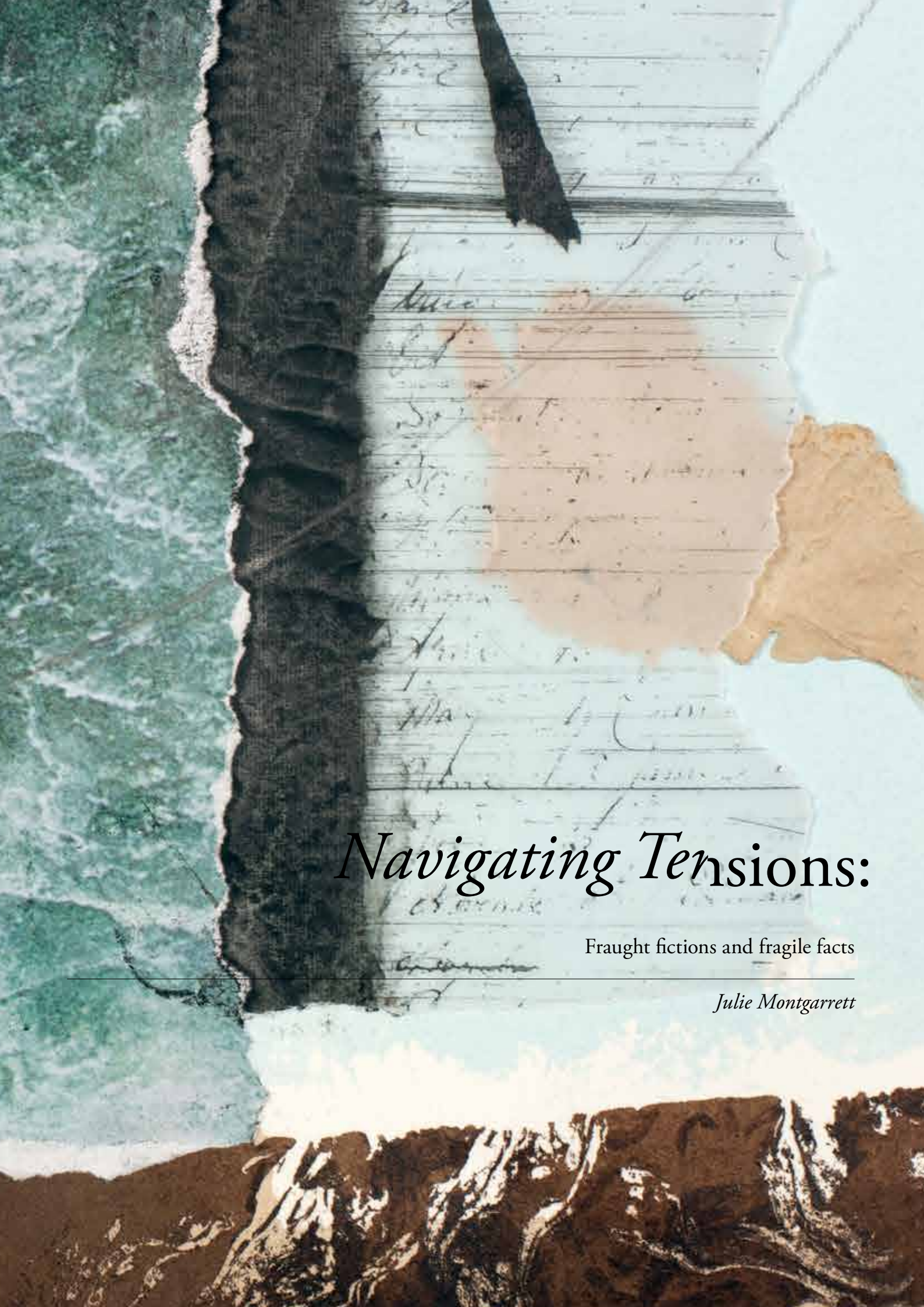

*Navigating Ten*sions:

Fraught fictions and fragile facts

Julie Montgarrett

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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 Spencer[1] writing of his brother Stanley[2] said that,

His work at the Slade was orthodox: the ideal of draughtsmanship as enunciated by Tonks[3] 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 early on formed his own way of thinking and of seeing things.[4]

