

# Imagined Portraits: Reviving Figures from Australia's Past



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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December, 2013

## **Abstract**

This thesis contributes to the growing scholarly interest in connections with Australia's past through localised, individual stories. While much of this scholarship has focused on literature and the writings of cultural historians, this thesis concentrates on ways of visually recovering the memory of historical figures in relation to land through examining a unique form of portraiture which I have termed 'imagined'.

The concept of imagined portraiture is distinguished from more conventional modes of portraiture using analyses of traditional portraiture by Richard Brilliant, Omar Calabrese and Catherine Soussloff. Imagined portraits, as I have defined them in my thesis, result from a temporal separation between subject and artist and involve a high degree of projection of the artist's self in portraying the absent subject. In contrast to naturalistic posthumous portraits which suppress the artist's identity as maker of the image to preserve external likeness, imagined portraits reflect the persona of the artist as much as the subject of the portrait.

This thesis is structured around imagined portraits by five Australian artists: Sidney Nolan's paintings of Ned Kelly, John Lendis's paintings of Lady Jane Franklin, Anne Ferran's photographic portrayals of female convicts, Leah King-Smith's photo-compositions of Victorian Aboriginal people, and Julie Dowling's paintings of her ancestors. In all of the artworks under consideration person and place are intimately bound and inseparably recalled. Land is central to the identity of the subjects, but it is also important to each artist's own relationship between self and place.

The artists studied in this thesis bond with historical figures to connect with Australia's past and form, or repair, meaningful attachments to the land. Using an interdisciplinary approach, I draw on the theoretical writings of philosophers Edward Casey and Jeff Malpas, historian Peter Read and feminist scholar on race and gender issues bell hooks to contend that knowledge of the past is critical to constructions of place and identity.

Due to the imaginative nature of the portrayal of the figures and the fusion with land, many of the featured artworks have not previously been considered portraits. Doing so enables a fresh perspective which highlights that an individual who actually existed lies at the core of each image. I argue that this is crucial to the artwork's capacity to arouse empathy with current-day viewers – something that is underscored by theorists of historical fiction, such as Herbert Butterfield, Georg Lukács and Jerome de Groot.

The historical subjects portrayed in this thesis are outsiders, many of whom have a troubled place in mainstream Australian history. Imagined portraits activate remembrance of these figures. They can contribute to the memory of those already mythicised, or recover individuals who were previously marginalised or excluded from Australian history. The imagined portraits featured in this thesis expose historical myths, gaps and silences while providing meaningful ways to connect with the past and negotiate displacement.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by warmly thanking my supervisors, Dr. Llewellyn Negrin, Dr. Brigita Ozolins and Dr. Mitchell Rolls, and my research advisor, Emeritus Professor Jonathan Holmes. Their guidance and feedback has been invaluable. My thanks also goes to Andrew Sayers who met with me in the early stages of my candidature and inspired me to think more openly about portraiture. I would especially like to thank artists John Lendis, Leah King-Smith, Anne Ferran and Julie Dowling for generously discussing their work with me.

This dissertation was funded by a Commonwealth Government Australian Postgraduate Award (APA). The Graduate Research Candidate Conference Fund Scheme provided me with the excellent opportunity to present and publish a paper at the Sixth International Arts in Society Conference in Berlin, Germany. I am also grateful for funds provided through the Graduate Research Support Scheme by the Tasmanian College of Fine Arts which enabled me to attend the 2012 ACUADS conference, meet artists and curators and analyse artworks firsthand. The Centre for Colonialism and Its Aftermath provided thought-provoking and extremely valuable opportunities to present my research at work-in-progress seminars.

At the Tasmanian College of the Arts, my appreciation goes to Coordinators of Graduate Research Paul Zika and Meg Keating, Executive Officer Suan Lee, administration officers Olivia Bowman and Lucia Usmiani, as well as my colleagues in the Art Theory department. At the Graduate Research Office I would like to thank Judith Hoff and Carol Lilley. My gratitude also extends to the librarians and document delivery staff who

provided me with valuable research materials, be it books, old videos, recorded interviews or exhibition catalogues.

When I was unable to analyse works firsthand, several galleries provided me with high resolution images to study and for this I would like to thank Lee Kinsella from the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, Paul Webb from the Canberra Museum and Gallery, and Nick Nicholson from the National Gallery of Australia.

Special thanks to my friends and family who have supported me throughout my candidature. Conversations with my good friend Jessica King, who lent me numerous books on photography, maintained my passion for art research. Lastly, heartfelt thanks to my husband, Chris Jackett, who lovingly read drafts of my thesis and visited many galleries with me.

## **Declaration of Originality**

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution, except by way of background information and duly acknowledged in the thesis, and to the best of my knowledge and belief, no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text of the thesis.

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*... our personal relationships to history and place form us ...*

– Lucy Lippard (1997, p.9)



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## Introduction

*If I wrote a story about Creek Bay Farm would my words bind me to it forever?*

— Rebe Taylor (2002, p. 19)

Revisiting a childhood holiday spot at Antechamber Bay on Kangaroo Island, historian Rebe Taylor delved into the history of the place and found the land to be layered with memory – this, Taylor explained, “was the antiquitous stuff that gave us a sense of belonging” (2002a, p. 19). Feeling grounded to the place through knowing its history, Taylor mused whether tracing the lives of the previous inhabitants and weaving this knowledge into a story would cement her connection to the land. Central to this thesis is Taylor’s assertion that “land, not blood, secretes memory” (2002a, p. 16). Land is promoted in this thesis as the channel to connect with persons of the past and, in the process, learn about oneself as “... the experience of places and things from the past is very often an occasion for intense self-reflection” (Malpas 1999, p. 182).<sup>1</sup>

Memories in the land continually resurface and demand interpretation; they are, in Peter Read’s words, “*ghosts that won’t lie down*” (1996, p. 200). Recovering these ghosts facilitates an important engagement with the past. As historian Cassandra Pybus eloquently expressed in her book *Community of Thieves* (1991, pp. 15-6):

It seems to me that the stories contained in this landscape I love so immoderately are critical to my self-definition; to my pride in being Australian ... We are shaped by this past ... and we need to know about it.

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<sup>1</sup> Malpas draws on Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913–1927) and Sally Morgan’s autobiography *My Place* (1987) to illustrate this point.

In the past two decades there have been some excellent studies into local histories by cultural historians.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on their own personal experiences, these historians connect with the past through particular places. Many historical novelists have similarly extracted stories from the land, their works blending historical fact and imagination. Less attention seems to have been paid to artists who are achieving a similar recovery in their work.

This thesis stems from a desire to learn about Australia's past through visual accounts of individual stories embedded in the land. The five artists featured in this thesis – Sidney Nolan, John Lendis, Anne Ferran, Leah King-Smith and Julie Dowling – visually revive historical figures while unearthing stories of the past in response to specific places. I identify their artistic revivals of historical figures as a form of portraiture, which I term 'imagined portraiture'.<sup>3</sup> Imagined portraits expressively portray absent subjects whom the artist has never met. They are a personal interpretation of an individual expressed according to the idiosyncratic style of the artist. In contrast to posthumous naturalistic portraits, which tend to replicate previous accounts of the subject, imagined portraits use photographs and other recordings as starting points for their own artistic exploration of the subject. The imagined portraits I have selected to analyse in this thesis have all emotionally moved me and inspired me to learn more of the historical subjects they depict.

I argue the imagined portraits in this thesis spark remembrance of their subjects. It is the act of remembering that keeps each subject alive. Remembrance is a keystone of portraiture, a genre associated with

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Rebe Taylor's *Unearthed* (2002b), Mark McKenna's *Looking for Blackfella's Point* (2002), Ross Gibson's *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (2002) and Peter Read's *Haunted Earth* (2003).

<sup>3</sup> The concept of which is described in Chapter One.

memorialising individuals. As Peter Conrad expresses, “art is experience preserved, time saved from itself ... for even the obscurest of individuals is not irrevocably dead so long as he or she is remembered” (2006, p. 16). For the artists in this thesis, remembering is an emotional process. They all, to borrow Eduardo Hughes Galeano’s phrase of remembering, pass their subjects “back through the heart” (Galeano cited in Haebich 2000). Their imagined portraits are characterised by a close emotional bond with their subject. As much as they are about the historical figure, they are also about the artist using the figure to connect with the past.

The past can be alluring. It is exotic and remote; a foreign country<sup>4</sup> with different values and norms. However, as enticing as it may be, the past is an unreachable destination that can only be reconstructed imaginatively through various vestiges (Lowenthal 1985, p. 4). Therefore, in the words of British philosopher Herbert Butterfield, “we must reinforce history by imagination” (1924, p. 18). Knowledge of the past can strengthen one’s sense of place. In the exhibition *Expanse: Aboriginalities, Spatialities and the Politics of Ecstasy*, curator Ian North promoted that searching for a sense of heritage is collectively felt in Australia:

Rediscovering roots and cultures is a common goal for non-indigenous and indigenous Australians alike: for the former, to lend themselves a sense of continuity with past generations, for the latter, to meet more urgent political needs as well (1998, p. 11).

Struggling to make meaningful connections with the past can lead to displacement. Even physically being in place, one can feel displaced. As philosopher Edward Casey explains, “We can feel out of place even *in* the home, where *Unheimlichkeit*, the uncanny anxiety of not feeling ‘at home’,

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<sup>4</sup> As described by L. P. Heartley (2002 [1953]), Herbert Butterfield (1924, p. 8), David Lowenthal (1985) and Cassandra Pybus (1991, p. 7).

may afflict us” (1993, p. x). Disrupted connections with the past can complicate one’s ability to form a strong and stable sense of place. Not having a sense of continuity with the past can lead one to question their right to belong. Settler Australians can experience guilt over dispossession or feel as if they are lacking longstanding, rich connections with the land and Australia’s past. Immigrants can feel unsure of how to relate to the history of the new land. For many Aboriginal Australians, colonialism ruptured connections to the land including cultural traditions and spiritual ties. Consequently, a mix of belonging and non-belonging characterises much Australian art (Alexander, Sharp & Carr 2009).

Sidney Nolan, John Lendis and Anne Ferran have to discover and develop their own meaningful connections to the land as they did not inherit any spiritual connections. Ferran does so through uncovering aspects of Australia’s past which have been suppressed. For Nolan and Lendis this task involves physical distance from the place of the desired connection. Both artists hold romanticised versions of the land they wish to identify with: the Australian bush for Nolan and the ‘lost’ English forests for Lendis. The physical distance from the location and temporal distance from the subject helps facilitate their desired connection as it allows space for them to aesthetically blend imagination, memories and stories.

Displacement can also stem from cultural denigration, whereby indigenous personality and culture is oppressed by an allegedly superior racial or cultural model (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2002, p. 9). Leah King-Smith and Julie Dowling experience this form of displacement due to dispossession. They use art to alleviate the effects of dispossession and mend broken connections to the land. Displacement is not a doomed, terminal condition. It

can have positive outcomes. For instance, Aboriginal historian Jackie Huggins explains: “My love of history stems from my displacement as an Aboriginal person” (1998, p. 120). I argue that the creation of imagined portraits enables the artists analysed in this thesis to resolve feelings of displacement which have arisen due to settler heritage, migration and cultural denigration.

My research has drawn on several different fields of theoretical endeavours into place, portraiture, postmodernism, postcolonial discourse, Australian art history, photography theory and oral history. As a young Australian researcher of convict and free settler descent, I engaged in this research to broaden my understanding of art and Australian history, posing the research questions: how can analysing these artworks as imagined portraits contribute to new modes of interpretation? How can the personal, expressive nature of imagined portraits enliven the memory of historical figures? How can creating imagined portraits of emplaced historical figures help the artists resolve feelings of displacement? How can the interplay between the past and the present be explored in imagined portraiture?

I was drawn to explore the dynamics of place, portraiture and the past in Australia through three recent exhibitions: the ANU Drill Hall Gallery exhibition *Recovering Lives* (2008),<sup>5</sup> the National Portrait Gallery exhibition *Open Air: Portraits in the Landscape* (2008),<sup>6</sup> and the touring exhibition *Face:*

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<sup>5</sup> *Recovering Lives* included work by Dadang Christanto, Julie Dowling, Jeanne Eaton and Janet Laurence and was curated by Nancy Sever and Dr Caroline Turner. The catalogue included essays by the curators, Mary Eagle, Anna Edmundson, Howard Morphy and Anthony Oates. The associated international conference (6-8 August 2008) featured interdisciplinary papers from a range of scholars about human rights, memorialisation, history, archives, testimony, art, literature, song and film.

<sup>6</sup> *Open Air* was curated by Andrew Sayers, Wally Caruana and Michael Desmond. The associated lectures of *Open Air* included ‘Belonging to the Land’ by Wally Caruana, ‘Faces and Places’ by Andrew Sayers and ‘Imagining Living Here’ by Sarah Engledow.

*Australian Portraits 1880 to 1960* (2010). This thesis aims to build on some of the issues raised in these exhibitions.

*Recovering Lives* alerted me to the potential of art to resurrect forgotten and dishonoured lives. In the forward to the exhibition catalogue of *Recovering Lives*, Howard Murphy defined recovering as “connecting individual lives to historical processes and trying to make sense of them in the present” (in Sever & Turner 2008). It is this process of recovery that lies at the heart of the artworks I analyse in this thesis. Intriguingly, although they dealt with expressing human lives, most of the artworks in *Recovering Lives* were not considered portraits.<sup>7</sup>

The next exhibition I viewed, *Open Air*, led me to explore what constitutes portraiture. With its mix of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australian art, *Open Air* presented a broad understanding of portraits as artworks which evoke human presence and/or express identity. Three artworks in *Open Air* highlight this understanding of portraiture: simple white streaks of paint on a fawn backdrop subtly evoke human presence in the land in a painting titled *Wind* (1970) by Tim Tuckson; intricately patterned wooden *pukumani* poles by three Tiwi artists express the identity of the deceased person to which they refer;<sup>8</sup> a colossally wide dot painting titled *Trial by Fire* (1975) by Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri conveys the artist’s relationship with the land and is thus positioned as a self-portrait. *Open Air* kindled my interest in portraiture, land and identity in Australia. Reviewer Jenny McFarlane’s question – “What possibilities does a more open conception of portraiture raise in a country for whose people place has always been the distinguishing cipher

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<sup>7</sup> The exception being Julie Dowling’s paintings.

<sup>8</sup> Mickey Geranium Warlapinni, Enraeld Munkara Djulabinyanna and Bob One Apuatimi.



of identity?” (2009) – became particularly pertinent to my research. Although I found the broad conception of portraiture illuminating, *Open Air* was arguably too diverse in its selection of works and its presentation of portraiture. It became evident that setting some parameters for my thesis would enable a richer, more coherent discussion.

The third exhibition, *Face: Australian Portraits 1880 to 1960*, introduced me to imaginary portraiture. At first I thought this concept could be applied to the type of portraiture I was interested in, yet as I researched ‘imaginary portraits’, I found that instead of capturing a specific genre of portraiture, the label was riddled with inconsistencies as different artists have termed their work ‘imaginary portraits’ for different reasons. Therefore I set about refining a concept to allow me to group and contrast a selection of artworks, that concept being ‘imagined portraiture’. Examining the artworks in this thesis as imagined portraits highlights the extant individual behind the portrait and functions as a binding mechanism which enables points of similarity and difference in style to be analysed. As imagined portraits, the cultural significance of these works in the broader context of Australian history can be considered.

Portraiture has a long and interesting history in Australian art yet, in contrast with landscape painting, very little has been written about Australian portrait practice.<sup>9</sup> Beyond the Australian scene, there have been some comprehensive analyses of portraiture including Richard Brilliant’s *Portraiture*

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<sup>9</sup> Eve Buscombe’s *Artists in Early Australia and Their Portraits* (1979) was one of the first texts to specifically focus on Australian portraiture. Since then, there have been a handful of useful catalogue essays exploring the complexities of portrait representations produced in conjunction with portrait exhibitions, such as: *Faces of Australia: Image, Reality and the Portrait* (1992); *The Possibilities of Portraiture* (1999); *Uncommon Australians: Towards an Australian Portrait Gallery*, Sydney (1992) and, more recently, *Face: Australian Portraits 1880-1960* (2010).

(1991), Joanna Woodall's edited volume *Portraiture: Facing the Subject* (1997), Shearer West's *Portraiture* (2004) and Catherine Soussloff's *The Subject in Art: Portraiture and the Birth of the Modern* (2006). These texts have assisted my understanding of the definition and function of portraiture. Although the portraits I am analysing are not strictly self-portraits, they are self-referential. In this sense, Omar Calabrese's detailed text *Artist's Self-portraits* (2006) has been helpful. As the imagined portraits in this thesis are argued to incite emotional responses in viewers, I have also drawn on theories on empathy by historian Dominick LaCapra (2001), and literary theorists Herbert Butterfield (1924), Georg Lukács (1962) and Jerome de Groot (2009).

This thesis focuses on painting and photography – the two dominant mediums of portraiture. Thus the two mediums will be analysed and compared through the strategies they enable. Painting has a long historical connection with portraiture before the invention of photography and arguably still has a strong hold on the genre. Texts such as *Painting People: The State of the Art* (2006) by Charlotte Mullins provide a persuasive account of painting's persistence. Theories on photography by Roland Barthes (1997), Susan Sontag (1977), and John Berger (1969, 1972, 1984) are central to my discussion of photography in Chapter Four and Chapter Five. In terms of photographic racial representation to contextualise my analysis of Leah King-Smith's work in Chapter Five, informative texts include Anne Maxwell's *Colonial Photography and Exhibitions* (1999), Elizabeth Edward's *Raw Histories* (2001), and Jane Lydon's *Eye Contact* (2005).

To examine representations of the land and explore the concept of place, the writings of philosophers Edward Casey (1993, 2002) and Jeff Malpas (1999; 2011) have been important. Casey and Malpas strongly

advocate that human identity is tied to place. In this thesis I take Casey's assertion that landscapes are placescapes (1993, p. 275) and analyse the way the artists convey the "emplacement" of the historical figure. I preference the word 'land' rather than 'landscape' when discussing the artworks in this thesis as 'landscape' is a term laden with European ideological connotations. Hence, there has been a widespread "move away from the notion of 'landscape' to 'art about land'" in Australia (Wilson 2000, p. 10). Landscape suggests the artistic presentation of scenery from a distanced viewing position, whereas the artworks in this thesis are about engaging with emplaced figures.

