentary ‘facts’ are cast to suggest uncertain ‘identities’ explored through a version of traditional artist tools – preliminary ‘sketchbook’ research towards a series of artists’ books – a lexicon of imagery for each character. Like banal fragments of some kind of contemporary fable from which in combination, a viewer might glean some meaning. A fragment that may suggest a larger narrative as Walter Benjamin wrote is a characteristic of modern allegory. Benjamin said in The Storyteller (1936), that the end of story telling was nigh. ‘It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest of our possessions, were taken away from us: the ability to exchange experiences.’ He saw the change as a product of the parallel, secular, productive forces of history, ‘a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing.’ As Sue Rowley observes, there is irony in the fact that Benjamin’s own writings, warning of the loss of narratives from modern, fragmented lives and experiences, may well have been a significant factor in the resurgence in storytelling and narrative traditions amongst contemporary writers and artists in contemporary arts practice. Rowley further notes, that postcolonial debates and feminist re-evaluations of women’s depictions denigrated by Modernist canons have driven exploration of stories as valuable art forms. That two factors underpin the exploration of narrative form in the crafts. The first is the idea that the stories we tell are the means by which we make sense of who we are. The second being, that this sense of identity is ‘grounded in the past. Ian Burn writing of artists’ use of anecdotal stories as a means of passing on their histories underlines the value of a narrative approach. “Neither the authenticity of the anecdote nor empirical veracity are an issue, for a story without any factual basis may serve to reveal greater ‘cultural truths’ than any other account.” Anecdotes, says Burn, “persist as one of the most effective forms of communicating a sense of history among artists.”

Recognition of the value of these kinds of subjectivities, of ‘other histories’ can be usefully traced to philosophers such as Foucault in terms of this research. Foucault argued that the project of a western linear, progressive, dominant history as Foucault in terms of this research. Foucault argued that the project of a western linear, progressive, dominant history denied the truth of actual world events; that it is a falsehood later described as ‘modernity’, which claimed a coherence and legitimacy for the era. This lie, contrived by those in power, determined what was or was not recorded and legitimised
I have chosen to work as a textile artist over 30 years, in an ‘other’ space, the textile studio, as a location for practice. I make works informed as much by the histories of drawing, embroidery and Colonial Australia as by contemporary issues and ideas. I work in relative exile from the often fraught domains of both art and craft theory, as well as that of colonial and post-colonial practice, borrowing textile machinery as material for innovative effect. The research involves ‘an attention to the process of creation’ as defined by Merleau-Ponty, as an active involvement with material ‘making visible/rigorous, toward making meaning.’

The process is one of speculation or trial and error, asking ‘what if?’ questions. Like Peter Hill, I believe practice as research inquiry does not require much methodology as ‘a methodology that [artists] discover and use to develop their own visual language, a personal methodology that is disciplined according to its own artistic needs. Such a language, unlike a trope, exhibits, unlike a photograph, emerge slowly through the research process and evolve unpredictably reliant on particular material encounters and chance occurrences that arise from this process. This impetus can be linked to what McDowell offers on the logic of practice, of ‘being in the game’ where strategies are not pre-determined but emerge and operate according to certain actions and movement in time. Unplanned forms arise through process and extend to immerse and question which further drives wider critical research including the philosophies of other artists and theorists and often, more historical ‘facts’ and historians’ perspectives, oral histories and folklore to further a return to a notion of making of the art-work, importantly of the place and context in which it is made. Materiality and materiality are both the subject of the story and the form of the narrative telling. My practice also involves a close consideration of the ‘visual languages’ and ‘personal methodologies’ of major internationally recognised artists whose work is informed by historical narrative forms as a means of addressing history, conflict and cultures in crisis. William Kentridge, Rozanne Hawkins, Slimpox and Sally Clarke write about their own practice as research as their works investigate significant social and political issues of identity, fragility, disadvantage and disenfranchisement through drawing, embroidery and installations. As contingent practices, drawing-embroidery practices and material form is sensed as a way of traversing the material forms of other cultures as an act of representation and process. Each track poses, recording change and repair and offers opportunities to create a sense of discovery, to uncover unpredictable silhouettes and surfaces as valuable approaches that continue to guide my sketchbook ‘thinking’—oblique strategies that complement the quality of habit-laden navigation required in managing the tensions of a drawn line.

As Nigel Hurst’s says, ‘the processes of both drawing and stitch may therefore be seen between the hand and the eye, and through that mediation, we are able to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known’.

Reassembling, re-ordering, re-scaling motifs, fragments and patterns of identity, work, ‘I wanted to make a piece that was so embedded, that was really inscribed in everyday life. And even though it was referring to an extreme event, an extreme situation – the point where everyday life and the war began was intervened. I think that is the way war is perceived in places where it lasts for many years. The event that took place many years ago is kind of doubtful. You are not certain of it.’

Imaginative works by artists, writers and others based on the representations in the State Library’s historical archive raise issues of possible confusion that these works are somehow accurate substitutes for the missing histories; that they will factually represent the past. Creative interpretations, like photographs, may be more imaginative constructions, as accurate documents and events and be considered to represent a truth. They cannot. Imaginative readings as certainties are as potentially destructive as the claims by some non-Indigenous Australians that ALL has been erased and is lost irrevocably. All may do it toward a kind of understanding of the ways that non-Indigenous Australians imaginatively smooth over this unknown, underwriting the idea that the place of what we do not and cannot know. What is important is how we manage this empress, what we imagine to try to mend our dis-comfort usefully toward an acknowledgment of our culpability in this history. Encountering these works requires a complicity on the part of the audience for thiscomplicity itself. As a form of representation, the history in the imagery is gleaned and cross-referenced visually, materially and spatially. Indexes and signs by repetition in the disjunctions of these fragments and patterns of coincidence are dependent on the dissonance and the material memory and the texts replay, reissue, re-inhabit, inconsistent narratives and outcomes.