Writing of his own time at the Slade, Gilbert wrote,

At this time colour was largely something you caught; you caught it unconsciously through the drawing – a kind of glorious measles.[5]

When drawing from the human figure whether the Academmia degli Incamminati[6] established in the late sixteenth century, the Slade School at the beginning of the twentieth century, art institutes of the twenty first century or web based offerings there is a common underlying theme all based on the ability to see, and that through continuous practice and training the ability to draw is and will become an established fact. The ability to see is not in itself sufficient, a plethora of treatise espouse the view that Learning to see is an essential part of learning to draw[7] and denies the more fundamental questions of what is a drawing, its purpose and what is to be achieved by and through the drawing? The studies of grey dust ingrained in casts of antiquities may lead to an understanding and appreciation of proportion and form but repetitive study deadens the senses.

Are these studies imbued with the vibrancy of personal discovery, the texture and sinuous fall of drapery, the swirl and eddy of water, the effect of light on colour, an understanding of the landscape or of the capture of history, the development of a personal language or simply exercises for busy fingers in the pursuit of learning to see as an essential part of learning to draw? Elizabeth Cross in her introduction to the Senbergs[8] exhibition: Jan Senbergs Drawings, wrote,

Senbergs drawings are images which provoke curiosity about how we construct and construe our world.[9]

Is it possible to extrapolate that Senbergs' drawings had this purpose and intent in the same way that Hogarth with his publication of Beer Street and Gin Lane, had the intent to actively support the introduction of the Gin Act to the English parliament and enacted in 1751 to reduce the excessive consumption of gin? Hogarth's earlier A Harlots Progress and The Rakes Progress[10] opening a window to the consequences of prostitution, gambling and alcoholism, moral narratives and biting satire directed at all levels of society, exposing a deep disillusionment with the excesses of a corrupt society. A legacy that exists in the satirical and cutting political cartoons that are still exposing the excesses of a modern society. Is Cross' interpretation of Senbergs drawing based on her own meaning making processes and experiences or was this Senbergs intent when he originally made the drawings? How an artist interprets their observations of the world may include verisimilitude but a realistic interpretation is often only a small part of the story.

The winner of the 2012 Jacaranda Acquisitive Art Award[11] (JADA) Miles Hall in his artist statement to the work eyes closed, searching for noon and night; wrote

The act of drawing provides an intimate, sensual relationship between form, gesture and surface. These drawings are done directly with the fingers, commencing with the eyes closed. Graphite powder is applied to a surface prepared with white pastel- a process that records movement, discovery, doubt and affirmation in the most precise way. My ambition is to combine touch and vision – where optical experience resonates with tactile, physical awareness, the drawings attempt to map out a territory that exists between darkness and light, establishing a small but resonate space within the universe.

Cambell Gray[12] the 2012 judge commented; the winning work beautifully embodies the immediate and tactile nature at the heart of drawing. It is clear from the artist's statement that there was and is a comprehensible intent and focus to the work prior to the commencement of the piece and that the judge's comments are apt and appropriate.

However, drawing is not restricted only to the creative process it is and will continue to be a major communication tool. The hand drawn map and its illustrative annotations of important landmarks communicates how best to undertake a journey with an expectation of successful completion; the international laundry symbols and road signs, the graphic novel and the visual language of the pictogram, are all vehicles for communication; and sometimes are the only form of communication where there is limited or no ability to read, speak or write. The "heart of drawing" being a language that conveys meaning and ideas, the establishment of a visual language allowing for safe passage, the removal of potentially dangerous and damaging situations and the creation of a means for dialogue where no dialogue was possible.

Jude McBean, Gallery Director of the Grafton Gallery in announcing the fifty works selected for the JADA 2012 wrote, Technological development also supports the fusion or blurring of boundaries between drawing and other areas of practices such as painting, printing and even sculpture.