Specific focus on the relationship between land and identity in Australia is discussed by Heather Goodall's *Invasion to Embassy* (1996), Tom Griffiths's *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia* (1996), the edited collection *Lying About the Landscape* (Levitus 1997), Mary Elizabeth Eagle and Tom Middlemost's *Landscape* (1998), Deborah Bird Rose's *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (2010). Although it focuses on Australian literature, Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra's *The Dark Side of the Dream* (1991) has also been insightful in this regard.<sup>10</sup> In terms of belonging and land ownership, Peter Read's *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* and bell hooks's<sup>11</sup> *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (2008) have been key texts.

Given the extensive oeuvre of each artist, it was necessary to be selective about the artworks which would be discussed. I have chosen to focus on four to six imagined portraits per chapter. The artworks are examined aesthetically and contextually. Thus, intimate inspection of the artworks has

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<sup>10</sup> For a critique of *The Dark Side of the Dream* see Huggan (2007, pp. 30-1).

<sup>11</sup> hooks was born Gloria Jean Watkins. Her pen name is deliberately written in lower case in respectful memory of her maternal great-grandmother Bell Blair Hooks.

been essential to aptly describe and analyse their formal properties. I have also drawn on artist statements and interviews which indicate the intention of the artist. I treat each chapter as a case study into belonging in Australia. This enables each personal case to be analysed in depth. I pay particular attention to the artist's connection with the subject. The central argument of this thesis is that the expressive nature of imagined portraiture enlivens the memory of historical figures, whilst also allowing the artist to work through feelings of displacement.

This thesis spans seven decades of Australian art, though it is not strictly chronological. It begins in the 1940s with Sidney Nolan's imagined portraits of Ned Kelly because I see Nolan's work as a catalyst for the creation of imagined portraits of historical figures in Australia. Since Nolan began painting, views regarding Australian historiography have changed significantly as the orthodox practices of the discipline of history have been contested and reassessed. Challenges to this model which are of import to this thesis include postmodernism, postcolonialism, feminism and oral history. These new 'ways of seeing' with their attendant discourses brought the lives of Aboriginal people, women, and everyday people to the fore. It is now commonly understood that history constitutes patterns of remembering and forgetting, gaps and silences. As a corollary, the subjects chosen by the remaining artists reflect a more nuanced understanding of Australia's past.

Chapter One – 'Imagined Portraiture, Land and Identity' – establishes the theoretical framework which underpins the following chapters. It introduces the properties of imagined portraiture, defining it in relation to more traditional notions of portraiture. As the imagined portraits in this thesis depict historical

subjects, I then consider the way the past is understood and represented in the present. I compare the differences and similarities between historical novels and imagined portraits and propose that empathy is vital to creating affective portrayals of historical subjects. The third and final section of Chapter One examines constructions of land, place and identity. In charting these concepts and artistic developments, this chapter grounds the core elements which link the artworks in this thesis. The subsequent five chapters each focus on one artist. These chapters are grouped into two parts which reflect two forms of displacement.

Part I ‘Land to Figure’ focuses on imagined portraits by three artists – Sidney Nolan, John Lendis and Anne Ferran – who have connected with historical figures through a particular place. These artists are searching for a sense of continuity with the past because they bear what Ian McLean calls the scar of antipodality, “of having an identity founded in negativity rather than positivity, in migration rather than indignity” (McLean 1998, p. 7). To ease this sense of dislocation, they connect with places through historical figures. Learning of their chosen subject enables them to feel connected to the land. This is their route to belong, to develop a relationship between self and place.

In Chapter Two – ‘A Story of the Bush: Sidney Nolan’s Ned Kelly Paintings’ – I explore Sidney Nolan’s imagined portraits of Ned Kelly, concentrating on those which portray Kelly alone in the land. Nolan believed white Australians were missing a long sense of connection to the land comparable with Aboriginal dreaming. I consider how Nolan used Kelly to develop his own meaningful relationship with the land. He was fascinated by the mythologisation of Kelly but also identified with him on a more personal

level – it is this personal connection that is emphasised in this chapter. I argue that Nolan’s imagined portraits began by being about the legend, but became more personal later in life as Nolan used Kelly to negotiate his own sense of dislocation, both at home in Australia and as he travelled overseas. While analysing Nolan’s imagined portraits of Kelly, I consider the dominance of the bush in Australian culture and masculine Australian stereotypes.

Women did not easily fit the colonial imagination and their achievements were often overshadowed by men. In Chapter Three – ‘Wilderness as a Site of Dreams: John Lendis’ Oeneiric Visions of Lady Jane Franklin’ – I analyse John Lendis’s imagined portraits of Lady Jane Franklin, a woman whose adventurous spirit was largely suppressed as it did not match feminine Victorian ideals. Lendis creates dreamlike images of Lady Jane combining European myths (what Lendis refers to as an “Anglo-Saxon dreaming”) and colonial paintings which reflect the cultural conditioning that tints his perception of the natural land. In Lendis’s imagination, Lady Jane is not a grieving widow, but a bold, adventurous woman. I consider the ways in which Lendis used Lady Jane to think through the projection of his English vision on the Tasmanian land. In a similar manner to Nolan, Lendis uses Lady Jane as a constant to explore and represent his experiences travelling between Tasmania and England. Using Lendis’s imagined portraits of Lady Jane, I explore the gendered nature of relationships to the land in colonial times, Victorian ideals of femininity and the concept of wilderness.

At the same time Lady Jane was adventuring across Tasmania, female convicts were incarcerated and kept out of sight and out of mind. While there are remnants of Lady Jane’s time in Tasmania, there is little evidence that female convicts were ever present in the land. In Chapter Four – ‘Writing Lost

Lives in Light: Anne Ferran's Anonymous Imagined Portraits of Female Convicts at Ross and South Hobart' – I analyse Anne Ferran's imagined portraits of anonymous female convicts. Ferran's photographic works were made in response to specific sites at Ross and South Hobart that once housed Female Factories. Through Ferran's imagined portraits, I explore portrayals of female convicts in Australian historiography and representations of sites of vanished histories and forgotten lives. Ferran's sense of dislocation stems from feeling denied a full, rich connection with an historical homeland because of the masculine bias of traditional Australian history. Her work is markedly different from that of the other artists examined in this thesis in that her imagined portraits do not figuratively depict the people she evokes.

Part II 'Returning Figure to Land' focuses on imagined portraits by two Aboriginal artists – Leah King-Smith and Julie Dowling – who reconnect historical figures and land to revive kinship ties to country. Both artists experience displacement due to cultural denigration. They create imagined portraits of historical figures to recover their relationship between self and place. Their connection with historical figures is political as well as personal. Visually reconnecting historical figures and land mends some of the wounds of dispossession and assimilation.

In Chapter Five – 'Layered with Land: Leah King-Smith's Photo-compositions of Victorian Aboriginal People' – I examine Leah King Smith's approach to creating layered photographic imagined portraits of Victorian Aboriginal historical figures. I analyse her celebrated series 'Patterns of Connection' (1991) to explore how her aesthetic intervention changes the viewing gaze and triggers an emotional response in viewers. King-Smith

rejects the English language and repositions the archival photographs from an Aboriginal perspective. In King-Smith's large, colourful imagined portraits, her subjects live on in the photographs.

Visually reuniting figure and land enables Aboriginal artists to solidify ancestral bonds with country. In Chapter Six – 'Feet on the Ground: Julie Dowling's Imagined Portraits of Matriarchs' – I analyse the feminine sensibility of Julie Dowling's imagined portraits.<sup>12</sup> Dowling's paintings are largely inspired by oral history and reflect a diverse range of artistic influences. As she employs western aesthetics, such as romanticism, for decolonisation, she too reclaims Aboriginal history.

The imagined portraits examined in this thesis bind the artists to particular places. I argue they enable the artists to resolve feelings of displacement. With their recovery of a diverse range of historical figures, they also form a captivating and complex picture of Australia's past whilst revealing various ways of belonging in Australia.

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<sup>12</sup> Part of this chapter was published as 'Individualising Indigenous History: Julie Dowling's Imagined Portraits', in *ACUADS 2012*, viewed 16 May 2013, <<http://acuads.com.au/conference/2012-conference>>.



# Chapter One

## Imagined Portraiture, Land and Identity

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*Making portraits is a response to the natural human tendency to think about oneself, of oneself in relation to others, and of others in apparent relation to oneself and to others.*

—Richard Brilliant (1991, p. 14)

Portraits have had a long history of serving as visual reminders of people. As social beings we are drawn to look at other people and form some kind of connection, while layers of experience within us dictate the direction of our curiosity and engagement. Portraits, in my view, are more than illustrations of faces; they are about visually engaging with people. As Richard Brilliant proposes, the “oscillation between art object and human subject” (1991, p. 7) is what makes portraits so appealing. It is unique to portraiture, a genre intimately connected with human experience. Portraits provide connections with their subjects, no matter how remote in time they may be (Brilliant 1991, p. 82). At the heart of portrait viewing there is a desire to form some kind of relationship with the subject. I argue this is true for all forms of portraiture, including imagined portraits as I will illustrate throughout this thesis.

This chapter introduces the theoretical and contextual framework which underscores the following chapters. It establishes the concept of imagined portraiture and explores different engagements with, and representations of, historical subjects. Comparing portraits to characters in historical fiction, I examine the importance of empathy in connecting the past and present. Another key feature of the imagined portraits I examine is that the subject is located in land and this emplacement is seen as integral to the identity of the subject. The imagined portraits in this thesis are of person and place as the memory of historical figures is bound to the land with which their lives are

associated. Therefore, this chapter also considers how land and identity are connected through examining the notion of place and exploring how displacement can affect Australian artists.

### The Concept of Imagined Portraiture

Portraiture is an extremely complex genre. For the purposes of this investigation, the crucial defining feature of portraits is that they are based on an existing, or once existing, individual(s).<sup>13</sup> This contrasts with ‘type’ representations of figures, such as in Russell Drysdale’s well-known painting *The Drover’s Wife* (1945). Many portrait theorists have identified dualities in portraiture, such as whether a portrait adheres to: likeness or type (Brilliant 1991; West 2004); an external likeness or internal character insight (Soussloff 2006; West 2004) or provides an insight into the subject or an insight into the artist (Steiner 1987). In the quest to discover the unique properties of imagined portraits, the most relevant duality relates to whether portraits are created as naturalistic works for reportage or as expressive works of art that involve a high projection of the artist. All portraits simultaneously involve both aspects, but tend to privilege either the documentary or the expressive dimension. There are varying degrees to which the artist can project him or herself into a portrait of someone else. I argue that imagined portraits are characterised by a high projection of the artist into the subject portrayed. Imagined portraits do not strive for verisimilitude but involve a high degree of subjective interpretation on the part of the artist to the point where they almost become a form of self-portraiture. In this respect, they differ from naturalistic portraits which are

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<sup>13</sup> This is also prioritised in Richard Brilliant’s comprehensive book on portraiture (1991).

often made for dynastic, overtly national or institutional purposes (West 2004, p. 45).

Naturalistic portraits are characterised by an “expectation of truth” relating to external appearance (Soussloff 2006, p. 6). The key concern of naturalistic portraits, which are often made to serve a documentary role, is to achieve an accurate likeness of the subject. Likeness refers to how the portrait visually equates with the depicted subject – it is most often seen to be external in the form of physical resemblance but it may also be internal by seemingly matching the character of the subject. For documentary purposes, a good portrait is seen to be able to address both external and internal likeness but is primarily concerned with external likeness. The most important aspect of likeness is that it is specific to an individual.<sup>14</sup> While most commonly painted from life, naturalistic portraits can also be made posthumously. Many portraits of William Shakespeare and Captain James Cook exemplify this notion.

The quest to determine Shakespeare’s likeness, to be able to envision the famous author, has intrigued scholars and lovers of his writing for centuries. In her book *Shakespeare's Face: Unravelling the Legend and History of Shakespeare's Mysterious Portrait* (2002), Stephanie Nolen notes that all written descriptions of Shakespeare’s appearance were made after his death and that the two portraits that scholars often agree to most accurately depict Shakespeare were also created posthumously. Two exhibitions on Shakespeare’s image have been held at London’s National Portrait Gallery, both of which highlighted the complexity of being able to determine an

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<sup>14</sup> The introduction to *Portraiture: Facing the Subject* by editor Joanna Woodall provides a succinct summary of the historical developments which led to individualistic portraiture (see Woodall 1997, pp. 1-18).

accurate likeness.<sup>15</sup> Most portraits of Shakespeare have been lifelike, serious portrayals that concentrate on presenting a ‘truthful’ appearance of the face.

Most portraits of Captain James Cook made in the nineteenth century also strived for naturalism. Very few portraits of Cook were drawn from life. Instead, like many of the portraits of Shakespeare, they were fashioned on previous engravings or painted portraits or based on written accounts of appearance. Versions of the popular, mass-produced, Wedgwood & Bentley portrait medallions, for instance, were many steps away from the original portrait that inspired them (Figure 1). They were made from a Wedgwood design based on John Flanxman’s wax cast which was based on James Basire’s engraved copy (1777) of William Hodges’s c.1775 painted portrait (National Museum of Australia). Other portraits have been similarly based on previous portraits. They have intended to stay true to these depictions, hence the similarity in the facial angle,<sup>16</sup> and were made to provide a reliable record of external appearance with minimal subjective interference from the artist. In contrast to these naturalistic portraits, imagined portraits make no attempt to provide an accurate likeness of the subject.



Figure 1: Portraits of Captain Cook (from right to left): A mass-produced Wedgwood & Bentley portrait medallion, Wedgwood design, John Flanxman’s wax cast, James Basire’s engraving (1777), William Hodges’s portrait (c.1775)

<sup>15</sup> *O Sweet Mr. Shakespeare(!) I'll have his Picture, the Changing Image of Shakespeare's Person, 1600-1800* (Piper 1964) and *Searching for Shakespeare* (Cooper 2006).

<sup>16</sup> This has sometimes been depicted in reverse due to copying and printmaking processes.

Portraits of Cook by contemporary Australian artist Ben Quilty illustrate how previous illustrations can be used as source material for more expressive portraits of Cook. There is a thick, sculptural quality to Quilty's Rorschach paintings.<sup>17</sup> In this style that Quilty has become well known for, Cook is evoked in thick smears of paint that only appear to form a face upon a distanced viewing (for example, Figure 2). Quilty describes that he often feels as if he inhabits the characters whose portraits he is creating (Art Gallery of South Australia 2011). His works are physical and expressive with their energetic, gestural styling, revealing as much about himself as his subject. As art critic John Berger proposed, "The more imaginative the work, the more profoundly it allows us to share the artist's experience of the visible" (Berger 1972b, p. 10).



Figure 2: Ben Quilty, *Cook Rorschach*, 2008

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<sup>17</sup> The term 'Rorshach' refers to the Rorshach test in which ink splotches are pressed together and unfolded to create a symmetrical, butterfly-like image. In Rorshach testing, these images are used for psychological studies as subjects are asked to describe what they see in the ambiguous splotches. In art, the term is used to describe the folding process of creation.

Quilty's portraits embrace the subjective dimension of portraiture. From this viewpoint which privileges the artist's interpretation of the subject, the artist's hand may be used to take the image beyond the boundaries of external likeness. With particular artistic energy and interpretation, portraits can reflect the artist's connection with, or perception of, the subject or perhaps the artist's mood when creating the image. For Henri Matisse, the "essential expression" of a portrait "depends almost entirely on the projection of the feelings of the artist in relation to this model" (Matisse & Flam 1995, p. 221). With the artist's feelings melded into the representation of the subject, the portrait could thus be read to reflect the artist. This has been observed in many forms of creative art. In Oscar Wilde's witty novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the artist is hesitant to exhibit the portrait he created of Dorian Gray, fearful that it reveals the secret of his own soul:

Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself (Wilde 1891 [2010], p. 9).

Styled by often intense personal feelings, expressive portraits provide insights into the artist.

A crucial defining aspect of imagined portraiture is the distance between the artist and subject. Imagined portraits portray absent subjects whom the artist has never met. This goes against traditional views of portraiture as being based on the real-life interaction of the portrait sitting, an idea which stems back to the old adage of the 'portrait painter as revealer of souls'. Portraits that are made from sittings involve a negotiation between the desires of the sitter and those of the artist. This varies in intensity depending on a number of factors, such as whether or not the portrait has been commissioned. If this is the case, the sitter usually has some kind of idea of what they want

from their portrait and may inject their own ideas into the creative process. Art historian Max Friedländer describes that portraitists are:

in a subservient position to the patron – who, even if he does not consider himself knowledgeable in matters of art, still thinks he himself knows better than the artist and therefore feels entitled to pronounce judgement on the portraitist's performance (1963, p. 232).

The sitter may also have agency in photographic portraits. If commissioned or requested, photographic subjects may have some say in the composition, facial expression and pose. Their gaze can also challenge the artist's intentions.<sup>18</sup>

In the case of imagined portraits, the tension between the desired outcomes of sitter and artist is removed as there is no sitter present to opine his or her thoughts. There is also no commissioning pressure to produce a certain style of portrait. The referential element is not the sitter as present in the artist's company, but rather a remote element, such as a photograph or description of the subject, chosen by the artist. Photography is the most obvious source material to facilitate visual reconstructions of absent subjects. The introduction of photography eliminated the necessity of portrait sittings. Instead, an artist could work from a photograph. As they may be the only visible trace left of a person's appearance, photographs are occasionally used in the creation of imagined portraits. However, unlike naturalistic posthumous portraits which almost identically replicate photographs or previous portraits, imagined portraits use photographs and other recordings as starting points for the artist's own artistic interpretation of the subject. The connection between subject and artist is purely personal. Imagined portraits blend different sources with

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<sup>18</sup> For example, see 'Reframing the Colonial Gaze: Photography, Ownership, and Feminist Resistance' (Eileraas 2003).

memory and imagination; the interpretation of the subject comes directly from the artist.

While connecting with historical figures, the artists chosen for analysis in this thesis contemplate their own identity, affirming the claim that “Knowledge of others is also knowledge of oneself” (Brilliant 1991, p. 141). Using the portrait of someone else to explore one’s own identity has a long ancestry in art. Its predecessor is the crypto-portrait where the artist secretly includes him or herself in the scene of a history painting (Calabrese 2006, p. 85). From the late Renaissance onwards, particularly in Baroque times, artists frequently revealed their identity through otherness as it became fashionable to create a proxy self-portrait using an historical figure (Calabrese 2006, pp. 95-115).<sup>19</sup> In this thesis, portraying an historical figure enables the artists to explore their own connection to the past and their own sense of place. Their use of historical subjects to mediate their own emotions is mostly subconscious. Since they do not *intentionally* indicate the artist’s identity, they cannot easily be deemed self-portraits.<sup>20</sup> Hence, I argue imagined portraits are a vicarious form of self-portraiture.