The works are informed as much by the histories of drawing, embroidery and Colonial Australia as by contemporary ideas and issues where both the making and audience perception is reliant on the representations in the library archives, and the context of the asking or the asking of silent questions, ‘what if?’ Or better still, as Samuel Beckett wrote, ‘Try again. Fail again. Fail Better.’

Julie Montague
November 2012
Artist Books

Salt Ash - Wind: Searching for Ghosts 2012
Museum board, laser printed and paper; archival laser printed tracing paper; polyester tulle; cotton/linen embroidery thread; woven linen thread; resin; found buttons and beads. 250mm x 350mm (open) 65mm high (closed). Book pillow – hand quilted buff dyed silk (place dyed and needle amortised); enriching edged with horse hair; ticking, screen printed and bleached voile, and discharged black cotton. 630mm x 400mm approx.

Bridget (Edwards) Montgomerie’s Sketchbook 2012
Museum board, vintage ticking mattress cloth; archive standard end papers; assorted papers; archival tracing paper; mixed media; polyester tulle; hand drawn organza; cotton thread; vintage rayon thread; inks and buff dyed rayon; screen printed silk organza; lace; pins. 630mm x 400mm (open) 65mm high (closed). Book pillow – found weathered, buff dyed wool blanket, floral printed muslin calico, hand and machine embroidery with blended cotton, related domestic items and cotton in calico four bag. 450mm x 400mm approx.

Jacob Montgomerie’s Book Sketchbook 2012
Museum board, then sat cloth cover; archive standard end papers; assorted papers; archival tracing paper; mixed media; polyester tulle; hand drawn organza; cotton thread; vintage rayon thread; inks and buff dyed rayon; pearl shell buttons. Book pillow – found weathered suit cloth; hand stitched fill. Filled with natural earth in calico four bag. 630mm x 400mm approx.

George Briggs’ Sketchbook
Museum board, vintage horse hair cloth; buff dyed and paper; assorted papers; archival tracing paper; mixed media; polyester tulle; hand drawn organza; cotton thread; vintage rayon thread; inks and buff dyed rayon; pearl shell buttons. Book pillow – found weathered suit cloth; hand stitched fill. Filled with natural earth in calico four bag. 630mm x 400mm approx.

House 2012
Tasmanian Ash gable; PVC pipe uprights; timber floor and anchor structures; found, taped and waxed assorted books; screen printed buff dyed canvas; silk and cotton embroidery thread. Buff dyed new silk fabric – dyed with plant materials from Flinders Cove, Yorke Island Historic site, George Town and Longford, Tasmania. Buff dyed on location at Longford and Beauty Point with local river and sea water. Hand and machine stitched; vintage peas, buttons and screen printed silk organza. Based upon Dr. Montgomerie’s cottage originally located at Doctors Bench on the Macquarie River now situated at Wilmont’s Historic Estate, near Longford, Tasmania. One of two house frames. 400mm x 200mm. Each silk panel on frame. 110mm x 200mm.

Basket 1995/2010
Rust and buff, dyed calico; Boltam and pins; found washed shells and objects from maintained Bichl Gilgit coast line. Organza ‘overly’ with drawing and hand embroidery. 460mm x 260mm

Horizon 1 2012
Muslin, polymer varnish; resin-bound pigment and reactive dyes; silk and cotton threads; monofilament and permanent marker. Dimensions variable.

Horizon 2 2012
Muslin, polymer varnish; resin-bound pigment and reactive dyes; silk and cotton threads; monofilament and permanent marker. Dimensions variable.

Horizon 3 2012
Muslin, polymer varnish; resin-bound pigment and reactive dyes; silk and cotton threads; monofilament and permanent marker. Dimensions variable.

Caddies

Postcolonial cell/ for Bridges 2012
Scanned and laser printed pages from sketchbooks on archival quality paper; assorted materials and Archie rag paper with iron back buff dye and reactive dye; organza fabric; threads and mixed media. 750mm x 650mm (variable).

Noughts and crosses 2012
Scanned and laser printed pages from sketchbooks on archival quality paper; assorted materials and Archie rag paper with iron back buff dye and reactive dye; buff dyed Lithia paper; organza fabric; threads and mixed media. 750mm x 650mm (variable).

Salt Ash + cold cold winds 2012
Scanned and laser printed pages from sketchbooks on archival quality paper; assorted materials and Archie rag paper with iron back buff dye and reactive dye; Lithia paper; organza fabric; threads and mixed media. 610mm x 610mm (variable).

Navigating Tensions 2012
Scanned and laser printed pages from sketchbooks on archival quality paper; assorted materials and Archie rag paper with iron back buff dye and reactive dye; screen printed, buff dyed organic fabric; threads and mixed media; red cotton setting, 50mm x 500mm (variable).

Cross Fire Witness 2012
Scanned and laser printed pages from sketchbooks on archival quality paper; assorted materials and Archie rag paper with iron back buff dye and reactive dye; screen printed; buff dyed organic fabric; threads and mixed media; red cotton setting, 50mm x 500mm (variable).

House of Cards 2012
Vintage hand made papers and plant materials; buff dyed Lithia and watercolour paper; buff dyed playing card; buff dyed silk; and polyester fabric. 400mm x 900mm (variable).

Figures 2012
Five hand and machine stitched black feded tulle and polyester fabric; silk and cotton threads; buff dyed Lithia paper; mixed media. Life-size; dimensions variable.

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