And Cornelia Parker in conversation with Jack Southern

Drawing, in the hierarchy of art forms, is always thought of as an adjunct or a lesser art form than the great art of painting or sculpture. Thinking of everything I make in terms of drawing takes the pressure off, and can be very liberating[13]

and

In terms of trying to capture things in two dimensions, I found it interesting to have this trace of a real experience on the paper rather than trying to draw representations of the things. It is like being true to the materials which are also the subject.[14]

With Parker's works including wire drawings, a silver dollar drawn into a fine wire[15], and an installation of charcoal retrieved from a church struck by lightning[16], 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 Montgarrett's[17] drawings on cloth and paper, machine and hand stitched from direct observation; a conjoining 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 more often than the finished things… So I always kept these notebooks and thought that they were really important.[18]

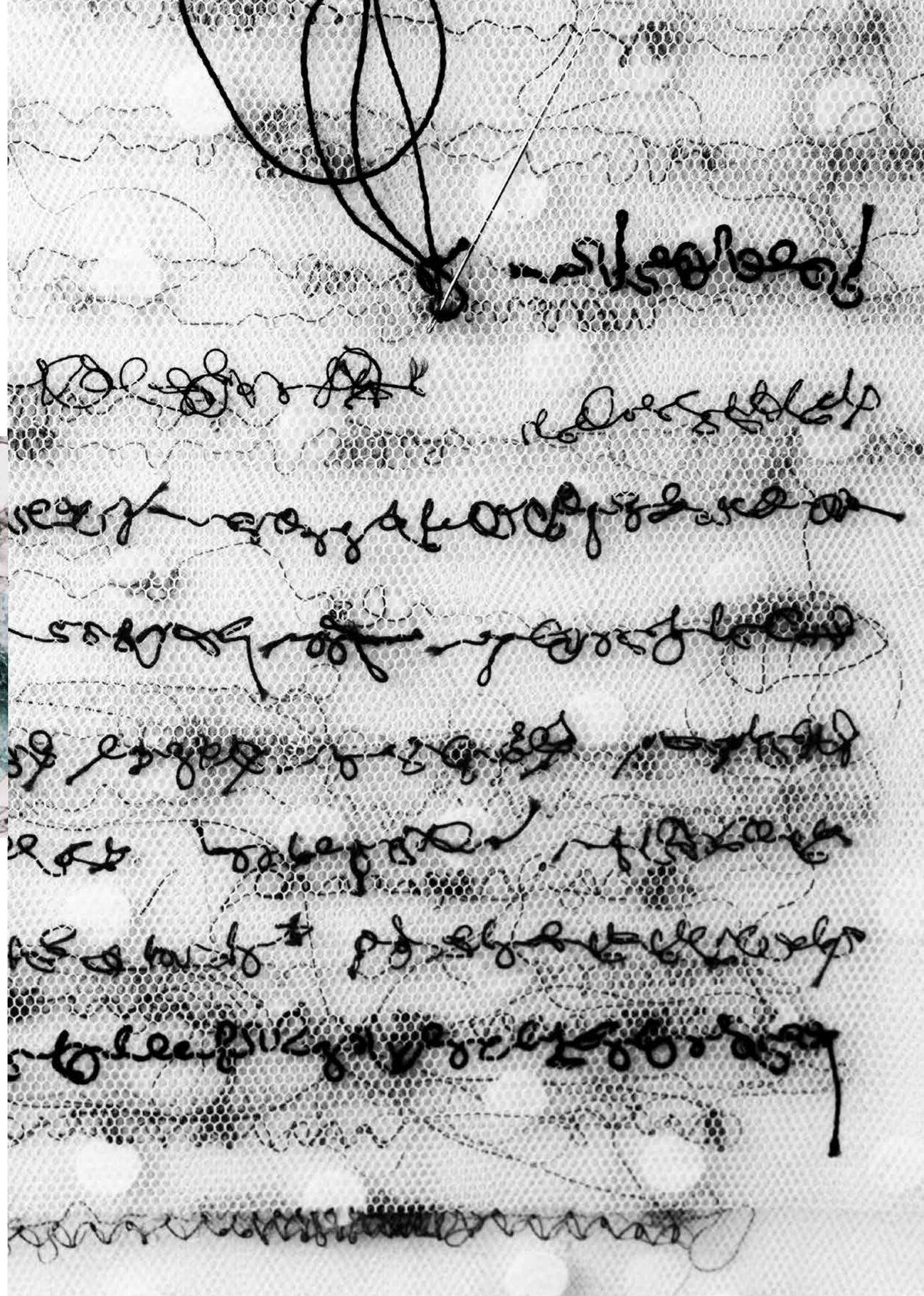
However in the new works from Montgarrett the sketchbook or journal has evolved into a major vehicle to carry powerful imagery where each page interacts with its closest neighbours. Where pages are created to carry a personal and deeply evocative vision; each page adding to a chapter in history.