All the artists in this thesis are concerned with finding a unique visual language to portray their subject(s) and the land attached to the memory of the subject(s). Sidney Nolan and John Lendis use the aqueous properties of paint to physically work through their emotions. Anne Ferran and Leah King-Smith test the boundaries of photographic representation, while Julie Dowling melds her own hybrid language through paint and glitter, and a range of different

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<sup>19</sup> For more on this see Chapter Three ‘Je est un auture’: The Self-Portrait as an Historic Figure’ in Omar Calabrese’s *Artists’ Self-Portraits* (2006, pp. 85-122).

<sup>20</sup> Calabrese defines self-portraits as artworks which intentionally evoke the artist’s own identity (2006, p. 30).



influences. The innovative use of materials is intriguing and revealing. Often the medium is used to speak of the artist's response to the subject or the historical treatment of the subject. The concern is not with the appearance of the subject, but who they were and how they should be remembered. In contrast to naturalistic posthumous portraits, it is not the appearance of the historical figure the artists are interested in recovering.

In proposing a distinct genre which I have termed 'imagined portraiture', it is important to distinguish my use of the term from that of 'imaginary portraits' which has been used in several different ways. In *Face: Australian Portraits 1880-1960*, curator Anne Gray (2010, p. 28) identifies some portraits as 'imaginary' because they blend truth and fiction. As noted by Gray, Walter Pater is commonly attributed to coining the term 'imaginary portraits' in the late nineteenth century. For Pater, it referred to a literary experiment "to create an autobiographically-based tale in which action is interiorised and dialogue nonexistent" (Bizzotto 2007). Some of Pater's characters were purely fictional; others were based on historical figures. The portraits which are the subject of my thesis are based on historical figures.

Many visual artists have employed the term 'imaginary portraits' to describe their work. Some have used the term to describe portraits of purely fictional subjects. For example, American artists Jim Nutt<sup>21</sup> and Jonathan Shahn<sup>22</sup> invented faces for aesthetic experimentation. Other artists have used the term 'imaginary portraits' in a more complicated way to describe portraits which blend imagination with the subjective interpretation of historical and living figures. For instance, Willem de Kooning's 'imaginary portraits' of the

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<sup>21</sup>See Warren (2011).

<sup>22</sup> See The Noyes Museum of Art (2008).

mid-1930s to 1940s, which evoke the melancholy of the Great Depression, were often based on self-portraits, a manikin in his studio, and studies of his friends (Lake 2010, p. 8). Later in life during a two-month frenzy of painting, Pablo Picasso also created a series he termed ‘imaginary portraits’ in collaboration with lithographer Marcel Salinas. Picasso’s works on corrugated cardboard may have been partially based on literary figures and their characters (Moyer 2013). In a different manner again, Joan Miró’s ‘imaginary portraits’ were based on previous portraits of historical female figures that were reworked in Miró’s distinctive style (see Soby & Miró 1980, pp. 60-3). As they refer to historical figures, Miró’s ‘imaginary’ portraits most closely align with my conception of imagined portraits.<sup>23</sup>

I propose that the term ‘imaginary’ conjures something purely invented, as with Nutt and Shahn’s portraits, whereas the term ‘imagined’ suggests a source point. As the portraits in this thesis are all inspired by individuals who once lived, the term imagined seems more appropriate. Also with a fresh term comes the opportunity to move away from preconceptions and present a perspicuous understanding. Imagined portraits animate historical figures in bold, idiosyncratic artist styles. When viewing an imagined portrait we are not just looking at a copy of a face, we are looking at the artist’s interpretation of the subject which inexorably involves personal emotions.

### Portraying Historical Figures

The artists included in this thesis have developed strong, emotional bonds with their historical subjects. Consequently, the past is not remote and detached to

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<sup>23</sup> While he did not call them such, several of Francis Bacon’s paintings of historical figures which were expressively reworked from previous portraits could hence also be considered imagined portraits.

the artists; it is very much alive and pertinent to the present. The artists all empathise with their subjects and encourage viewers to do the same. Empathy is an important ingredient in resuscitating historical figures. I argue the empathetic connection between artist and subject filters through to viewers.

European historian Dominick LaCapra insists that those who study the past should be empathetically connected to their historical subject but simultaneously be conscious of the differences between their own position and that of their subject (2001, p. 40). Along similar lines, French historian Pierre Nora proposes that those who study the past now openly confess the intimate relationship they have with their subject (1989, p. 18). This bond then becomes the means to understanding the past (Nora 1989, p. 13). This approach not only deepens our historical understanding of the past, it also exposes our relationship to the past (Attwood 2005, p. 182) – a relationship that plays an important role in comprehending the present. The artists in this thesis openly proclaim their personal, empathetic relationships to their subjects, as many historical novelists do.

I now want to extend some theories on historians and historical fiction to imagined portraiture. The term ‘historical novel’ signals a fusion of historical facts and imaginary accounts. It has been highly successful in designating a literary genre that has been around since the birth of the novel, although its origins are most commonly linked to Sir Walter Scott in the early nineteenth century (de Groot 2009, pp. 11-2). In contrast to historians, “historical novelists take the bare bones of ‘history’, some facts, some atmosphere, some vocabulary, some evidence, and weave a story in between the gaps” (de Groot 2009, pp. 9-10). They translate the past into the present. For two of the most prominent critics of the historical novel, Herbert

Butterfield and Georg Lukács, it is important that the fictional reconstructions of historical novels are based in history, that they evoke individuals who once lived (Butterfield 1924, p. 23; Lukács 1962, p. 63). This is also a vital component of imagined portraits. Paramount to historical fiction and imagined portraiture is what one of the earliest critics of the historical novel, Alessandro Manzoni, referred to as “mixing history and invention” (Manzoni 1984, p. 61).<sup>24</sup> Historical fiction can facilitate an engagement with the past (Shakespeare 2006, p. 34).<sup>25</sup> I argue that imagined portraits can bridge viewers to the past in a similar way.

The elusive nature of the past makes it open to a multitude of interpretations. As writer Nicholas Shakespeare proposed, “History needs to forget as much as fiction needs to remember and in that intersection there should be ample space to build an open house – a monument, if you like – of competing narratives” (Shakespeare 2006, p. 40). Different interpretations can resonate with different audiences. Historical novels are but one “‘form’ of history” (Butterfield 1924, p. 3); imagined portraits are another. Historian Penny Russell adeptly summed up the contrast between the historian’s and the artist’s perspective when she opened one of John Lendis’s exhibitions on Lady Jane Franklin.<sup>26</sup> Russell declared:

My Jane Franklin does not tell us just what satisfaction to the soul she found in moving through this alien and mystifying land. Her words, always, were bent to more practical purposes. John Lendis’s Jane can be less constrained. His paintings remind me that although the demands of being a lady and a governor’s wife pressed closely around her, something in the landscape outside her windows called on her restless spirit ... Lendis’s paintings offer us

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<sup>24</sup> Manzoni wrote his essay in the late 1820s. It was then published in 1850 (de Groot 2009, p. 30). The version I refer to is the one translated by Sandra Bermann in 1984.

<sup>25</sup> Such an engagement can be hotly contested, as with Kate Grenville’s novel *The Secret River* (see Nolan & Clarke 2011).

<sup>26</sup> Some of the imagined portraits in this exhibition are analysed in Chapter Three.

a vision of some of those moments – those that lie furthest beyond the reach of the historian’s imagination (2005a).

Artists and novelists can extract from the subject’s life what is relevant to their own and draw on emotions that transcend a particular moment in time.

One of the leading critics of the historical novel, Georg Lukács proposes that historical novels induce empathy through their “poetic reawakening” of historical figures (1962, p. 42). In giving more than just a physical description of historical figures, historical novels and imagined portraits are infused with the emotions of the creator. Since those emotions reflect the empathetic bond the creator has with the subject, a contemporary audience is likely to also view the portrayed subject through a similar empathetic lens. In establishing an emotional connection with its audience, British philosopher Herbert Butterfield argued that historical novels can make history “a kind of extension of our personal experience, and not merely an addition to the sum of our knowledge” (1924, p. 96). Historical novels and imagined portraits are speculative but very much connected to the real world. Being mediated through the present, they make the past easily accessible to contemporary audiences. Using a blend of history and memory, fact and fiction, past and present, historical novels and imagined portraits enable contemporary readers and viewers to connect with the past through an individual, or individuals, who lived in that distant time. The ability to create human connection is central to historical novels (de Groot 2009, p. 26) and imagined portraits.

I propose that imagined portraits are effective conveyors of empathy because of the underlying sociality of portraiture. According to Catherine Soussloff, portraiture is “social connection through visible means” (2006, p. 13). Portrait viewing facilitates a connection between viewer and subject as the

viewer is aware they are looking at an interpretation of another human being. This awareness inspires curiosity, leading the viewer to wonder who is depicted and why. Titles and artist statements are important in guiding the viewer's perception of the depicted subject. With imagined portraits, external likeness is not proposed nor sought by viewers. Imagined portraits are about the artist's connection with the subject. This connection provides a channel to the past which viewers can follow.

All of the imagined portraits in this thesis are underpinned by historical research. Most of the artists included in this thesis have spent over a decade researching and portraying their chosen subject(s). Their research anchors their imagined portraits to historical fact. The tendency towards research is also evident in historical fiction, where an increasing number of novelists are emphasising their historical research (McKenna 2006, p. 100). As such, historical novelists are now frequently seen "as the trustworthy purveyors of the past" (McKenna 2006, p. 98). Yet it is not the historical novels themselves that alone convey the history, a large portion is conveyed through "the author's personal story of confronting this past" (McKenna 2006, p. 106).<sup>27</sup> In a similar manner, artist statements are often just as insightful, or perhaps even more so, than imagined portraits alone. For this reason, artist statements are woven throughout each subsequent chapter. The artists in this thesis draw on aspects of their subjects' lives which are relevant to their own lives. The aspects they identify with have often been expressed differently in written histories. In each chapter I aim to highlight the artist's unique approach in reviving the memory

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<sup>27</sup> The classic example, which McKenna does use, is Kate Grenville's comments and memoir *Searching for the Secret River* (2008) which recounted her research experiences and thoughts while she was writing her historical novel, *The Secret River* (2005).

of their historical subject, in each case presenting a different perspective of Australian history.

Another similarity between historical fiction and imagined portraiture is mounting a response to national history. Since the inception of historical fiction, many writers, such as Walter Scott, Joseph Krassowski and Chinua Achebe, have worked with a sense of national history (de Groot 2009, p. 49). In Australia national history is somewhat problematic. There have been many debates over the British colonisation of Australia to the extent that in their recent manifestation they were dubbed the 'History Wars'. The varying accounts of Australia's history by historians,<sup>28</sup> politicians and novelists, canvass the different perspectives of the History Wars, generally purporting one of three scenarios: that British colonisation was characterised by violent invasion, amicable frontier contact, or Aboriginal resistance.<sup>29</sup> At the heart of the History Wars is the complex issue of legitimacy, of who has the right to belong in Australia.<sup>30</sup> Many historical novels have been published amongst these debates, leading several writers to criticise contemporary Australian literature for being excessively fixated on the past (see Falconer 2003; Ley 2006). Historical novels and imagined portraits often present revisionist histories which counter mainstream national narratives.

The large portion of historical novels filling bookshelves in Australia indicates that fascination with the past is primarily literary, however this thesis illustrates that Australian artists are also contemplating the past. It is not only writers of historical fiction that are concerned with rescuing marginalised

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<sup>28</sup> For example, Lyndall Ryan, Keith Windschuttle, Geoffrey Blainey, Henry Reynolds, and Stuart Macintyre.

<sup>29</sup> For more on this see *The History Wars* (MacIntyre & Clark 2004).

<sup>30</sup> The issue of legitimacy and belonging is explored further in the next section.

historical figures and troubling foundation myths. In this thesis, the artists each have their own personal agendas, which are often revisionist in nature. Even while Sidney Nolan portrayed the famed bushranger Ned Kelly, he was conscious of presenting his own interpretation of Kelly. The remaining artists create imagined portraits in response to gaps in Australian historiography.

Historical individuals are a direct link to the past. Herein lies the significance of portraying once existing individuals. Remembering a diverse range of individual stories through different perspectives creates a dynamic picture of the past and its ongoing significance to the present. Reflecting on the colonial wrongs of American history, namely cultural denigration, American activist bell hooks asserts that recovering individual stories is the only way to set the past right and intervene in “our nation’s collective forgetting” (2008, p. 181). The national “collective forgetting” hooks describes has also been observed in Australian history in regards to Aboriginal Australians, most notably through W. E. H. Stanner’s notion of the ‘Great Australian Silence’ (1968). Stanner spoke of a “cult of forgetfulness practiced on a national scale” in Australia between 1939 and 1955 (Stanner 1991, pp. 22-5).<sup>31</sup> However, the alleged silence was not the product of a lack of information being produced about Aboriginal people so much as being about the conscious or unconscious “will to ignorance” (Rolls 2010, p. 26).<sup>32</sup> Claiming ignorance enables an escape from the pain confronting the past can inflict. While it is easier to forget the past, “forgetting settlement is also to not know oneself, not to be fully alive in

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<sup>31</sup> Inspired by Stanner, Bernard Smith similarly described a “white blanket of forgetfulness” concerning white Australian views of Aboriginal people (1980).

<sup>32</sup> Rolls cites numerous examples in histories, anthropological studies, literature, middlebrow fiction, non-fiction, visual art, theatre and radio to illustrate that “‘The Great Australian Silence’ could easily be described as filled with noise” (Rolls 2010, p. 16).



the experience of place” (Turner 1999, p. 22). Knowledge of the past is therefore vital to having a strong sense of self anchored to place.

History and place are entwined – one cannot exist without the other, even if place is evoked through displacement. It is for this reason that Butterfield associates geography with historical fiction. He writes that as well as being based in reality, historical novels are composed in places; they have “their roots in the soil” (Butterfield 1924, p. 41). History cannot exist without the land in which it unfolds (Casey 2002, p. 275). It is the link of historical persons to locality that completes historical novels and imagined portraits.

### Land and Identity

Representations of land indicate ways of perceiving and relating to place. As Jeff Malpas has stated (2011, p. 7), they convey modes of “emplacement”. The imagined portraits in this thesis convey the emplacement of the historical figure as well as reflecting the artist’s own sense of place. Having a sense of place is vital to having a conception of oneself (Malpas 1999, p. 152). Our identities, emotions and memories are connected to places. Perceiving nature as place, as more than rock and earth, requires a meaningful investment in the land. Knowledge of the history that occurred in that location – the figures who walked the same soil, the memories that live in the land – facilitates such an investment. As Canadian artist Marlene Creates describes, land “becomes a ‘place’ because someone has been there” (quoted in Lippard 1997, p. 32). It is the combination of memory and space that creates place (Lippard 1997, p. 9).

The identity and images of persons are frequently connected to the places in which they lived their lives (Malpas 1999, p. 179). The first occurrence of the use of landscape in western art to convey the identity of the

subject was in the eighteenth century with Thomas Gainsborough's painting *Mr and Mrs Andrews* (c.1750) (Figure 3). As John Hayes (1975, p. 41) and Anne Bermingham (2008, p. 28) have observed, this work signalled a new fusion of landscape and portraiture in which the land became linked to the identity of the subject. The figures in this painting share the land. *Mr and Mrs Andrews* depicts a newly married couple *and* their land. The farm setting differs from idyllic landscape settings; it is purposeful and specific. Their position as proud landowners is evident (Berger 1972b, p. 107). More broadly, *Mr and Mrs Andrews* reflects the English perception of landscape at the time, which was one of possession. In *Landscape and Ideology* (2008), Anne Bermingham charts the tradition of English landscape painting, asserting that in eighteenth-century English conversation pieces the garden "collapsed nature and the cultural (social, aesthetic) processes that appropriated it" (2008, p. 14). Nature and culture were seen interchangeably as one and the same.



Figure 3: Thomas Gainsborough, *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, c.1750

Whereas the English felt very much at home in the land over which they had a proprietary interest, Australian depictions of figures and land have

not been as straightforward. Instead of presenting an intimate affinity with place, they have largely been concerned with seeking to establish a connection with an environment from which the subject is alienated or dispossessed.

In Australia, nineteenth-century depictions of historical figures in the land predominately featured male heroes such as explorers or Bushmen conquering nature. Burke and Wills,<sup>33</sup> for example, were popular subjects. In the 1860s, inland explorers, such as Burke and Wills, who lost their battle through the desert were extolled as heroes (Eagle & Middlemost 1998, p. 7). Their failure to return amplified the perception of the Australian outback as treacherous and unforgiving. Seen as a force to test the endurance of ‘man’, the explorers who ventured inland were bestowed with traits of stoic endurance. Rather than looking back to Europe, these explorers provided Australia with local heroes acting in a unique and epic landscape (Haynes 1998, p. 111).

Fusions of landscape and portraiture that surfaced in commemoration of Burke and Wills as artists often aimed to represent the specific place where the explorers lost their lives. For example, to specify the place, the engraved Burke and Wills ‘Dig Tree’<sup>34</sup> was employed by John Longstaff in *Arrival of Burke, Wills and King at the Deserted Camp at Cooper’s Creek, Sunday Evening, 21st April 1861* (1907). In this monumental painting the monotone brown landscape seems to suffocate the figures (Figure 4). The sun appears low in the sky, sunken like the hopes of the men. There is no trace of greenery, of fresh, supple shoots such as those in pastoral imagery. The torn shirts of the men and worn boots convey endurance and hardship. The ground is hard with dry clay.

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<sup>33</sup> Robert O’Hara Burke and William Wills

<sup>34</sup> An inscription on a Coolibah Tree reading ‘DIG 3 FT. N.W.’ became associated with Burke and Wills in the early 1900s after John Longstaff depicted it as a central remnant of the expedition. It is also known as the ‘Deopt Tree’, ‘Brahe’s Tree’ and ‘Dig Tree’ (Bonyhady 2002, p. 22).

Everything appears desolate. It captures the way “a national character is seen to spring from the land – timeless, tough, resilient – and it imprints itself on people who have so recently inhabited it” (Willis 1993, p. 62). While paintings such as this cannot be considered imagined portraits because they strove for naturalism,<sup>35</sup> they highlight the way land was associated with the identity of the subjects to promote Australian character traits such as endurance and mateship.



Figure 4: John Longstaff, *Arrival of Burke, Wills and King at the Deserted Camp at Cooper's Creek, Sunday Evening, 21st April 1861*, 1907

The bush has been central to Australian identity. Nationalistic ideals manifested in the symbolic construction of ‘the Bushman’ – a hardworking rural male. Many paintings of Bushmen came out of the Heidelberg School,<sup>36</sup> a group of artists who were championed by many for painting ‘the real

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<sup>35</sup> I refer here to paintings of Burke and Wills by Nicholas Chevalier, William Strutt, John Longstaff and Ivor Hele, amongst others. There were also printmakers and sculptors who created naturalistic posthumous portraits of the explorers.

<sup>36</sup> A group of artists who painted *plein air* landscapes. The Heidelberg School began in 1891 and continued into the early twentieth century. Most notably, the artists included Frederick McCubbin, Arthur Streeton and Tom Roberts.

Australia'.<sup>37</sup> Bushmen were also heavily represented in literature by Henry Lawson and Banjo Patterson, amongst others, in publications such as *The Bulletin*. Another figure of the bush which captured the popular Australian imagination was the bushranger. The remoteness and obscurity of the bush made it an ideal source of mythopoetic narratives. According to Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, the Australian bush can fulfil certain fantasies because it is “both real and unreal” (1991, p. 147). The bush dominates stereotypical presentations of Australia.

Explorers and Bushmen epitomise the western man-against-nature theme. The achievements of women did not fit the colonial imagination and its male-oriented myths concerning explorers, mateship and bushrangers (Rutherford & Peterson 1986, p. 9). Hard physical labour and endurance were valued traits when Australia was settled, so much so that it was believed they had redemptive powers. With hard work, even convicts could be redeemed (Gibson 1991, p. 10; Goodall 1996, p. 38). Male convicts, that is. As I explore in Chapter Four, female convicts were perceived to be less useful. Women in general did not feature in foundation stories of Australia.<sup>38</sup> Only the male body was seen as able to withstand the forces of colonialism. It was hardened by the trauma of exile, enabling men to withstand the brutality of the new environment (Turner 1999, pp. 26-7).

Representations of figures and land changed in the twentieth century. Historical figures were no longer celebrated posthumously for dying in their

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<sup>37</sup> Not all art historians believe the Heidelberg School should be remembered for capturing the Australian character. This view has been challenged (for example, see Levitus 1997, pp. 8-9).

<sup>38</sup> For more on this see Kay Schaffer's *Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition* (1988) and Miriam Dixson's *The Real Matilda: Women and Identity in Australia, 1788 to the Present* (1999).

quests to conquer the land.<sup>39</sup> From the mid-1940s, Sidney Nolan and his peers, such as Albert Tucker<sup>40</sup> and David Boyd, challenged romantic portrayals of figures in the Australian bush. Their imagined portraits of explorers moved away from nineteenth-century history painting conventions which were used to portray subjects in a heroic light. They undermined the glorification of men in the land promoted in Australian history. Boyd was particularly concerned that settlers were out of place in Australia because their attempts to understand the land had failed. His imagined portraits of inland explorers often ridicule the ill-prepared journeys, as can be seen in *Burke and Wills Bed Down for Night* (1957-58) (Figure 5) where the explorers sleep in the dry, red bush in a high-posted English bed.



Figure 5: David Boyd, *Burke and Wills Bed Down for the Night*, 1957-58

<sup>39</sup> Since the last major Burke and Wills painting in 1911 by William Strutt, *Death of Burke*, there was a lacuna of around thirty years when no explorers were portrayed. Australian modernists regarded historical subjects such as explorers Burke and Wills as “didactic and portentous” (Bonyhady 2002, p. 14).

<sup>40</sup> For an example of Tucker’s imagined portraits, see: *The Last Days of Leichardt* (1964) and *Arrival at Cooper’s Creek* (1968). For more on Tucker see Janine Burke’s excellent biography, *Australian Gothic: A Life of Albert Tucker* (2002).



Artists also began to recognise the dispossession of Aborigines from their land, which heightened their own sense of alienation. From the late 1930s, Yosl Bergner and Noel Counihan used conventions of social realism to portray Aboriginal people living in cities, separated from their lands (for example see Figure 6 and Figure 7). In their paintings, unnamed Aboriginal people are depicted in dark and brooding tones conjuring desolation. Feelings of displacement in Australia often stem from issues of legitimacy. As explained by Bain Attwood: “Aboriginal and settler Australians have a common problem: a lack of legitimacy. Their moral status, and hence their identities and rights, are denied by the other group” (2005, p. 190). Being aware of the dispossession of Aboriginal people can lead some Australians to feel displaced.<sup>41</sup>

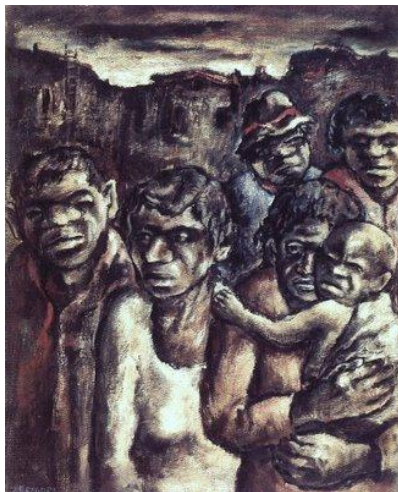


Figure 6: Yosl Bergner, *Aborigines in Fitzroy*, 1941



Figure 7: Noel Counihan, *Aboriginal Family Outside Swann Hill*, 1960

Boyd also presented disquieting scenes of the plight of Aborigines. His awareness of Aboriginal dispossession echoes the work of Bergner and Counihan. Boyd produced seventeen imagined portraits of Tasmanian Aborigine, Truganini. These works are a sombre reflection on the struggles

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<sup>41</sup> Peter Read’s book *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* (2000) provides an excellent exploration of this conflicted sense of belonging.

Truganini had to face, which Boyd learnt of through extensive research.<sup>42</sup> With its depiction of grasping fingers and pleading eyes, *Truganini – a Dream of Childhood* (1958-59) (Figure 8), for instance, is deeply haunting. The figures in the foreground appear to be drowning in the densely knotted foliage, while in the background one menacing silhouetted figure hunts another smaller, crouching figure. There is no place for the eye to rest in this dynamic image.

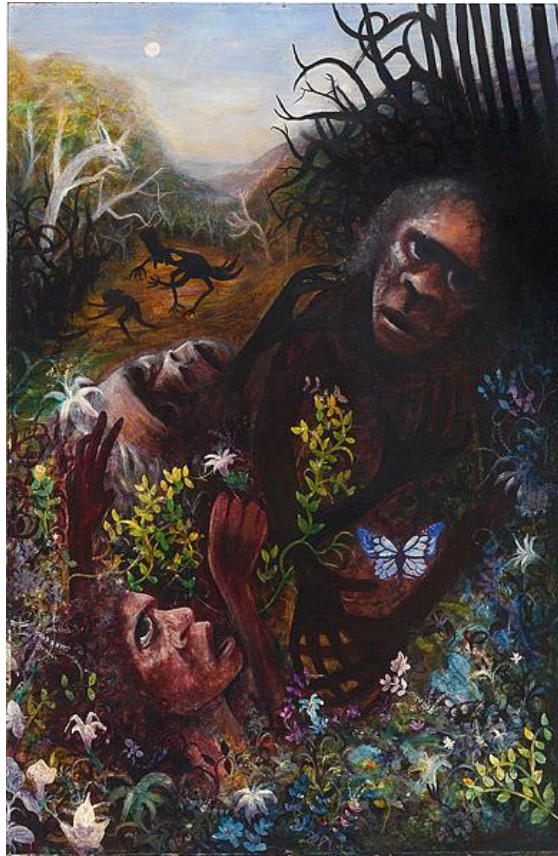


Figure 8: David Boyd, *Truganini – a Dream of Childhood*, 1958-59

Poet Judith Wright, who wrote the forward to *The Art of David Boyd* (1973), personally experienced displacement over her simultaneous love of the land and guilt of invasion (1991, p. 30) and noted that Boyd experienced the same feelings (Wright in Benko 1973, p. 7). However, by raising awareness of the atrocities of the past, Wright proposed that Boyd's works can offer

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<sup>42</sup> For more in this see Benko (1973, p. 30) and Taylor (2012).



atonement: “In these radiant paintings, we forgive ourselves” (in Benko 1973, p. 7).

In contrast to settler art which treats the land as something detached and external, in Aboriginal art the land is “a space to be remembered, a space in which to orient oneself because you have always been a part of it and vice versa” (Gibson 1991, p. 8). In Aboriginal art there is no clear cut separation between humankind and nature. Aboriginal art cannot easily be classified in western art terms because the notion of country differs from western notions of landscape:

It is simplistic to call some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art ‘landscape painting’. Rather, this work is about ‘country’, which is simultaneously concept and place. While landscape painting in a Western tradition is based on a particular or imagined location, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists (such as Judy Watson) ‘country’ can be something that permeates a painting in an abstract manner. Without necessarily describing its location, the painting can invoke the sense of ownership of ‘country’ in compelling and emblematic forms (Perkins & Lynn 1993, p. xi).

Leah King-Smith and Julie Dowling speak of landscape in terms of their connection to country and respecting nature. In some of Dowling’s paintings,<sup>43</sup> landscape is not actually shown but rather conjured through a story relating to country.

The Aboriginal concept of country is multidimensional consisting of “people, animals, plants, Dreamings” and earth materials such as air, soil, water and minerals. There may also be *sea country* and *sky country* (Rose 1996, p. 8). Humans are only a small aspect of country; they live with it. This unity with the land contrasts greatly with western notions of conquering and possessing land. Country is family, not an object to be catalogued and owned (Morgan, Tjalaminu & Kwaymullina 2010, p. ix). Land has spiritual

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<sup>43</sup> I refer here to Dowling’s ‘Nyorn’ series which is discussed in the section ‘Facing her Ancestors’ in Chapter Six.

importance, but it is also central to social relations and the cultural construction of and transmission of knowledge.<sup>44</sup> Responsibilities to care for the land are inherited and, in many Aboriginal communities, gender specific.<sup>45</sup> Plants, animals, totems and dreaming links are all part of Aboriginal connections to land and land management (Gammage 2011, p. 3; Goodall 1996, p. 7).

Aboriginal traditions often lodge identity in relationships to land (Caruana, Desmond & Sayers 2008).<sup>46</sup> Country and self are thus inseparable. Weaver Jack's 'Lungarung' paintings exemplify this connection. Jack explains: "we are same one, my country is me" (Jack in Art Gallery of New South Wales 2006). When her painting *Weaver Jack in Lungarung* (2006) (Figure 9) was selected as a finalist in the 2006 Archibald Prize it was controversial because it was not a conventional, figurative self-portrait. Emily Rohr, who represented Jack at the Short Street Gallery in Broome, defended Jack's painting by insisting that it was a self-portrait because "to understand her you must know her land because they exist together and define each other" (Art Gallery of New South Wales 2006). Jack has a strong sense of self and place. Conversely, for many Aboriginal people, their home and country has been rendered unfamiliar by colonialism (Huggins, Huggins & Jacobs 1995, p. 172). Having a longstanding connection to country which was enforcedly denied, many Aboriginal people today express "a twin sense of alienation and belonging" (Hodge & Mishra 1991, p. 97). Strong ties to the land may exist but they may have been fractured or lost. This is the case for the subjects in King-Smith's and Dowling's imagined portraits.

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<sup>44</sup> See Goodall (1996, pp. 2-6).

<sup>45</sup> See Toussaint, Tonkinson & Trigger (see 2001).

<sup>46</sup> As do other cultures such as Navajo (see Casey 2002, p. 35) and Maori (see Malpas 1999, p. 3).



Figure 9: Weaver Jack, *Weaver Jack in Lungarung*, 2006

Drawing on the work of self-proclaimed Aboriginal artist Mudrooroo Narogin, Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra insist that cultures must be self-reflective to maintain vibrancy (1991, p. 114). Regarding literature, they assert that Aboriginal writers can adopt white genres to challenge white authority with a mix of “fantasy and reality, dreamtime and chronology, fact and myth” (Hodge & Mishra 1991, p. 115). As will be illustrated later in this thesis, Julie Dowling’s and Leah King-Smith’s imagined portraits embody such a mix. Both artists combine European conventions of representing Aboriginal people with Aboriginal beliefs and aesthetic experimentation, while also employing antilanguage strategies to dismantle white hegemony. By antilanguage strategies, I refer to attachment to traditional languages and the rejection of the English language. According to Donna Leslie, art can be a “protective shield ... to regenerate empowerment and to communicate to the

world that aboriginal peoples have survived colonisation and assimilation attempts to destroy Aboriginal heritage” (2008, p. 14). For Leah King-Smith and Julie Dowling art is such a shield. Ruptured connections to country can be repaired. In *Heartsick for Country*, Ambelin Kwaymullina passionately declares that even when ties to country are damaged they are “not yet broken ... because the land holds memory” (Morgan, Tjalaminu & Kwaymullina 2010, p. xvi).

## Conclusion

The artists in this thesis all spend considerable time physically being in the place depicted in their imagined portraits. This enables them to recover the historical subjects in relation to that place and also to form their own bond with the place. As Tom Griffiths and Tim Bonyhady observe, recorded and remembered, written and oral stories often “need to be reconstructed in place” (Griffiths & Bonyhady 2002, p. 10). Referring to landscape poetry in Australia, Ross Gibson suggests that articulating the experience of “subjective immersion in place” provides hope for positive relationships with place (1991, p. 18). For the artists in this thesis, creating imagined portraits of historical figures in land is a positive experience which alleviates displacement.

The dominance of the bush in Australian culture compelled Sidney Nolan to turn to Ned Kelly, while the exclusion of women from the national imaginary inspired Anne Ferran. John Lendis also moves away from the traditional male hero, mediating his experience of the Tasmanian land through the persona of Lady Jane Franklin. For Leah King-Smith and Julie Dowling the task is one of reconnecting with the land and recovering from dispossession.

Nolan's imagined portraits of Ned Kelly form the focus of the next chapter. The remaining chapters reveal that the ways in which Australian artists visually revive historical figures from the past has diversified in style and intention.

## PART I: LAND TO FIGURE

## Chapter Two

### A Story of the Bush: Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly Paintings

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*... the works link us to the past with our memories of the landscape and the oddity of the Kelly outbreak ...*

—Sidney Nolan (quoted in Lynn, Nolan & Semler 1985, p. 10)

Sidney Nolan became interested in history at an early age, most vividly when his primary school history teacher spoke of Gallipoli and raised his shirt to reveal a battle-inflicted scar from the war – a tangible ripple in his skin that gave great weight to his history lessons (Nolan in Bennetts 1982). Later in life, Nolan was drawn to historical figures through memory-infused landscapes. He explained: “I find that a desire to paint involves a wish to hear more of the stories that take place within the landscape” (Nolan 1948, p. 20). Nolan portrayed several historical figures but most famously and frequently, he portrayed the Australian outlaw, Ned Kelly.<sup>47</sup> In the words of art historian T.G. Rosenthal (2006), Nolan developed a “magnificent obsession” with Kelly. Painted sixty-five years after Kelly’s death, Nolan’s imagined portraits added a new, visually evocative dimension to remembering Kelly.

Highly conscious of the subjectivity of his imagined portraits, Nolan did not believe in a singular historical truth and instead wanted to convey his personal impression of historical figures. In many paintings, he wove personal details into his imagined portraits of Kelly. As was discussed in Chapter One, imagined portraits are often autobiographical as well as biographical. Nolan admitted this later in life when he declared: “the Kelly paintings are secretly

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<sup>47</sup> Nolan also portrayed tales from Greek mythology, such as Leda and the Swan and Oedipus, as well as characters from epic poems, such as Dante’s ‘Inferno’.

about myself” (quoted in Lynn, Nolan & Semler 1985, p. 8). In this chapter I argue that Nolan’s connection with Kelly became increasingly personal.

Nolan used Kelly as a channel to help himself adapt. Kelly was his way of visually resolving being in, and responding to, the land. There is a wealth of art criticism on Nolan and the artwork he fervently produced. However, my approach concentrates on some lesser known imagined portraits which, I argue, reveal Nolan’s own sense of belonging in Australia. Analysing these paintings enables a fascinating glimpse into the different ways Nolan envisioned Kelly in the land to resolve personal feelings of familiarity, insignificance and mortality. It is through these works that I see Nolan best developing his relationship between self and place.

### Connecting with Ned Kelly

There were many factors that led Nolan to Kelly. As a boy, Nolan absorbed firsthand stories about Kelly from his grandfather who was a policeman in Kelly’s day (Underhill 2007, p. 271). This special kind of access put Nolan close to Kelly. It meant Kelly was not just part of his collective memory as an Australian, but also part of his personal memory. He describes knowledge of Kelly as “an organic thing I grew up with” (Nolan in Underhill 2007, p. 265). Both men were born in Australia but had a strong sense of Irish heritage.<sup>48</sup> Even though Nolan was a sixth generation Australian, his family were proud to promote their Irish roots (Kennedy in Nolan, Bail & Sayers 2002, p. iv). Nolan confessed in 1985, “I feel quite Irish in temperament” (Nolan in Underhill

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<sup>48</sup> Ned’s father Red Kelly had grown up in Tipperary, Ireland, but had been sent to Van Diemen’s Land for stealing two pigs (see Molony 2002, p. 7; Smith 2003, p. 22). Nolan’s parents were also born in Australia but were proud of their Irish heritage.



2007, p. 302). As an Irish-Australian, I propose that Kelly represented the kind of identity Nolan sought. Nolan admired the way Irish Kelly became Australian through bonding with the land.

Kelly's Irish heritage is partly responsible for his notoriety as the Irish patriotism of Kelly's family was not appreciated by the British government officials (see Kenneally 1955, p. 23). With fiery Irish blood coursing through his veins, Kelly collided headfirst with the police. After one too many incidents,<sup>49</sup> Kelly and some of his family and friends ended up on the run as wanted criminals. Kelly was unlike other bushrangers<sup>50</sup> in that he attempted to justify his actions in detailed, passionately voiced letters. In the nineteenth century there were mixed feelings towards Kelly but, overall, the illustrated press<sup>51</sup> presented him in a sympathetic light.<sup>52</sup> Kelly was generally presented in accord with what Graham Seal identifies as the key characteristics of outlaws in mythology: "friend of the poor, oppressed, forced into outlawry, brave, generous, courteous, does not indulge in unjustified violence, trickster, betrayed, lives on after death" (Seal cited in Tranter & Donoghue 2008, p. 374). Coupled with the fact that the police at the time were often seen as

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<sup>49</sup> Kelly was arrested several times: for being associated with bushranger Harry Power in 1870, for receiving a stolen horse in 1871 and for drunk and disorderly behaviour and assaulting a policeman in 1877. The major incident that triggered Ned Kelly's notoriety began in April 1878 when a drunken Constable Fitzpatrick visited the Kelly residence and allegedly made advances towards Ned's sister, Kate Kelly. The scene turned violent. Fitzpatrick claimed Ned Kelly shot at him three times and that one bullet scraped his wrist; the Kellys claimed Fitzpatrick accidentally bumped and scratched his wrist on something sharp (see Smith 2003, pp. 48-64). The different accounts of how the event unfolded, the Kellys and Fitzpatrick's, exacerbated the conflict between the police and the Kellys.