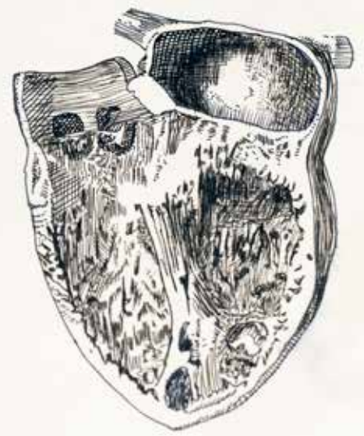
Montgarrett, like Spencer, has always exhibited her own language and way of expressing her vision of place, her sentences have always had shape and form, her visual words clear and concise, shaping academe rather than being shaped. The four journals are like dance hall mirror balls reflecting history into the future and casting the future into the past; casting shards of light onto a long hidden and in some part dismissed and untruthful 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 Montgarrett has remained truthful to her ideals. These journals are not private they demand public scrutiny and consumption. They are as important to colonial history as Cookham was to Spencer. As drawings, they add a new dimension to the graphic novel; Montgarrett's drawings exhibit a passion that ensures that the truth cannot remain hidden and shy 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 RA 1892-1979
2 Sir Stanley Spencer KCB.CBE RA 1891-1959
3 Henry Tonks 1863-1937, Slade School of Art 1892-1930
4 Gilbert Spencer(1961) Stanley Spencer by his brother Gilbert. Victor Gollancz Ltd., London. p105
5 Ibid p117
6 Originally the Accademia dei Desiderosi; the Academy of those Desirous of fame and learning later to become Accademia degli Incamminati; Academy of the Progressives established by Lodovico Carracci and his cousins the brothers Annibale 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 67 Vol 3 Marshall Cavendish 1986
7 Drawing projects
8 Jan Senbergs 1939-
9 Elizabeth Cross (2006)Jan Senbergs Drawings, Ballarat Art Gallery,Victoria.
10 Beer Street and Gin Lane 1751; A Harlots Progress 1731; A Rakes progress 1735.
11 Jacaranda Acquisitive Art Award; Grafton Regional Gallery NSW. Prestigious major prize for drawing
12 Dr,Cambell Gray: Director of the University of Queensland of Queensland Art Museum.
13 London 2010; Maslen M: Southern J (2011) Drawing Projects, Black Dog Publishing London. P54
14 ibid p56
15 Measuring Liberty with a Dollar 2007. Silver dollar melted and drawn as a fine wire the height of the Statue of Liberty
16 Mas(Colder Darker Matter) 1997, charcoal collected froma church struck by lightning, Texas USA
17 Julie Montgarrett; Australian Embroiderer/Textile/ Installation Artist
18 QAG/ANG (1991) Being and Nothingness: Bea Maddock; Bea Maddock in conversation with Roger Butler

Postcolonial eye/I for Bridget 2012





Salt Ash + cold cold winds 2012

Navigating Tensions: fraught fictions and fragile facts

“*we cannot live* in the past, *but the past l*ives in us”[1]

Charles Perkins

Amanda Vanstone, the former Howard Government Minister, recently claimed on National Television that Australia is a nation created in peace.[2] 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 collective history continues[3], as evidenced by Vanstone’s claim. Australia is not and never was a country created in peace.

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 make themselves anew, as roving parties worked across the island ‘bounty-hunting’ Aborigines. Those few settlers who had earlier attained some language and understanding of the first Australians in Van Diemen’s Land were swept away along with an ancient fragile high culture by the projects of unscrupulous, ambitious individuals intent on making their own fortunes at any cost and by any means available.