<sup>50</sup> Such as John Caesar, Martin Cash and Jack Donohoe. The term 'bushrangers' to describe Australian outlaws was common since 1805 (Tranter & Donoghue 2008, pp. 373-74). Ned Kelly, however, became the ultimate bushranger, "the end as well as the symbol of the tradition" (Hodge & Mishra 1991, p. 131).

<sup>51</sup> The illustrated press included *The Illustrated Australian News* (1862-1896); *The Illustrated Sydney News* (1853-1884); *Australasian Sketcher* (1873-1889); *The Sydney Mail* (1860-93); *The Australian Pictorial Weekly* (June 1880-July 1880) and *The Bulletin* (1880-2008).

<sup>52</sup> For more on these illustrations, see 'The Art of Engraving: Images of Ned Kelly and the Illustrated Press' (Moignard 1981).

tyrants, this led Kelly to be mythologised as someone who reluctantly became an outlaw. He allegedly did so not only for his own family but for all struggling Irish families in the region, and by extension, all those who felt oppressed. Kelly has thus been likened to Robin Hood and Jesse James. Nolan saw Kelly in a similar light as a man who stood up for himself, his friends and family (Sayers 1994, p. 9; Underhill 2007, p. 271).

Nolan found Kelly's life captivating. He read J. J. Kenneally's *The Complete Inner History of the Kelly Gang* (first published in March 1929), contemporary newspaper reports, the Royal Commissioners Report, as well as Kelly's epic letters: the Cameron Letter and the Jerilderie Letter.<sup>53</sup> In a statement about his first Kelly series, Nolan quoted a section of the Cameron Letter that revealed Kelly's insistence that he was a forced outlaw: "... if my people do not get justice ... I shall be forced to seek revenge ..." (Nolan 1948, p. 20). When Nolan was researching Kelly in the 1940s, two writers, Douglas Stewart and Max Brown, also tapped in to the legend of Ned Kelly. Stewart's play *Ned Kelly*<sup>54</sup> presented Kelly in a heroic light as someone who embodied the Australian character (Webb 2003). Brown's book, *Australian Son: The Story of Ned Kelly*, by contrast, was original in its distanced approach; it was neither for nor against Kelly as most previous books had been (Iron Outlaw

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<sup>53</sup> The Cameron Letter was Ned Kelly's attempt to explain his actions to Donald Cameron, a member of the Legislative Assembly who was sympathetic towards the problems amongst settlers in Victoria. It was posted from Glenrowan to Cameron in 1878 (see Innes 2008, pp. 46-50 which includes a copy of the letter). The Jerilderie Letter refers to a fifty-six page statement by Kelly justifying his actions in 1879. Both letters were dictated by Kelly and written by Joe Byrne. Kelly hoped the Jerilderie Letter would be published but it took another fifty years for this to happen (for more information on the Jerilderie Letter see Innes 2008, pp. 51-4; National Museum of Australia). In 1967 Nolan produced a set of lithographs based on the Jerilderie Letter (Rosenthal 2002, p. 289).

<sup>54</sup> In 1956 Nolan, who immensely enjoyed the theatre, painted backdrops for Stewart's play in subdued, earthy colours (Rosenthal 2002, pp. 257-58).

2011). However, Nolan had already formulated his ideas about Kelly and did not draw on Brown's new research.

As well as researching secondary sources, Nolan was drawn to the physical artefacts of Kelly. When Nolan was growing up, Kelly's armour was on public display at the Melbourne Aquarium. "It is really one of my earliest memories – like the sea, or the smell of a eucalyptus tree", Nolan said of the armour (Underhill 2007, p. 265). Being able to study the armour firsthand no doubt would have excited and inspired him. Another encounter with a tangible remnant of Kelly was his death mask and what was believed to be his skull,<sup>55</sup> which were on public display at the Melbourne Gaol until 1978. Nolan used the death mask as source material.<sup>56</sup> This, along with the studio photographic portrait of Kelly the day before he was hanged taken by Charles Nettleton and other portraits from the illustrated press, assisted Nolan in painting some portraits of Kelly without the helmet.<sup>57</sup>

Nolan felt as if he could identify with the violence of Kelly's life through his own wartime experiences. He did not see live action in the war but was still affected by guns and the chronic reports of bloodshed in the 1940s. His brother Raymond, who was a soldier, died tragically in an accident just before the end of World War II.<sup>58</sup> While a deliberation on war and violence is most evident in Nolan's Gallipoli series, which began in 1955, it is also an integral part of some of the Kelly paintings. Reflecting on his experiences with army training, Nolan explained: "I sought an individual like Kelly who ... was

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<sup>55</sup> It is now known that this was not the skull of Ned Kelly (AAP 2011; Ciallella 2011).

<sup>56</sup> Now in the collection of the National Museum of Australia, the mask was previously in the possession of Australian artist Max Meldrum. Nolan based *Death of a Poet* (1954) on Kelly's death mask.

<sup>57</sup> For example, *Ned Kelly* (1946).

<sup>58</sup> Raymond Nolan accidentally drowned in Cooktown while waiting to be released from the army and sent home (Clark 1987, p. 89).

a real individual whose life was full of violence which was expiated at the end of a rope ...” (Nolan cited in Lynn, Nolan & Semler 1985, p. 7).

### Kelly, Nolan and the Bush

The bush setting was an important ingredient that facilitated Kelly’s prominence in Australian culture (Seal in Innes 2008, p. 254). It distinguished Kelly from European and American mythical heroes and heroines and made his story uniquely Australian. As seen in Chapter One, the bush has been promoted as a central component in the construction of white Australian identity. Nolan described: “The history of Ned Kelly ... is a story arising out of the bush and ending in the bush” (Nolan 1948, p. 20). The centrality of the bush to Kelly’s legend made Kelly an ideal figure to assist Nolan in understanding his own identity in relation to the Australian land.

The dominance of the bush in Australian culture created pressure to identify with it in order to be a ‘typical Australian’. Even though most Australians, like Nolan, lived in the city, the typical Australian was, and continues to be, associated with the bush. As Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra have pointed out, this stereotype is problematic on several levels. At a surface level, the typical Australian figure symbolically annihilates women, Aborigines and new migrants (Hodge & Mishra 1991, p. xv). It also excludes city-dwellers like Nolan. Hence, “Most Australians are left with the paradox that they are not ‘typical Australians’ at all” (1991, p. xv). Hodge and Mishra suggest that to develop a sense of belonging non-Aborigines need to claim to love the land as much as Aboriginal people (1991, p. 144).

Nolan’s first major engagement with the bush occurred when he was conscripted into the army in 1942. Stationed in the remote, dry and desolate

Wimmera region of Victoria while serving in the army, Nolan felt the urge to find his own unique visual language to represent the land. Immersed in the bush – the terrain associated with Australian national identity – he began experimenting with perspective and the relationship between forms and the landscape (Sayers 1994, p. 20). He felt that the land “demanded interpretation” (Nolan in Underhill 2007, p. 268). Anne-Marie Willis (1993, p. 63) proposes that in the 1940s landscape painting became an important rite of passage. Using bold primary colours and a flattened perspective, Nolan set about finding his own visual language to portray the bush.

Art historian Richard Haese credits Nolan’s Wimmera paintings as ending the “tyranny of the picturesque” in Australian landscape painting (Haese & Minchin 1983, p. 9). They were unlike any Australian landscape paintings at the time and inspired some of Australia’s most prominent landscape painters such as Fred Williams (Haese & Minchin 1983, p. 8). With notable exceptions such as the modernist painter Margaret Preston, previously Australian art had largely been derived from European traditions. The land, in particular, had been rendered and comprehended through comparisons with Europe, whereas Nolan’s landscapes were not tainted by previous aesthetic visions or expectations.

Nolan turned to historical figures to complete his engagement with the Australian land. He often imagined historical figures as he travelled. This sense of unearthing memory in the land is also evident in Nolan’s poems.<sup>59</sup> As Nolan travelled around Cooper’s Creek he was fascinated by inland explorers Burke and Wills. When he visited Fraser Island he was amazed at how Eliza

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<sup>59</sup> A collection of Nolan’s poems can be found in the *La Trobe Library Journal* (‘Poems by Sidney Nolan’ 1999).

Fraser had adapted to the land. But Ned Kelly was the one historical figure he kept returning to.

Painting Kelly was Nolan's way of infusing the land with myth. Writer Vance Palmer declared that "men cannot feel really at home in any environment until they have transformed the natural shapes around them by infusing them with myth" (quoted in Haese 1981, p. 276). It gave him a sense of continuity with the past. Shortly before Nolan began painting Kelly, the Australian artist Albert Tucker penned an influential essay titled 'Art, Myth and Society' (1943). According to Tucker, "the function of myth is to imaginatively complete what the intellectual does not know" (1943, p. 51). Myth was a hot topic in the literary and artistic journal *Angry Penguins* in the 1940s. Publisher of the *Angry Penguins*, Max Harris, believed artists should turn to legends embedded in places (see Haese 1981, p. 276). In accordance with Andrew Sayers (1994), I see Nolan's use of myth as personal rather than an assertion of national character. Kelly gave Nolan a connection with the bush he otherwise would have lacked and a sense of continuity with the past. Rarely separating Kelly from some representation of land, Nolan promoted the memory of Kelly as inextricable from the Australian bush.

When Nolan visited the bush where Kelly's story unfolded – now known as Kelly Country<sup>60</sup> – he encountered a different side to the memory of the bushranger. It was 1945 and Nolan was travelling with friend and writer Max Harris. The pair went into the pub where Ned Kelly made his last stand eagerly anticipating local insights and stories passed down about the outlaw. They even offered free drinks to anyone who would tell them about Kelly

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<sup>60</sup> A portion of north-eastern Victoria that extends "from Mansfield in the south to Yarrawonga in the north, and from Euora in the southwest of the Kelly country to Tallangatta in the north-east" (Kenneally 1955, p.19).

(Rosenthal 2002, p. 61). But liquor would not warm the locals' views of Kelly and his gang. They soon realised just how unwelcome they were when "a 16-stone barman leapt over the counter and said: 'We don't encourage tourists in the Kelly Country'" (Harris cited in 'Artist Hitch-Hiked to Paint' 1949). Nolan was also "old enough and Australian enough" (Nolan quoted in Neales 1997) to meet one of Kelly's brothers, Jim. However, Jim Kelly was old and tired and still tormented by his brother's death (Rosenthal 2002, p. 61). He did not want to say anything more to a prying stranger. Kelly's life, it seemed, was shrouded in secrecy. This did not dissuade Nolan; it gave him greater license to interpret Kelly the way he wanted.

Visiting Kelly Country and Jim Kelly led Nolan to see two sides to the memory of Kelly: one as the legend who had become absorbed into Australian culture and the other as a real person whose remaining family were still mourning the loss of his life. I argue Nolan grappled with this throughout his depictions of Kelly. He was fascinated by the power of Kelly's memory as a mythicised bushranger but he also empathised with the plight of Kelly's real life. I see the first series as being about the legend of Kelly and other individual imagined portraits of Kelly as reflecting Nolan's empathetic bond with Kelly.

### The Famous First Series

In the first series, Nolan engaged with the legend of Kelly and presented an almighty figure with a bold presence. These paintings, now permanently displayed in a specially designed oval room at Canberra's National Gallery of

Australia, are often deemed the most important of Nolan's oeuvre.<sup>61</sup> The first series has a sense of narrative and unity like a large storyboard of dramatic moments in the Kelly saga. Nolan captioned the paintings in this series with anecdotes from the Royal Commissioners Report of 1881, newspapers of the day and J.J. Keneally's *The Complete Inner History of the Kelly Gang and their Pursuers* (Nolan 1948, p. 20). These captions signalled Nolan's research and interest in history but also marked his imaginative departure from historical fact.

The series begins with a pure landscape painting which depicts a large murky river and a burning fringe of trees or a setting sun on the horizon (Figure 10). Nolan stated he wanted this ambiguity of sun and fire "because this was a tranquil scene for the subsequent violence" (National Gallery of Australia 2010b). The suspense in this painting, a scene awaiting action, is an exciting opening to the series. I agree with Sayers (1994, p. 16) that the use of this painting to open the narrative highlights the importance of land to Nolan and his engagement with Kelly.<sup>62</sup> However, in this series I feel the land primarily acts as a stage for the figures.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> The National Gallery of Australia (NGA) houses 26 of the 27 paintings: the NGA bought one painting, *The Death of Sergeant Kennedy at Stringybark Creek* when it was first exhibited, and 25 were donated by Sunday Reed in 1977. In 2010, *First Class Marksman*, the missing painting from the NGA's collection, was sold to a private collector (Boland & Madden 2010). Interestingly, the first series gained little attention in Australia when it was exhibited at Valesquez Gallery in Melbourne in 1948. John Reed describes that the paintings "passed almost unnoticed" (Reed 1967, p. 443). Convinced that Nolan had talent, the Reeds took the Kelly paintings to be exhibited in Paris and Rome the following year where they were received well. Jean Cassou, head of the Musée national d'art moderne in Paris, said the works made "a striking contribution to modern art" (quoted in Clark 1987, p. 73).

<sup>62</sup> The significance of land and the connection between Nolan, Kelly and the land will be further analysed in the next two sections.

<sup>63</sup> To me, the importance of the land is most evident in other individual paintings of Kelly as I explore in the next section.





Figure 10: Sidney Nolan, *Landscape*, 1947

The next twenty-six paintings portray episodes in Kelly's short life in loose chronological order: from lesser known moments, such as setting fire to a tree to keep warm in Wombat Ranges,<sup>64</sup> to the crucial moment when Constable Fitzpatrick allegedly made advances towards Ned's sister, Kate Kelly<sup>65</sup> which led to conflict between the police and the Kellys, to the incident at Stringybark Creek,<sup>66</sup> the siege at Glenrowan,<sup>67</sup> finally culminating in Ned Kelly's trial in which he was sentenced to death.<sup>68</sup> However, the series is not intended to be a literal sequential narrative. Nolan's faux-naïf style<sup>69</sup> lightens the solemnity of the historical quotes.

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<sup>64</sup> *The Burning Tree* (1947)

<sup>65</sup> *Constable Fitzpatrick and Kate Kelly* (1946)

<sup>66</sup> *Stringybark Creek* (1947)

<sup>67</sup> *Burning at Glenrowan* (1946), *Siege at Glenrowan* (1946) and *Glenrowan* (1946)

<sup>68</sup> *The Trial* (1947)

<sup>69</sup> Faux-naïf is French for 'falsely naive'. The self-taught French painter Henri Rousseau (1844-1910) inspired Nolan's faux-naïf style. Nolan had access to a catalogue of Rousseau's 1942 retrospective exhibition when he was staying with the Reeds at Heide (Sayers 1994, p. 22).

Nolan sought a distinctive way to portray Kelly. The most dominating feature of the first series is the black rectangular helmet which is visually striking in its simplicity.<sup>70</sup> Initially, the silhouetted helmet was a way for Nolan to make Kelly stand out against the flat and formless land of inland Australia. As Nolan commented, “You had a strange coloured monotonous bush and nothing stood out against it ... when Kelly turned up with a black or rusty kind of armour, a man riding about on a horse, it stood out” (Nolan in Underhill 2007, p. 266). In the first Kelly series, the helmet dominates and disguises any trace of individuality through distinctive facial features, but paradoxically the helmet is how Kelly is identified. The helmet both represents and hides Kelly. It is a kind of mask. Phillippe Roberts-Jones asserts “masks are a way of escaping from reality and hiding, but they are also a way of asserting an inner reality” (1978, p. 96). The Kelly helmet could represent inner illumination (Gaston 2001, p. 101) as it blurs the line between historical fact and imagination. It is both historical and of the present, living on in an imaginative realm created by Nolan.

Nolan’s helmet apotheosises Kelly, giving him significance and standing beyond a moment in the past. Nolan’s patron John Reed encapsulated the importance of the helmet in immortalising Kelly:

For such a heroic concept it is, of course, necessary that we are not confronted with the image of the man as we know him; instead Nolan has created for us the beautiful, evocative and even majestic symbol of the famous Kelly armour, against which the other figures appear in all their human insignificance (Reed 1967, p. 446).

The helmet relates back to the real, historical Kelly and his physical iron mask which inspired it, but it is also more universal as it gives Kelly symbolic

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<sup>70</sup> There are several artworks that foreshadow Nolan’s use of the Kelly mask (for a discussion of these influences see Sayers 1994, p. 22).

resonance. A naturalistic portrait would make Kelly appear human and mortal. In contrast, the helmet portrays Kelly as an irrepressible figure. Even when it is reduced in stature, the recognisable black helmet has a striking presence. Its simplicity creates a powerful and memorable impression and thus achieves the unforgettable quality Nolan strived for.<sup>71</sup>

In the first series, Nolan seems to be celebrating Kelly, the legendary figure. This is indicated by his use of bold colours and the bright enamel paint, Ripolin. Nolan was aware of Pablo Picasso's use of Ripolin<sup>72</sup> and was eager to try it even though it was expensive and had to be imported from overseas.<sup>73</sup> Ripolin dried with a molten, glossy finish that still preserved the integrity of each brushstroke. It also had an alluring aroma which seduced Nolan (Underhill 2007, p. 254). Combined with his faux-naïf style, the vividly coloured first series has the impression of a child's storybook retelling a popular narrative. While the first series involved a degree of subjective interpretation on Nolan's part, other works reveal a deepening personal connection with Kelly, the man, rather than Kelly, the legend.

### Becoming One with the Land

*Return to Glenrowan* (1946) (Figure 11) is arguably more intimate and empathetic than the paintings in the first series, even though it was made at the

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<sup>71</sup> Nolan's early Kelly paintings sparked the creation of several imagined portraits of Kelly by other artists. In 1954 Nolan's close friend, Arthur Boyd created a ceramic sculpture of Kelly. Two years later, another of Nolan's friends, Albert Tucker, depicted Kelly, although Tucker's Kelly images were always in the shadow of Nolan's paintings. Boyd's and Tucker's similar portrayals of the helmet shape did not have the same original resonance that Nolan's did.

<sup>72</sup> Georges Braque (1882-1963) and Francis Picabia (1879-1953) also used Ripolin.

<sup>73</sup> Sunday Reed, who was keen to foster Nolan's art, bought the expensive Ripolin and many other art materials for Nolan (see Kubik 2007).

same time. It explores Kelly living on in the land rather than as legend in popular culture. Even though it is painted with the glossy and vibrant Ripolin, the colours of this painting are more naturalistic than the bold primary colours of the first Kelly series. The ground is not dry and golden but emerald green. This painting is complex and elusive. The title conjures the setting as a specific, real place, yet the flat, empty land is far from the dense woodland that characterises Glenrowan. It was made shortly after Nolan visited Glenrowan, but portrays more of a dreamscape. The word “return” in the title seems to metaphorically describe returning in the mind through memory.

The land is more than a background or stage, as it is in the first Kelly series. *Return to Glenrowan* is a painting of Kelly and the land. The two elements are evenly represented as the tree trunk on the left balances the composition of Kelly holding his gun high on the right. Depicted in the foreground, Kelly and the landscape are a united force confronting the viewer. The land is Kelly’s ally. In *Return to Glenrowan* the Kelly helmet appears to be made of shards of bark conjured through thick, straight painted lines. Composed of the bush, it has a natural appearance that echoes the colour of the solitary tree on the left. The organic, earthy form of the helmet appears to symbolise mortality; this Kelly is not the immortal legend of the first series with an impenetrable, solid black helmet.



Figure 11: Sidney Nolan, *Return to Glenrowan*, 1946

The most intriguing aspect of this painting is the small figure that can be seen within the aperture of the helmet (see Figure 12) in a kind of second layer of content. Depicted in subdued, milky tones, the figure has a faint, enigmatic presence. It was painted around thirty years after the original was painted (Haynes 2012a, p. 35), although the reasons for its inclusion are unknown. Aligned with the cylindrical neck holding the helmet, the figure is anchored in a stable composition. This minute figure could be a ghostly vision of Kelly riding through Glenrowan, a policeman,<sup>74</sup> or it could be Nolan himself declaring his use of Kelly to explore the land. Interpreting this figure to be Nolan, *Return to Glenrowan* is not only an imagined portrait but also a “self-portrait in attendance”, characterised by Omar Calabrese as “... where the artist inserts his own image, or where he appears as a concealed figure that takes part in the activity, or as an object of the scene” (2006, p. 49).

<sup>74</sup> Curator Peter Haynes (2012a, p. 33) recently interpreted the figure as a policeman.



Figure 12: Sidney Nolan, *Return to Glenrowan* [detail], 1946

The figure in *Return to Glenrowan* faces the viewer, poised on his horse wearing an Australian bushman's hat. He encapsulates the archetypal Australian: the lone male in the Australian bush. Hence, the figure could symbolise Nolan presenting himself as a 'real Australian', riding into the bush like the drover in Tom Robert's celebrated nationalistic painting, *A Break Away!* (1891). He may have painted himself into this imagined portrait to signal that he was able to connect with the bush through Kelly. Choosing to insert himself in this particular painting may have been his way of conveying that of all the paintings he produced at Heide, this one best articulated his empathetic bond with Kelly. *Return to Glenrowan* respectfully integrates Kelly and land while highlighting the mortality of Kelly. While it releases Kelly to the land, it reveals Nolan's own desire to identify with the land as a 'typical Australian'.

In the decades between the first series and Nolan's reworking of *Return to Glenrowan*, his connection with Kelly and the land developed significantly.

After visiting the Northern Territory with fellow artist Albert Tucker in January 1950, Nolan said that Aborigines “show you that the country is a gentle declaiming one, the barrenness and harshness is all in our European eyes and demands” (Tucker, Nolan & McCaughey 2006, p. 110). Nolan marvelled at the relationship Aboriginal Australians have with the land, developed over tens of thousands of years (Nolan in ‘Natives’ Art ‘Best in World’ 1949; Bennetts 1982). His thoughts mirror Geoff Levitus’s insistence that non-Aboriginal Australians struggle to bond with place:

White Australians don’t have the benefit of many centuries of living in one place, of developing a dreaming, an entire cosmology or spirituality based on such a relationship of people to place. But a relationship exists nonetheless. It is based on complex, psychologically profound influences and experiences, including migration and travel, different kinds of exile from other places, a comparatively short-term or transitory relationship to place and the landscape that does not allow for a deepening understanding of it or a symbiotic relationship with it, but which is coupled with a yearning to belong (Levitus 1997, p. 10).

Nolan’s yearning to belong was satisfied through Kelly. In 1964 Nolan declared, “Though I was filled with this enthusiasm for the bush, I had not found out what I wanted to say about it ... I realised that Ned Kelly was the vehicle I needed” (Nolan in Underhill 2007, pp. 265-6). This was a critical year for Nolan’s connection with Kelly and the land. At this time Nolan was living overseas, yet continued to paint Kelly and the Australian land. In Nolan’s own words, he made the figure of Kelly “able to travel” (Nolan in Underhill 2007, p. 271).

### *Painting from Abroad*

Australian environmental historian George Seddon proposes that “travel can strengthen the sense of place” (Seddon 1997, p. 137). For Nolan, this seemed to be the case. Nolan loved to travel and spent months on end travelling and

living overseas. Whilst living in London in November 1964, he wrote in his diary: “[I] feel strongly that the Kelly paintings I have been doing the last months are what I really wanted to paint about the bush and Kelly back in 1946 and it has taken me all this time to do it” (Underhill 2007, p. 31). Made nearly two decades after his first series, Nolan’s 1964 paintings present Kelly as a small figure within dominating landscapes. At this time Nolan returned to using oil paint,<sup>75</sup> a medium that allowed him to work in a different manner. With oil paint, Nolan could slow his painting and work on a very large scale. In contrast with the land that characterises many works in the first series – dry and golden earth meeting bright blue skies<sup>76</sup> – in the 1964 paintings the land appears dense and dynamic.

In *Kelly in the Landscape* (1964) (Figure 13) Nolan presents a diminutive masked Kelly enveloped by the land. The mustard-browns and crimsons in the soil evoke Australian ochre while the sage-green and silvery streaks conjure gum leaves. The wild foliage swamps the figure and obstructs the illusion of depth. There is no sky visible as the land continues to unfold. To me, Nolan’s disruption of the figure in landscape configuration is evocative of Albrecht Altdorfer’s celebrated sixteenth-century work *St George and the Dragon* (1510) (Figure 14).<sup>77</sup> Art historian Christopher Wood proposes that in *St George*, Altdorfer “draws the forest inward, tight around the figures. He represents the forest from the inside out” (Wood 1993, p. 147). In *Kelly in the Landscape*, Nolan similarly portrays the land from the inside out, except on a much larger scale. In Nolan’s painting, the land thus engulfs not only the

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<sup>75</sup> Nolan previously used oil paints in the 1930s before using Ripolin.

<sup>76</sup> For example, *Ned Kelly* (1946), *The Chase* (1946) and *The Encounter* (1946)

<sup>77</sup> For more on Altdorfer’s approach see Christopher Wood’s book, *Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape* (1993).



figures but also the viewer. While the helmet enables Kelly to stand out, the other figures are barely perceptible. Unlike Nolan's first Kelly series where the land was largely used as a setting for the actions of the figures, in *Kelly in the Landscape* the focus is predominantly on the land.



Figure 13: Sidney Nolan, *Kelly in the Landscape*, 1964

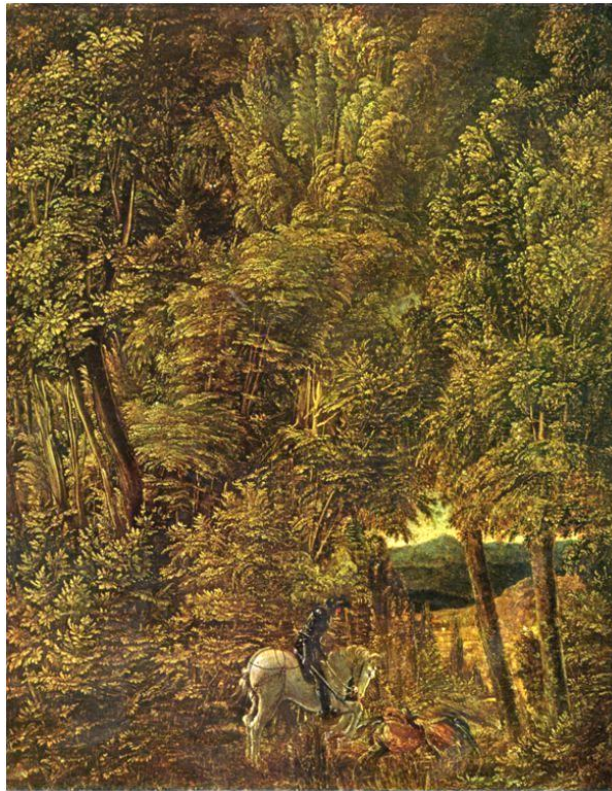


Figure 14: Albrecht Altdorfer, *St George and the Dragon*, 1510

Many of the 1964 paintings present Kelly in an ethereal form. The distanced Kelly in *Kelly in the Landscape* seems evanescent; he could fade into the bush without a trace. In stark contrast to the first series where a boldly defined Kelly is stamped onto the landscape, the pale shapes of Kelly's body and the other figures appear to have been created by rubbing the oil paint back; they have been worked into the landscape rather than painted over it. *Kelly in the Landscape* and other 1964 paintings present a more natural sense of integration with the land. In the 1964 paintings, Kelly no longer defines the landscape; the landscape defines him.

An important element of the 1964 paintings is that most of them feature a river with a figure or horse half-submerged. This was Nolan's way of portraying Kelly in the places of his childhood: the Goulburn River at Shepparton, where he spent his childhood holidays, and the Murray River in South Australia. The 1964 paintings led to a colossal polyptych titled

*Riverbend* (1966) (Figure 15). Similar in style, *Riverbend* consists of nine panels. Each panel is over one metre wide and one and a half metres tall. *Riverbend* is an immersive artwork that spans across an entire wall akin to Claude Monet's waterlilies. The viewer feels as if they could step into the world Nolan has created. Seen from left to right, it portrays a narrative sequence of Kelly shooting Constable Scanlon and then escaping into the bush.<sup>78</sup>



Figure 15: Sidney Nolan, *Riverbend I-9*, 1966

Rather than painting the surrounding English environment, Nolan spent his time overseas remembering Australia. The physical distance strengthened his memory of the place and deepened his attachment to it. As Edward Casey proposes, “To know a region is also to be able to *remember* it” (2002, p. 76). In an interview in 1969 Nolan spoke of remembering his local river when painting *Riverbend*:

I can still evoke in myself in my studio on the Thames, the river that I saw as a boy ... There is always a dappled, spotted light like a leopard on the ground, and this light is the light we grew up in. I painted a large painting, which is really a reminiscence of a shadow river, a kind of billabong where the river winds round, that I walked in as a boy with my father. The bank falls in the water, and it's very cool and it smells of tannin. Forty or more years later, sitting up in the studio looking at the Thames with its fleeting light and the industrial chimneys, and the townscape at the end of it, I can still go back to this thing on the Murray River and get it so that when I took the painting back to Australia and showed it to the people there by the river, the old boys came in and recognised it (Nolan in Underhill 2007, p. 312).

<sup>78</sup>For more comprehensive descriptions of this painting see McCaughey (1987, p. 12) and Rosenthal (2002, p. 95).



Nolan was proud of being able to reconstruct the Murray from memory. Across the other side of the world, he knew it better than ever. *Riverbend* indicates the strength of his ties to the land he left behind.

While still overseas, this time in America, Nolan painted another epic polyptych that presents a much larger version of Kelly. Nolan appears to ponder mortality in this work entitled *Glenrowan* (1966) (Figure 16). *Glenrowan* presents Kelly's face squared by a faded outline of Nolan's iconic square mask. As a mask within a mask, the crimson closed eyes are framed with a black strip as if blind-folded (see *Glenrowan 3* in Figure 17). Unlike *Kelly in the Landscape* and *Riverbend*, in *Glenrowan* the viewer is met with a suspended, larger-than-life figure. Broken and segmented, Kelly's body only takes up three out of the nine panels of this immense series (Figure 17).

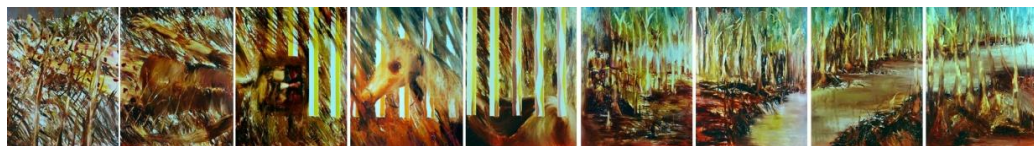


Figure 16: Sidney Nolan, *Glenrowan I-9*, 1966

The paintings begin with Kelly's resting body but then merge into a densely treed landscape with swampy river. The transition from Kelly to river is marked by a series of white and yellow vertical stripes. The sharp edges of the stripes stand out from the softened natural forms. The way they jar against the naturally-formed curve of the river evokes man-made intrusions in the land, such as building infrastructure. They appear to be Nolan's way of symbolising Glenrowan as they are also used in *Mrs Reardon at Glenrowan* (1946) and *Siege at Glenrowan* (1946) in the first series. Nolan made this work in New York but sold it to the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh in 1976

(Rosenthal 2002, p. 95). Across the other side of the world, Nolan reminisced and worked from a fusion of memory and imagination.

Nolan dedicated *Glenrowan* to his father who had recently passed away (Lynn & Nolan 1979, p. 150; Underhill 2007, p. 312). In this light, *Glenrowan* reflects Nolan coming to terms with his father's passing. I can imagine Nolan meditatively moving his fingers through the cold, wet paint over the bumpy skin of the canvas. Working in oil paint rather than enamel would have enabled Nolan to move slowly through this painting, smoothing through and scraping back paint. This may have helped Nolan process the intense emotions that surrounded the loss of his father.

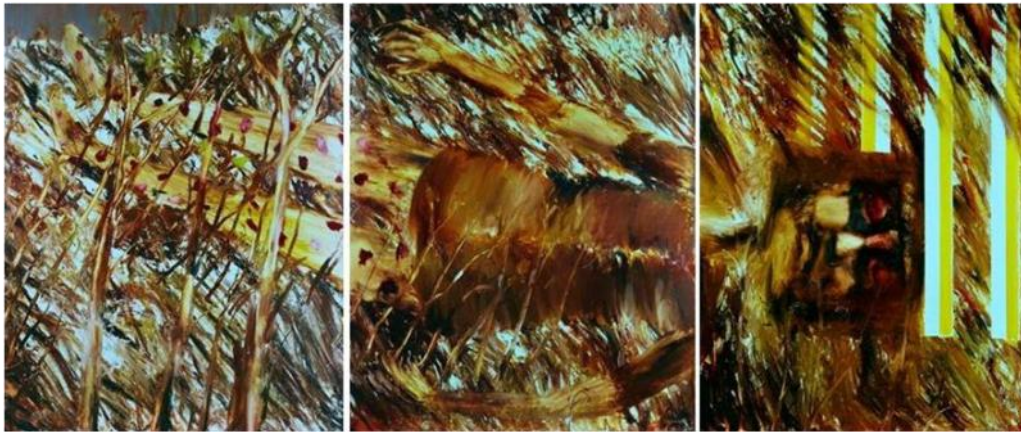


Figure 17: Sidney Nolan, *Glenrowan I-3*, 1966



Figure 18: Sidney Nolan, *Glenrowan 6-8*, 1966

The filament brown tones that dominate the image conjure decay. Thin, fingery tree branches grow over Kelly's body which hovers flat against the land. The trees are so dense that they obscure the sky ensuring that the focus is on the muddy, leafy ground. There is a sense of decomposition into the land. Amongst the lines of tree trunks, barely visible outstretched figures seem to dance. This may allude to Nolan's interest in the way the memory of people can live in the land, lying dormant until someone takes an interest – as Nolan did with Kelly.

In this painting, Nolan seems to lay memory of his father to rest in the river. In the bottom left corner of one panel in *Glenrowan*, a figure appears to hold a baby (see Figure 19). Nolan spent the first year of his life by a river on his family's property in Nagambie in Victoria. The baby could be Nolan, cradled in his mother's arms watching his father vanishing into the land, subtly placing himself within the scene as another self-portrait in attendance. In a reflective statement about this work in 1978, Nolan said of the mother and baby, "I suppose [it is] my mother and myself off in the distance" (Lynn & Nolan 1979, p. 150). The small figures thus indicate the personal nature of this painting. Memory of growing up by the river stayed with Nolan. He imbued it with nostalgia and let it feed his imagination, expressing that "the river remains" (Nolan in Bennetts 1982).



Figure 19: Sidney Nolan, *Glenrowan 6* [detail], 1966

Nolan continued to paint Kelly in different ways to work through his emotions but he did not return to Kelly and the land as a major personal concern. His strong identification with Kelly, however, was indicated in his last self-portrait in which Nolan framed his own face within his famous Kelly mask (Figure 20). At the time Nolan made this image he had openly admitted that the Kelly paintings were about himself (Lynn, Nolan & Semler 1985, p. 8). This self-portrait, *Myself* (1988) (Figure 20), overtly conflates Kelly and Nolan.



Figure 20: Sidney Nolan, *Myself*, 1988

Nolan was passionate about poetry and was influenced by the French Symbolist<sup>79</sup> poet Arthur Rimbaud.<sup>80</sup> Rimbaud often wrote about outsiders and was himself a rebellious outsider. Curator Maggie Gilchrist suggested that

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<sup>79</sup> Nineteenth-century symbolism in literature (where it began) and art was characterised by privileging subjectivity and emotion over realistic, objective descriptions of the natural world (Myers 2007).

<sup>80</sup> Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891) dramatically gave poetry up at the age of twenty-five. Rimbaud was mainly based in Paris and London but, like Nolan, travelled extensively (Steinmetz & Graham 2001). I will explore another way in which Rimbaud may have inspired Nolan later in this chapter.