These art-works explore visual narrative, premised upon the fact of the resilience of visual storytelling. Its longevity across all cultures and centuries strongly suggests it is fundamental to human culture, a basic human need which conveys aspects of lived experience becoming part of an individual’s knowledge. It is as much a ‘story’ communicated as it is a story that operates as part of the construction and maintenance of an individual’s world. Through drawing and embroidery as contingent practices, I aim to present ‘possibilities from uncertainties’- stories tinged with doubt aligned with the unbridgeable gaps in understanding that generated fraught and brutal relationships between non-indigenous and indigenous Australians. Gaps that continue to haunt our shared cultural domains despite the passage of more than 200 years.

My interest in this period is based on a cast of characters drawn from my family’s early colonial history in Van Diemen’s Land, recently discovered by chance. The letter ‘u’ was removed from my last name in the 1870s to deny any relationship to my Great, Great, Great Uncle, Jacob Mountgarrett – the ‘notorious’ first Surgeon in Van Diemen’s Land who died destitute and dishonoured. Childless, he and his wife Bridget, baptised their ‘fostered’ daughter, Dolly Dalrymple Mountgarrett Briggs, and taught her to read, write and sew. Amongst the first settlers in the colony in 1803, both Jacob and Bridget were dead by 1829. Dalrymple had left their home four years before. Dalrymple Briggs was the second child of a Trawlwoolway Aboriginal mother, Worrete-moete-yenner, and the grand-daughter of Mannarlargenna, a chieftain from the north-east of Van Diemen’s Land. Dalrymple’s father, George Briggs, was an English-born, red haired sealer.[4] Historic records claim she was the first child born in the Colony to a white father and indigenous mother. Dalrymple was given little more than British manners, an Anglican Baptism and a girl’s ‘education’. Yet, with determination and bravery, she survived to make a life for herself to become a famous Tasmanian Aboriginal heroine and matriarch – a rare survivor in the increasingly violent war-zone that was Van Diemen’s Land in the first decades of the nineteenth Century. Dalrymple’s father, George Briggs, circumnavigated Van Diemen’s Land in an open whaling boat in 1815. Dalrymple’s mother sailed with other sealers as far as Rodriguez/Mauritius in 1825. Further details of their lives are scant, as part of a larger unknown and poorly recorded era – the first 25 years of white settlement of northern Tasmania. Attempts to picture the lives of these individuals during this period of escalating warfare require an imaginative piecing together of few ‘facts’ and fragments to shape mismatched ‘what if?’ scenarios and to perhaps create a different sense of these lives and experiences and by comparison perhaps aspects of our own.

Between the sightlines – guessing games in borrowed places

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’ disguises, 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

somehow present, if never fully imagined, recognised or known. Remembering, as Alison Ravenscroft says[5], 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.'[6]

As an artist, I am 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 sin*gle story be *told as though it weret*he only one"[17]
>
> *John Berger*

The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence[7]

Both Ravenscroft and James Boyce [8] 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.[9] 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'.[10] 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'.[11] 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.'[12] 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?'[13]

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.[14] 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.[15] 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,[16] 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.

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.[18] 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.'[19] 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.'[20] As Sue Rowley observes[21], 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.'[22] 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.'[23] Anecdotes, says Burn, 'persist as one of the most effective forms of communicating a sense of history among artists'.[24]

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 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

through erasure and denial of the disruptions, uncertainties and chance events that actually occur in (historical) time. Foucault proposed that subjective experience was unacknowledged and thus had had little value; despite the Enlightenment belief that knowledge equalled power. His historical analysis of the Prison, the Asylum and the Clinic observed that subjectivity generated a formative power of self and of philosophical thought that was superior to the power structures of the dominant hegemonies from which it emerges.

Issues of identity and oppression of marginalised groups that postmodernism permitted initially proposed by philosophers such as Foucault, poststructural theories of autonomy by Derrida, Paul de Man and others were further articulated by the founders of post-colonialism, amongst these were the cultural critics, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and writer, Chinua Achebe. Said particularly, followed Foucault's proposal that power and knowledge are inseparable. The Western world's claim to knowledge of the East gave the West the power to name, and to control. Collectively, their critiques of Western Imperialism crucially informed and additionally fuelled further critical debates surrounding issues of Australian indigenous equality, land rights and social change by writers and activists such as Charles Perkins, Marcia Langton, Bain Atwood, Noel Pearson and many others. These texts amongst many critiques of cross-cultural research particularly in the visual arts further inform my research and exegesis toward the presentation of multiple viewpoints. They provide a complexity of intersecting, overlapping, challenging stories of circumstance and survival that was determined as much by chance as self-determination. The 19th C settler epistemologies that shaped and enabled the genocide of indigenous Tasmanian Aboriginies, continues to thread through our culture. This period, informed by the writings of these authors, critics and artists investigating postcolonial theory, presents great opportunities for visually re-imagining and re-presenting the past to revise and re-conceive our sense of both the past and present.