Nolan was drawn to Rimbaud because his anarchist persona was akin to that of Ned Kelly's persona (1985, p. 5). Several critics<sup>81</sup> have noted the influence Rimbaud had on Nolan's painting, particularly Rimbaud's method of working automatically.<sup>82</sup> Nolan's friend, John Sinclair, declared that Rimbaud's poetry "became Nolan's artistic credo" (Sinclair 1967, p. 436).<sup>83</sup> Inspired by Rimbaud's aesthetic doctrine, Nolan let memories of the facts he researched about Kelly percolate and become tangled with his personal thoughts and experiences. Nolan's friend, the poet Barrie Reid, described this Rimbaud-inspired intermingling of thoughts as an "imagining process" (Reid 1967, p. 447). It personalised his imagined portraits of Kelly and made them Nolan's own vision of the bushranger. However, I want to propose another way in which Rimbaud may have influenced Nolan – through Rimbaud's poetic expression "*Je est un autre*", which translates as "I is another". As an avid reader of Rimbaud's work, Nolan would have no doubt encountered this phrase. He may not have consciously conceived of it as such, but it fittingly describes his use of Kelly.

Nolan undeniably contributed to the memory of Kelly. His black helmet has become the image of Kelly many Australians now recall when they think of the outlaw. As Tom Rosenthal describes: "Ned Kelly has, by a process surely unique in the history of painting, become Sidney Nolan's image of him ... the painting image has taken over from the real one as recorded in the history books" (2002, p. 59). Nolan passed away on the 28th of November 1992. His memory remains forever entwined with Ned Kelly. Rephrasing

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<sup>81</sup> For example, Clark (1987, p. 32) and Lynn (1967, p. 8).

<sup>82</sup> For a description of Rimbaud's manner of working see Starkie (1939, p. 130).

<sup>83</sup> Nolan created a series inspired by Rimbaud entitled 'Illuminations' (1982) (see Haynes 2012b).



Rimbaud's expression 'I is another', it can be stated that Nolan is Kelly, as his last self-portrait so clearly illustrates.

## Conclusion

There are many facets to Sidney Nolan's connection with Ned Kelly. Nolan drew on written histories, Kelly's words, as well as physical artefacts of Kelly's, his own experiences of being in the land and memory to create his imagined portraits of Kelly. More than being solely about Kelly, these imagined portraits were entangled with Nolan's own memory and personal experiences. In tracing the subtle self-portraits Nolan embedded in *Return to Glenrowan* and *Glenrowan*, I hope to have illustrated some of the ways in which Nolan used Kelly to reflect on life and having a sense of self tied to place. While using Kelly to develop his own relationship with the bush – the foundation of the 'typical Australian' – Nolan facilitated a powerful way to remember Kelly. The simple iconography of the helmet Nolan forged to depict Kelly has a unique and powerful public recognisability that continues to resonate with many Australians.

Nolan saw and represented two sides to Kelly, one as an immortal legend, the other as a vulnerable outsider. The first series conveys the legend of Kelly, while other individual imagined portraits present a more intimate, mortal version of Kelly. Nolan kept returning to Kelly and painting him throughout his life. As he travelled overseas he continued to use Kelly to express personal emotions. Being physically separated from Australia seems to have strengthened Nolan's sense of place.

The next chapter extends the idea of visually resolving a sense of belonging through a well-known figure by exploring John Lendis's imagined

portraits of Lady Jane Franklin. Ned Kelly and Lady Jane Franklin hold a prominent place in Australian historiography. However, it is interesting to note that despite the fame of these figures in mainstream history, they both did not conform to the norms of their time. Whereas Kelly embodied the masculine bushranger traits Nolan desired to connect with the bush, Lady Jane Franklin was outcast because of her gender. Lendis reasserts her relationship with the land while using her to explore personal concerns. Lendis similarly travels with Lady Jane, using her as his vehicle to bond with the land.

## Chapter Three

### Wilderness as a Site of Dreams: John Lendis's Oeneiric Visions of Lady Jane Franklin

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*Jane Franklin moves between states of desire, embrace, fear and forgetting as she travels within and against this Antipodean landscape.*

—John Lendis (2006, p. 61)

John Lendis has been painting imagined portraits of Lady Jane Franklin for nearly a decade. At times Lady Jane's figure is barely visible, appearing as a minimal outline surfacing in a murky riverbed or along a mountain shrouded in thick mist. Layers of thinned oil paint contrast with single lines tracing her fingers, while thick patches of swift brushstrokes conjure hair and a bodily frame. Lendis is not interested in merely illustrating Lady Jane or events in her life; he uses her as a catalyst to explore his own perception of, and relationship with, the Tasmanian land.

Born and raised in England, Lendis arrived in Tasmania with a strong cultural memory of England which shaped his perception of Tasmania. As Peter Read writes of migration, "In the new country dead homelands remain moving shadows throughout the whole of life" (1996, p. 28). Lendis became interested in the transplanted English vision of the Tasmanian landscape he shared with colonists, in particular with Lady Jane whose outward Englishness and journeys through Tasmania intrigued him. Lady Jane was an outsider whose behaviour upset many colonists. As someone who was out of place and seemingly misunderstood, Lendis turned to Lady Jane to negotiate his own displacement. In contrast to Sidney Nolan who sought identification with the bush as a 'typical Australian', Lendis has no desire to identify with Bushmen.

His bond with Lady Jane enables him to maintain a dual English-Australian identity whilst romanticising the landscape.

In most of his imagined portraits, Lady Jane is depicted floating, dreamily drifting through the pictorial frame. Lendis explains that her travels “wove her mind across the oceans stretching out before her and lying between herself and the world of Europe” (Pollock Gallery 2004). Through Lady Jane, Lendis is able to visually explore his own sense of place. As seen in the previous chapter, travelling and memory can solidify one’s relationship between self and place. Physically far from England, Lendis feels best able to connect with his Anglo-Saxon heritage in remote areas of Tasmania that remind him of the black forest setting of mythic European tales. Lady Jane is his medium between the two places. Through her, he can negotiate the differences and establish a sense of belonging.

### Enchanted by Lady Jane

Lady Jane Franklin is an intriguing figure who has fascinated not just Lendis but a host of historians, authors and artists. In many ways, Lady Jane could be seen as the perfect Victorian wife. She cared for her husband, Sir John Franklin, who was Lieutenant Governor of Van Diemen’s Land (now Tasmania)<sup>84</sup> from 1836 to 1843, threw lavish dinner parties when she was governess in Hobart, and supported local charities. In these ways her actions were similar to her predecessor in Hobart, Governor Arthur’s wife, Eliza (Alexander 1999, p. 137). However, this is where the comparison ends. Lady

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<sup>84</sup> Lady Jane Franklin actually helped promote the name of Tasmania instead of “the awkward name of Van Diemen and the expletive Land” (in a letter by Sir John Franklin quoted in Woodward 1951, p. 227).

Jane stepped far beyond the nineteenth-century, socially-constructed boundaries for women – she erected a temple named Ancanthe in the outskirts of Hobart, travelled vast distances (often without her husband) and involved herself in government affairs which led to “charges of ‘petticoat government’” (Russell 2005b, pp. 48-9). Noting this contradiction, biographer Penny Russell describes Lady Jane as “simultaneously an awkward anomaly and a typical participant” of colonial society (2002, p. 19).

Lady Jane and her husband Sir John Franklin have a prominent place in Australian history. There are many references to the Franklins in Tasmania. In Danielle Wood’s Tasmanian novel, *The Alphabet of Light and Dark* (2003, pp. 156-57), the protagonist observes the name Franklin “attaching itself like a burr to so many Tasmanian things”. Aside from Franklin Square in the centre of Hobart, there is the town of Franklin, the Franklin Ranges, Franklin River, Franklin Street, ‘Lady Jane’s Apple Tree’ on the banks of the Tamar, and Lady Franklin Gallery, which was originally known as Ancanthe.<sup>85</sup>

There are two main strands characterising interest in Lady Jane: one relates to her adoption of an Aboriginal girl named Mathinna; the other relates to her search for her missing husband, the explorer Sir John Franklin. Many of the accounts of her adoption of Mathinna present her as selfish and ethnocentric. In his acclaimed novel *Wanting* (2008), Tasmanian author Richard Flanagan wove a story around Lady Jane’s time in Tasmania, her adoption of Mathinna and her quest to find her husband.<sup>86</sup> Flanagan portrays Lady Jane as barren and too concerned with what others think to openly show affection towards her adopted Aboriginal daughter. More recently, a *Ten Days*

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<sup>85</sup> For more on the naming of places in Tasmania see Moore-Robinson (1935).

<sup>86</sup> Flanagan describes his characters and themes on his website (see Flanagan 2008).

on the Island installation by Craig Walsh, *Digital Odyssey* (2011), projected the faces of Lady Jane and Sir John onto trees in Franklin Square that looked at each other, whispered a little and very noticeably blinked. The moving faces brought a vivid presence to the square.<sup>87</sup> Underneath Sir John's statue, a depiction of Mathinna struggled in jarring, sudden movements within the confines of the plinth. As in Flanagan's novel in which Mathinna is used as Lady Jane's social experiment and physically abused by Sir John, this work implied mistreatment towards Mathinna with her body awkwardly crouched and caged within the plinth. In a different, desperate and sorrowful tone, one of Adrienne Eberhard's poems evokes a loving, motherly figure of Lady Jane who yearned to care and protect Mathinna only to regretfully realise that Mathinna was never really her child (Eberhard 2004, pp. 44-9).

Aside from Mathinna, much of the focus on Lady Jane's life has been directed at her search for her husband, Sir John Franklin, who failed to return from his quest to discover the North West Passage. From 1850 to 1857, Lady Jane organised many searches for Sir John using her own funds (Elce 2009, p. 22). Despite her agency, she has frequently been remembered in the shadow of her husband as incomplete without him. She has been seen as a tragic heroine who gave her life for love. As the perfectly devout Victorian wife, her heart was perceived to have sailed away in the vessels she arranged to look for her husband. This representation eclipses her strength and independence. An obituary in the *New York Times* expressed: "Lady Jane's life will always be

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<sup>87</sup> Franklin Square is the major site which commemorates Sir John Franklin in Hobart but it has a somewhat messy history. Franklin Square was never celebrated with an official opening because Hobartians were divided over the direction of Sir John Franklin's statue – the seafarers thought it was scandalous that his statue had its back to the sea but many thought it would be even worse if his back was turned on Hobart town (Moore-Robinson 1935).

pointed to as one of wonderful wifely devotion, no less than of the deepest of sorrow” (‘Obituary: Lady Jane Franklin’ 1875).

Lendis was primarily drawn to Lady Jane because she was an outsider whose desires did not always conform to the norms of her time. He sees her as a remarkable woman who did as she pleased, despite attempts to restrict her from doing so. In 2008, Lendis spent time at the Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge, England, as an artist in residence. There he searched through diaries, letters and official documents relating to Lady Jane’s search for her husband. Once he became familiar with her cramped handwriting, reading the original documents became “a transcendent experience” for Lendis (Lendis 2010). In the presence of these historic, tangible documents he felt an intimacy with Lady Jane. He was moved by material which had largely been discarded by historians, including personal letters from Lady Jane’s close friends, children and well-wishing strangers who wrote to Lady Jane about their dreams of her finding Sir John. This remarkable sharing of dreams is the kind of peripheral detail in historical record that inspires Lendis, putting him emotionally closer to Lady Jane. As I will illustrate later in this chapter, Lendis does not see Lady Jane as a submissive widow.

Despite her position as governess, there are surprisingly few portraits of Lady Jane made from life. The best known examples, which have adorned the cover of several books, are by Amelie Romily and Thomas Bock (see Figure 21 and Figure 22). Portraits such as these made in the nineteenth century present Lady Jane with soft curls, large eyes, prominent cheekbones and small but full lips. She appears feminine and refined.



Figure 21: Amelie Romily,  
*Lady Jane Franklin*, 1816



Figure 22: Thomas Bock,  
*Lady Jane Franklin*, c.1840

Lendis does not preserve any element of likeness to Lady Jane; he stylises her face, reddens her hair and erases any possibility of recognition through facial features. He also at times creates proxy portraits of Lady Jane, depicting her in the guise of English heroines, a strategy which will be explored in a later section of this chapter. Lendis is personally and aesthetically driven to paint Lady Jane. He visually revives Lady Jane in his own way rather than through imitation of previous portraits. His portrayals of Lady Jane thus complement the criteria of imagined portraits described in Chapter One.

Concentrating on the medium of paint, Lendis explores what the material itself can express. In some works he combines the high gloss, multi-layered varnished finish of Renaissance paintings with the raw thick texture of oil paint dabbed on in thick splodges. He experiments with waxes, paint thinners, varnishes, and incorporating pieces of cloth into his paintings to combine traditional painting techniques, European aesthetics and a modern



vision. In a similar vein to Nolan who strived for an emotional connection with viewers, Lendis aims to connect with the viewer on a “purely emotional level” through the expressive use of paint (Lendis 2006, p. 6).

Lendis’s main interest in Lady Jane is in her travels through Tasmania. Lady Jane was an avid explorer. Her travels have largely been overshadowed by her dedicated search for her husband as this behaviour better conformed to Victorian norms for women. When Lendis travels around Tasmania, he envisages Lady Jane, the seemingly unlikely Victorian, female adventurer. He portrays Lady Jane as a woman who boldly ventured where other women of her class feared to tread. In his imagined portraits, Lady Jane is not remembered solely in relation to Mathinna or Sir John Franklin; she is most frequently a lone figure in the land.

### Lady Jane the Adventurer

Lady Jane was an avid adventurer. She loved to venture into “the bush itself, where there were no dwellings or inhabitants” (Woodward 1951, p. 231). She even “wore out two pairs of boots” becoming the first known European woman to climb Mt Wellington in Tasmania (Rait 1938, p. 6).<sup>88</sup> The journey that captivated Lendis most was the overland trip from Hobart to Macquarie Harbour that the Franklins made in 1842,<sup>89</sup> especially the part about Lady Jane

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<sup>88</sup> At least two other white women, Lady Jane’s step-daughter, Eleanor, and Mrs Maconochie (wife of the private secretary), were part of this expedition (Rait 1938). There were most likely servants whose presence was not recorded.

<sup>89</sup> The expedition party comprised of Dr Milligan (Franklin’s A.D.C. and orderly and Jane’s maid), David Burn “who wrote tragedies and persuaded the Franklins to take him so he could compose a narrative of the journey” and a working party of twenty convicts (Woodward 1951, p. 237).

“being carried across the Tasmanian wilderness in a palanquin like a queen” (Shannon 2007).<sup>90</sup>

The overland journey required a lot of effort on the part of surveyors. It took two years for the track to be made for the Franklins’ journey. James Erskine Calder, the Government surveyor, was confident that the trek could be made “safely within a week” (Woodward 1951, p. 237). When Calder was informed he could choose the path, he went “straight ahead like a rhinoceros well knowing that no-one except our old dare-devil Governor would ever travel over it” (quoted in Thwaites 1966). He purposefully made the path treacherous to amplify the sublime conviction put forth in the eighteenth-century theories of Immanuel Kant (1960 [1764]), Edmund Burke (1970 [1759]) and William Gilpin (1972 [1794]) that one could glimpse God in the face of powerful, terrifying and pristine landscapes.

Along the way Sir John claimed authority on the land they trekked by naming places. Lady Jane also had agency in requesting place names. For example, Lady Jane named a twenty-two foot waterfall Bagota after Sir John’s personal assistant (McGoogan 2006, p. 244). As an act which symbolically transforms space into place, naming is a powerful way of inscribing one’s passage on the world (Carter 1987, p. xxiv; 67). Several of the place names the Franklins chose reflect their experiences of travelling through that region. Detention Corner, for instance, was named such by Sir John because it is where he, Lady Jane and their expedition team were forced to “halt for a week” on the way to Macquarie Harbour (Calder 1984 [1875], p. 69).

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<sup>90</sup> Lady Jane fell ill on the journey but was determined to continue. Thus a “rude sort of palanquin” was constructed for her to be carried by four convicts who allegedly volunteered. They carried her for around fifty kilometres, making her only walk when the terrain became “too steep or scrubby for such a means of conveyance” (Calder 1984 [1875], p. 55).

As romantic attitudes took hold in the 1830s, “human progress came to be spoken of as a capacity to enjoy the unspoiled beauties of Australia in their sublime aspects” (Smith 1960, p. 224). In Calder’s eyes, Lady Jane was “innately brave, a perfect heroine” (Calder 1984 [1875], p. 9) for embarking on such a perilous journey. She has been recorded as the first white woman to make this journey, although her maid, Miss Stewart, accompanied her the whole way. The trip that Calder was sure they could make in a week ended up taking a gruelling two months (Woodward 1951, p. 237). Calder depicted Lady Jane enjoying nature in an emotionally-charged way, illustrating her as “... under the sky, on the tops of mountains, by the side of rapid rivers, looking over lakes and standing amid lightnings: and in these perilous positions admiring the Creator of it all” (Calder 1984 [1875], p. 11). In Lendis’s imagined portraits, Lady Jane is similarly immersed in wild landscapes.

Journeys into the wilderness were popular amongst men in Victorian England. Ostensibly discovering new places no one had ever seen before was seen as spiritually uplifting (Casey 1993, p. 231). However, in the Victorian era the sphere for women was the domestic space of the home. This was “the one secure refuge for virtuous femininity, [whereas] travel in all its forms assured new dangers for women, and required vigilant protection” (Russell 2002, p. 11). Women travellers not only deviated from the norms of femininity, but also differed greatly from male travellers who rationalised their journeys as essential quests to discover more of their masculinity. Burn (1977 [1842], p. 8) admits that “no great results” were expected from the Franklins’ overland voyage to Macquarie Harbour. Yet there was little concern about the futility of the trip – men could travel for the purpose of adventure, but women, on the

other hand, could not.<sup>91</sup> Russell proposes that “travel gave [Lady] Jane some sense of mastery over the world” (2002, p. 5). It no doubt fed her curious mind and allowed her to escape the constraints of her society.<sup>92</sup>

On her 1842 journey to Macquarie Harbour, no known words from Lady Jane exist; if she kept a diary it has been lost. Lendis used this void to imagine her experiences. He moved away from directly narrating episodes from this journey and instead portrayed Lady Jane alone drifting through the land in a dream-like manner in his series *Dreaming of the River* (2004). He gave her the freedom she never had in real life and which she has frequently been denied in historical memory where her life has been tied to Sir John.

### Memories of Previous Visions

In his exhibition *Dreaming of the River*, and in most subsequent works, overt references to England permeate Lendis’s paintings of Lady Jane. As he imagines Lady Jane’s journey through the Tasmanian wilderness, he associates the Tasmanian landscape with England. A shared English lens on the land is one of the strongest links between Lendis and Lady Jane. In many of his imagined portraits of Lady Jane, he incorporates colonial landscape paintings by artists such as John Glover which mediated the Tasmanian landscape through a European lens – paintings made during Lady Jane’s time in Tasmania. Including these glimpses of landscapes enables Lendis to contemplate and work through his own English heritage.