Try Again. Fail again. Fail Better – Samuel Beckett [25]

I have chosen to work as a textile artist over 30 years, in an 'other' space/place of practice. I make works informed as much by the histories of drawing, embroidery and Colonial Australia as by contemporary ideas and issues. I work in relative exile from the often fraught domains of both art and craft, rather than, like many contemporary artists, borrowing textile mainly as material for innovative effect. The research involves 'an attention to the process of creativity' as defined by Merleau-Ponty, as an active involvement with material 'making visible/tangible, toward making meaning'.[26] The process is one of speculation or trial and error, asking 'what if' questions. Like Peter Hill,[27] I believe practice as research inquiry does not so much require a disciplined 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 internal structure.' As such the works, unlike a photograph, emerge slowly through the research process and evolve unpredictably reliant on particular material encounters and chance occurrences that arise from process. This methodology refers to Bourdieu's theories of the logic of practice,[28] 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 more 'enquiries' and questions which further drives wider critical research including the philosophies of other artists and theoreticians and often, more historical 'facts' and historians' perspectives, oral histories and folk lore to further inform a return to making of the art-work. Importantly the thinking is visual, material, critical and circular. The imagery 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 respected artists whose works also use visual and material narrative forms as a means of addressing history, conflict and cultures in crisis. William Kentridge, Rozanne Hawksley, Sian Bowen, and Doris Salcedo are key references for my 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 allow visual and material forms to emerge, using additional strategies such as tearing, piercing, burning, staining, bush dyeing, erasure and fusion among other more conventional approaches. These are not simply destructive nor inimical. Each traces process, recording chance and repair and offers opportunities to create a sense of fragility, to discover 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 Hurlstone[29] says, 'the processes of both drawing and stitch may therefore be seen to act as mediators 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".[30]

Reassembling, re-ordering, re-scaling motifs, fragments and visual clues can generate many stories, many emergent meanings about the past and present as a vehicle to explore what William Kentridge describes as a process where 'the very mechanism of vision is a metaphor for the agency we have, whether we like it or not, to make sense of the world.'[31] This approach to practice is close to mine in that, as Kate McCrickard describes,[32] 'Kentridge's oeuvre may be best described as a mass of unbuttoned fragments that are never fully fastened together. He channels his visual world through a conduit of disjunction and incomplete viewing.'[33] McCrickard further notes, Kentridge's observation that the mechanics of puppetry – a lessening of control between hand and eye suggested the value of tearing paper to blunt purpose and direction. 'To disrupt habitual line and open up holes in our vision field, bringing vividness and variety to our perception of things. …tearing breaks and bothers identity. It pushes the viewer to work at recognising form through association and memory, thus evoking a sense of looking askance or indirect vision, flickering between seeing and knowing.'[34]

I borrow a form of montage adapted from Eisenstein's early film approach to editing where a dialectic was created from an initial shot as thesis, and a second frame as antithesis where an audience might create meaning as a synthesis.[35] Meaning is generated by repetition of the disjunctions, as Neill Overton states, until 'the viewer becomes an accomplice to locating these patterns of coincidence.'[36] Fragments and scraps of images and elements may dissolve and re-surface in tandem with material encounters toward dislocated dialectical imagery[37] – a chair, a knot, stained, pierced silhouettes re-appear in no coherent order mimicking the disordered nature of lived experience exploiting chance events lassoed by particular situation. My aim is to harness image and a fragile materiality to suggest ambiguous and contradictory associations to construct and reconstruct uncertain and assumed significances.

By combining and rearranging visual forms and materiality, the few 'facts' and fragments of this story point to the damage wrought post-contact and aim to raise many doubts and unsettling questions that cast certainty aside. The past is not an accusation. It is an opportunity for doubt to perhaps consider other stories through the contradictions inherent in the historical record. Doubt may challenge our habit of false assumptions born of cultural blindness and a need for certainty in stereotype. Doubt in this case is an ally and not a liability for it may reveal not only the damage that an absence of understanding creates but the fact of its enduring presence at the core of non-indigenous perceptions of Aboriginal culture.

I am interested in the powerful metonymic installations by Colombian artist, Doris Salcedo. An unease is sensed through the materiality of familiar forms which conjure absence and presence in implied social relationships. These are absences that cannot be recovered, that anxiously hover on the periphery of vision; on the edge of sense and meaning. Salcedo's use of limited materials – fragile and difficult – silk thread and human hair intricately stitched through the surfaces of wooden tables[38] ; shoes that once belonged to the 'disappeared' of political violence in Colombia,[39] sealed in wall cavities, just visible shrouded by skin-like veils, the edges surgically stitched into place; cement filled wardrobes[40] all evoke a sense of almost unbearable presence as familiar objects carry a suffocating absence of identity. More recent works such as the installation for the Istanbul Biennale (2003) underline a haunting absence by association – 1550 chairs amassed in the space between two buildings is something akin to a mass grave. They transform the space but not the memory. Salcedo said of this 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 intertwined. 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.'[41]

Imaginative works by artists, writers and others based on readings of the fragmentary historical archive raise issues of possible confusion that these works are somehow accurate substitutes for the missing archives; that they WILL factually represent the past. Creative interpretations, like photographs, may be mistaken for facts, as accurate documents of 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 irretrievably. All they might do is point toward a kind of understanding of the ways that non-Indigenous Australians imaginatively smooth over this unknown, underlining the unease we feel in the face of what we do not and cannot know. What is important is how we manage this emptiness, what we imagine to try to mend our dis-comfort usefully toward an acknowledgment of our complicity in this history.

Encountering these works requires a complicity on the part of the viewer as does history itself. As a form of mise-en-abyme, meaning 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 individual perception, cultural memory and bias to perhaps reveal unforseen, even 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 a 'process' of speculation, like unfinished sentences or the asking of silent questions, 'what if?'' Or better still, as Samuel Beckett wrote, 'Try again. Fail again. Fail Better.'[42]

Julie Montgarrett
November 2012

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1 Hetti Perkins, (2011) art+soul,. Melbourne, Miegunya Press. quotation on back cover from her father, Dr. Charles Perkins
2 Amanda Vanstone on ABC 24 – National Television, April 19, 2012 while promoting a new National Anthem she has written, said that, 'Australia is the only country to be created in peace.'
3 Windschuttle, Keith, (2002) The Fabrication of Australian History, Volume 1: Van Diemen's Land 1803-1847, Sydney, Macleay Press.
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Titles

Artist Books

Salt-Ash + Wind: Searching for Ghosts 2012

Museum board; laser printed end papers; archival laser printed tracing paper;polyester tulle; cotton/polyester embroidery thread; waxed linen thread; inks; found buttons and beads. 360mm x 540mm (open) 90mm high (closed) Book pillow – hand quilted bush-dyed silk (place dyed and resist smocked stitching) edged with horse-hair; ticking, screen printed and bleached voile; and discharged black cotton. 630mm x 450mm approx .

Bridget (Edwards) Mountgarrett's Sketchbook 2012

Museum board; vintage ticking mattress cloth; archive standard end papers; assorted papers; archival tracing paper; mixed media; polyester tulle; cotton thread; vintage rayon thread; inks and bush dye stains; screen printed silk organza; lace pins. 360mm x 540mm (open) 90mm high (closed)

Book pillow – found weathered, bush-dyed wool blanket; floral printed muslin calico, stranded cotton, bush-dyed felted NZ wool. Hand and machine stitched filled with broken crockery, related domestic items and rocks in calico flour bag. 630mm x 450mm approx.

Jacob Mountgarrett's Book Sketchbook 2012

Museum board; linen sail cloth cover; archive standard end papers; assorted papers; archival tracing paper; mixed media; polyester tulle; screen printed silk organza and horse hair; cotton thread; vintage rayon thread; inks and bush dye stains; machine embroidered organza; screen printed silk organza and 114 cow pins. Book pillow – found weathered sail cloth, bush-dyed calico, stranded cotton, red and blue wool suiting: wool blanket. Hand and machine -stitched filled with weathered bones and rocks in calico flour bag. 630mm x 450mm approx.

George Briggs' Sketchbook

Museum board; vintage horse-hair cloth; bush-dyed end papers; assorted papers; archival tracing paper; mixed media; polyester tulle; hand-drawn organza; cotton thread; vintage rayon thread; inks and bush dye stains; pearl shell buttons. Book pillow – found weathered sail cloth hand-stitched filled with sand and shells in calico flour bag. 630mm x 450mm approx.

House 2012

Tasmanian Ash gable; PVC pipe uprights; timber base and anchor structures; found, taped and waxed assorted books; screen printed bush-dyed organza; silk and cotton embroidery thread. Bush dyed raw silk fabrics – dyed with plant materials from Risdon Cove, York Town Historic site, Georgetown and Longford, Tasmania. Bush dyed on location at Longford and Beauty Point with local river and sea water. Hand and machine stitched; vintage pearl buttons and screen printed silk organza. Based upon Dr. Mountgarrett's cottage originally located at Doctor's Bend on the Macquarie River now situated at Woolmers' Historic Estate, near Longford, Tasmania. One of two house frames. 4000mm x 3500mm. Each silk panel on frame: 118mm x 2000mm

Basket 1995/2010

Rust and bush- dyed calico; flotsam and jetsam found assorted shells and objects from mainland Bass Strait coast-line. Organza overlay with drawing and hand embroidery. 480mm x 360mm

Horizon 1 2012

Muslin; polymer varnish; resin-bonded pigment and reactive dyes; silk and cotton threads; monofilament and permanent marker. Dimensions variable.

Horizon 2 2012

Muslin; polymer varnish; resin-bonded pigment and reactive dyes; silk and cotton threads; monofilament and permanent marker. Dimensions variable.

Horizon 3 2012

Muslin; polymer varnish; resin-bonded pigment and reactive dyes; silk and cotton threads; monofilament and permanent marker. Dimensions variable.

Collages

Postcolonial eye/I for Bridget 2012

Scanned and laser printed pages from sketchbooks on archive quality papers; assorted materials and Arches rag paper with iron bark bush-dye and reactive dye; organza fabric; threads and mixed media. 600mm x 810mm (variable)

Nought and cross 2012

Scanned and laser printed pages from sketchbooks on archive quality papers; assorted materials and Arches rag paper with iron bark bush-dye and reactive dye; bush-dyed Lokta paper; organza; threads and mixed media. 750mm x 900mm (variable)

Salt Ash + cold cold winds 2012

Scanned and laser printed pages from sketchbooks on archive quality papers; assorted materials and Arches rag paper with iron bark bush-dye and reactive dye; bush-dyed Lokta paper organza fabric; threads and mixed media. 780mm x 891mm (variable)

Sleet in Summer 2012

Scanned and laser printed pages from sketchbooks on archive quality papers; assorted materials and Arches rag paper with iron bark bush-dye and reactive dye; Lokta paper; organza fabric; threads and mixed media. 810mm x 930mm (variable)

Navigating Tensions 2012

Scanned and laser printed pages from sketchbooks on archive quality papers; assorted materials and Arches rag paper with iron bark bush-dye and reactive dye; screen-printed, bush-dyed organza fabric; threads and mixed media; red cotton netting. 810mm x 930mm (variable)

Cross-Fire Witness 2012

Scanned and laser printed pages from sketchbooks on archive quality papers; assorted materials and Arches rag paper with iron bark bush-dye and reactive dye; bush-dyed Lokta paper; bridal tulle; found playing card organza fabric; threads and mixed media. 810mm x 930mm (variable)

House of Cards 2012

Vintage hand-made papers and plant materials, bush dyed Lokta and watercolour papers; bush-dyed playing cards; bridal tulle and polyester fabrics. 4000mm x 1800mm (variable)

Figures 2012

Five hand and machine stitched black bridal tulle and polyester fabric; silk and cotton threads; bush-dyed Lokta papers; mixed media. Life-size- dimensions variable.

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