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<sup>91</sup> Much criticism was thus directed at Lady Jane’s involvement. For example, an article in the *Colonial Times* (‘Domestic Intelligence’ 1843) expressed frustration over the cost of accommodating Lady Jane, especially when (in the minds of the male colonists) there was no conceivable reason for her to be there.

<sup>92</sup> This has been a frequent interpretation of the motivation of female travellers (see Bassnett 2002, p. 234).

Since Bernard Smith's groundbreaking text *Place, Taste and Tradition* (1945), it has been accepted that colonial artists interpreted the Australian landscape along European terms, treating it as if it were an extension of their familiar homeland and shaping it to conform to certain pictorial conventions, often of the Sublime or Picturesque. Smith argued (1945, p. 28):

To say, then, that the early colonists saw Australian landscape with English eyes is to say that they endowed that landscape with the formal qualities of the landscapes to which they were accustomed in England, when they viewed the landscape aesthetically.

This mode of thought has become so widely accepted that Australian art historians Tim Bonyhady and Christopher Allen describe it as a cliché (in Copeland 1998). However, what is less commonly considered is that a transplanted vision continues to affect some contemporary artists, like Lendis, who have moved to Australia.

Lendis grew up in Nottingham, England. Although nowadays it is an industrial area, it was once mythically associated with thick green forests as the setting of the legend of Robin Hood. To Lendis, the old natural forests in Nottingham encapsulate the idea of wilderness where man is but a tiny spec, overwhelmed by nature. Lendis imagines that these forests in Nottingham survived up until the twentieth century. He sees his parent's generation and his generation as the ones responsible for violating the natural land. In effect, human activity in the twentieth century further altered the land, but it was not the sole culprit. According to Simon Schama (1996, p. 142), the image of the greenwood put forth in Robin Hood tales was a fantasy – the real place had been cleared centuries earlier by Celtic cultures, then by the Romans. Lendis is nostalgic in the true sense of the word, which Edward Casey describes as grieving over the non-return home (1993, p. 38), for the unreachable, illusory prior version of his homeland.

Lendis associates forests with what he calls his “Anglo Saxon ‘dreaming’” (Lendis 2006, p. 8). The image Lendis held of the old forests in Nottingham was so strong that when he arrived in Tasmania he felt a strange sense of recognition:

In Tasmania, I found what I had only carried as a memory: a lost landscape, threatened but not demolished by violations of man. Somewhere, I realised, it had been my search and desire for the redemption of this land that had driven my departure from England (Lendis 2006, p. 14).

In the natural forests of the South West coast of Tasmania, where Lady Jane traversed in 1842, Lendis felt connected to the forests of European myths: “The overwhelming European-ness [*sic*] of Tasmania’s forests provided me with a bridge [...] back to the European ancestry to which I felt I belonged” (2006, p. 14). For Lendis, the lost forests of Nottingham equal a direct route back to his Anglo Saxon ancestry, to gaining a stronger sense of heritage. The landscape of South West Tasmania offered him a pocket of a preserved forest akin to the one he had been seeking. As a fellow English citizen and, most importantly, someone who immersed herself in natural landscapes, Lady Jane gave Lendis a connection to the Tasmanian landscape. Travelling through the land, he imagined her experiences and how, in this place with its seemingly timeless essence, he could see and experience the natural world as she would have.

Rather than representing the unique properties of the Australian land as Nolan did, Lendis often depicts Lady Jane amongst dark forests. His relationship with the Tasmanian land is always tied to his English imagination and European aesthetic vision. The similarity of Tasmania to lost English forests nourishes Lendis. Immersed in the damp, tall-treed blackwood and sassafras forests of South West Tasmania he recalled: “I could almost imagine myself as a child standing in the remnants of the black forests in England”

(quoted in Cica 2011, p. 164).<sup>93</sup> He is affected simultaneously by feelings of recognition and difference.

I stand in this country that looks so like the long-gone forests of England and I try to unlock the riddle of being in this time and space that is a memory that I carry from another life in another world (Lendis 2006, p. 61).

Lendis's paintings are "about finding a place by imagining it" (Thow 2007). His familiarity with previous interpretations of a place affects his experience of that place. When he is contemplating Lady Jane in the land he is also haunted by nineteenth-century portrayals of the land. The glimpses of colonial landscape paintings Lendis includes in his imagined portraits of Lady Jane appear as windows in his paintings. They are typically vague, as if seen through "a dream of fog" which is how Lendis describes experiencing the land (Art Society of Tasmania, no date).

Lendis fears the disruptive tendencies of humankind. Yearning for a natural environment, he savours the idea of wilderness as a place "free of the ugliness of man" (Lendis 2006, p. 12). This longing is symptomatic of what environmental historian William Cronon describes as perceiving the wilderness as the "natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilisation that has lost its soul" (1995, p. 79). Wilderness has long been culturally constructed as the "best antidote to our human selves" (Cronon 1995, p. 69).<sup>94</sup> As described earlier, exploring the wilderness in Lady Jane's time was similarly seen as a way of nurturing the soul. Lendis's longing for a pre-industrial England is comparable to that of British settlers who arrived in Australia with desires to find what was lost in England: a nostalgic, largely imaginary vision of an

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<sup>93</sup> This comparison was also made by David Burn who referred to the South West forest of Tasmania as "the Black Forest" (Burn 1977 [1842], p. 25) in his narration of the Franklins overland journey to Macquarie Harbour.

<sup>94</sup> Although Cronon's discussion is American I feel it is highly relevant to Australian constructions of wilderness.

agrarian lifestyle prior to industrialisation and urbanisation (Goodall 1996, pp. 39-42; Willis 1993, p. 65).

Lendis weaves parts of paintings by artists such as John Glover and Knut Bull into his imagined portraits of Lady Jane as they appear to portray a state of nature before it has been anthropogenically disturbed. However, it is important to note, as Bill Gammage has persuasively illustrated (2011), that the supposedly pristine landscapes colonial artists recorded were unknowingly altered by Aboriginal land management.<sup>95</sup> One of Lendis's early imagined portraits of Lady Jane, *Detention Blend* (2004) (Figure 23), for instance, includes a cropped segment of a painting in the style of one of Knut Bull's Romantic sunrise paintings.<sup>96</sup> In this painting Lady Jane is being carried out of darkness towards a sunlit landscape which has an inviting and awe-inspiring magnetism. However, this idyllic Tasmanian scene hovers as a mirage, projecting the pleasing yet unattainable promise of a connection with a redemptive wilderness.

In the top centre of *Detention Blend*, an orange body of a fox is depicted with its neck bent in a right angle that parallels Lady Jane's body.<sup>97</sup> The fox glows against the darkened background symbolising the intrusive move into foreign land. It seems to look on, scrutinising Lady Jane's transition from England to Tasmania. Like the fox, she is an intruder in the land. Lady Jane cannot smoothly enter this land; she is held in detention, lying along the bottom of the canvas, body encased in a white rectangle. Her head is

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<sup>95</sup> For specific examples of paintings which reveal Aboriginal land management see the chapter 'Canvas of a Continent' in Bill Gammage's book *The Biggest Estate on Earth* (2011, pp. 18-100).

<sup>96</sup> Bull was born in Norway and transported to Australia for forging a £100 note in London (Heys 2006). For an example of such a sunrise painting, see Bull's painting *Entrance to the River Derwent from the Springs, Mount Wellington* (1856)

<sup>97</sup> There were no foxes in Tasmania when Lady Jane was here. Foxes have only recently been spotted in Tasmania. Nowadays they are an introduced pest.



awkwardly angled and her arms are doubled as if moving, struggling against the restraint of the coffin-like shape that holds her body. This may indicate the constraints of being a Victorian wife whose society dictates that her place is in the home.



Figure 23: John Lendis, *Detention Blend*, 2004

*Detention Blend* presents a figure that cannot freely enter the land. This jarring seems indicative of how Lendis himself felt – drawn to the magnificent new Tasmanian land with its potential to put him in touch with his ancestry yet wary of how to fit in, knowing that its familiar appearance is just a facade and that once entered it may lose the sense of lost England he so desperately wants it to provide. Suspended horizontally, there is a sense in *Detention Blend* that Lady Jane is being carried, perhaps a reference to her journey from England to Australia or to her travel in the palanquin. Thinly traced arms also reach out to her waist. Reaching arms are a motif of Lendis's imagined portraits. I propose they symbolise Lendis's attachment to Lady Jane, his need to be with her as he uses her to explore his own relationship with the land.

The word ‘detention’ in the title may not only refer to an emotional state, it may also allude to Detention Corner: the place where the Franklins had to halt on their journey to Macquarie Harbour. Several of Lendis’s titles poetically allude to places, episodes of Lady Jane’s life, or emotional states such as ‘solitude’, ‘solace’ and ‘lamentation’. Positioned lying down, this imagined portrait evokes dreaming, especially when juxtaposed with other works shown in this exhibition, such as *Sleeping Lady Jane* (2004), *Dreaming of Lady Jane* (2004) and *Dreaming of Home* (2004).<sup>98</sup> The evocation of dreaming and the inclusion of the colonial landscape suggest Lendis is concerned with experiencing the land first and foremost through the mind.

### In the Guise of an English Heroine

In Lady Jane’s day, Romantic artists, such as those in the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, rebelled against industrialisation by revisiting tales from the past and presenting them in a dreamlike manner. Lendis explains that some of his paintings are “enmeshed with Victorian era Romantic poets and painters” (Pollock Gallery 2004), such as John Everett Millais’ *Ophelia* (1851-52) and John William Waterhouse’s *The Lady of Shalott* (1888). Alluding to these sources contextualises Lady Jane within Victorian English culture but also sets her apart from Victorian ideals while allowing Lendis to explore another dimension of his English heritage.

During the years searching for her husband, Lady Jane had laudanum-induced fanciful dreams. In Lendis’s oneiric visions of Lady Jane, she is at times melancholic but mostly freed by Sir John’s absence. In her article, ‘Wife

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<sup>98</sup> See Wood (2004).

Stories: Narrating Marriage and Self in the Life of Jane Franklin' (2005b, p. 46), Russell proposes that in her marriage to Sir John, the explorer, Lady Jane was allowed more autonomy than most Victorian wives because of his long absences abroad. When he went missing she could use the loss as a "potent weapon" (Russell 2005b, p. 52) knowing it would stir sympathy and that she would largely be left alone to mourn.<sup>99</sup> In this light, Sir John's disappearance freed Lady Jane from unfavourable public scrutiny and allowed her complete autonomy. I see a similar interpretation in some of Lendis's imagined portraits. Lady Jane's devotion to her husband led many to see her in a tragic light with her soul destined to float over an endless ocean like Ophelia and the Lady of Shallot. Conversely, when Lendis casts Lady Jane as Ophelia and the Lady of Shallot, he does not conform to the emotional coupling of beauty and death of previous illustrations, especially those of the Pre-Raphaelites; he draws on these tropes to re-present Lady Jane.

*Beneath the Night* (2010) (Figure 24) is strongly reminiscent of John Everett Millias' famous painting, *Ophelia* (1851-52) (Figure 25). Many of Lendis's imagined portraits of Lady Jane take this Ophelia-like form, suspended in a river.<sup>100</sup> Ophelia was a popular subject in Victorian England. She paired death and beauty and reflected the ultimate loss of life for love.<sup>101</sup> Yet Lendis's synthesis of Lady Jane and Ophelia differs from the Pre-Raphaelite depictions. Lendis's figure lies on top of the water. This contrasts with Millias's Ophelia who is mostly submersed with her dress and bodice

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<sup>99</sup> Earning sympathy seems particularly desirable for Lady Franklin after being vilified by much of the Hobart press for having too much control in government affairs (see Russell 2005b, pp. 48-52).

<sup>100</sup> For example: *Ancanthe* (2009), *Iseult* (2010), *Across the Night* (2010) and *Sea of Dreams* (2011).

<sup>101</sup> Ophelia was a character in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* who was driven mad with grief after her father was murdered by her lover.

skimming the surface but the weight of her body beneath suggesting that she will soon be pulled completely under. The flowing materials of Ophelia's dress appear dense and heavy, whereas the simple gown of Lady Jane resembles a stream of silk being effortlessly carried by the water. The thin veil of paint is semi-transparent; rather than being overlaid on top of the river, it drifts as a membrane, as part of the river's skin. Lady Jane is not on the brink of death; her eyes look out to the viewer, not up to the heavens. In *Beneath the Night* she is not a passive victim of fate but a persistent and haunting presence.

In Millias' depiction, the pale dead Ophelia is set against a living backdrop of true-to-life foliage: fresh, lime-green shoots, white and pink roses and other meticulously painted flowers.<sup>102</sup> Conversely, in *Beneath the Night* Lendis creates a simple backdrop – an ashen pattern of leaves stamped onto the canvas like handprints. The silver leaves seem to have a dual function: they are a comforting veil, shielding Lady Jane from the dangerous forest at night but they are also a screen that prevents the viewer's eye from travelling into the landscape. They push the background toward the viewer in a flat block rather than mark a channel of depth. This directs the focus to Lady Jane. There are several references to Lady Jane's life in this image. The falling white splotches of snowflakes foreshadow Lady Jane's future loss of her husband to the Arctic Circle. In the top right corner of the image the patterned leaves have been wiped back to reveal a foggy glimpse of Tasmania's Government House.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Millias painted his landscapes *plein air*. The landscape in *Ophelia* was painted at Hogsmill River at Ewell in Surrey (Curnow, no date).

<sup>103</sup> This is a depiction of Government House as it stands today in Queens Domain, Hobart. This Government House was built in 1855, thus it is not the building the Franklins resided in. As Danielle Wood has noted (2004), "the artist toys with history, portraying its essence while remaining unconstrained by its specificity."



Figure 24: John Lendis, *Beneath the Night*, 2010



Figure 25: John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1851-52

The deep brown tones of the river in *Beneath the Night* immediately remind me of the Gordon River on Tasmania's West Coast which is, at times, so dark and motionless it resembles a black mirror. However, at dusk and nightfall the dark surface captures rather than reflects. Lendis recalls: "I was on one side and the subject of my gaze was hidden beneath the skin of the [Gordon] River's surface" (Lendis 2006, pp. 9-10). This is the river that witnessed Lady Jane's travel in 1842. In *Beneath the Night* it is almost as if it has stored a piece of her spirit.

The Gordon River had a profound impact on Lendis's interaction with the Tasmanian landscape. It provided him with a means of entering and travelling through the densely forested West Coast. In his own words: "I was travelling into the heart of nature, straight through the middle of the cacophonous, disorienting forests that had previously distracted me" (Lendis 2006, p. 10). The Gordon River gave Lendis a sense of peace in the land – it is where he began to feel at one with the Tasmanian wilderness and where he felt closest to Lady Jane. When Lendis was travelling up the Gordon River he documented his experience with photographs rather than through sketching. These photographs captured moments of curved pattern in the river's surface, evanescent lines that traced Lendis's passage. He later translated these lines into paint. Including Lady Jane imbued the river with secret memory and ensured his paintings would not slip entirely into abstraction.<sup>104</sup> The Gordon River has become a motif in many of Lendis's imagined portraits of Lady Jane, appearing as a "symbol for a life force or power that runs through and behind images from both current and past experiences" (Lendis 2006, p. 49).

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<sup>104</sup> In his Masters exegesis, Lendis describes feeling as if his paintings of the river alone were slipping into abstraction which is not what he wanted (Lendis 2006, p. 40).



Another of Lendis's imagined portraits of Lady Jane, this time in the guise of the Lady of Shallot,<sup>105</sup> also references travel through water. The Lady of Shallot cast herself out in a boat on a river to die after being cursed by looking at Sir Lancelot. Conversely, Lendis's imagined portrait, *The Lady of Shallot* (2010) (Figure 26), conveys a living, rather than a doomed, figure. She is seductive, gently flicking her auburn hair from her shoulder. Soft, nebulous lines outline her luminous form. The warm, saffron tones of the figure advance to the viewer while her gaze directly confronts them. It is not an apprehensive or solemn stare as Pre-Raphaelite artists William Holman Hunt and John William Waterhouse<sup>106</sup> depict the Lady of Shallot as possessing, it is a soft, almost hypnotic stare.

The direct gaze positions the viewer as Sir Lancelot. The longer I linger on looking into her eyes, the more I feel a sense of melancholy, as if I am slowly cursing her. Yet, she does not merely accept her curse. As she glares back she seems to curse the viewer. She is not locked in a room awaiting a doomed mistake but actively seeking out the viewer's gaze. Lendis does not illustrate a particular moment from the ballad, as artists have historically done. He combines all major moments: she is the sheltered lady at the window,<sup>107</sup> this is the moment she first sees Lancelot, and she is also within a boat on a river. In this collision of narrative, the figure is no longer subject to the consequence of action.

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<sup>105</sup> 'The Lady of Shallot' (1832) is a Victorian ballad by English poet Lord Alfred Tennyson.

<sup>106</sup> See John William Waterhouse's painting *The Lady of Shallot*, c.1894.

<sup>107</sup> The rectangular frame around her face creates a sense of her being seen through, or looking out through, a window.



Figure 26: John Lendis, *The Lady of Shallot*, 2010

The river in this painting is made with a pattern of fuscous lines huddled together. Patches of pattern and a murky landscape seem to be collaged together and set against smooth and mellow pearlescent rectangles to form an indistinct and largely abstract background.<sup>108</sup> The muted tones are soothing. With such a gentle background, the viewer's gaze remains focused on the figure. A thin line, like a thread from the Lady of Shallot's weaving, outlines a boat.<sup>109</sup> Barely visible, this boat does not contain her or seal her fate. It subtly alludes to her travels and to the ships she later sent out in search of her husband. In Lendis's portrayal, Lady Jane is more than a cursed woman or a grieving widow destined to surrender and sail to her end.

<sup>108</sup> Pattern is important to Lendis. He completed a diploma in textile design at Nottingham College of Art and Design and states that his "escape from the world was to lose myself in the detail of pattern" (Lendis 2006, p. 13).

<sup>109</sup> Since moving back to England, this boat shape has surfaced in several of Lendis's recent imagined portraits of Lady Jane, for example: *I Wish I Had a River to Skate Away On* (2010), *Laudanum* (year unknown), *Solace* (2010), *The White Willows* (2010), *Winter Boat* (2010) and *Tristan and Isolde* (2011).



Lendis's allusions to *Ophelia* and *The Lady of Shalott* associate Lady Jane with Victorian England and forge another link in the chain of Lendis's English heritage. Whilst reviving Lady Jane in a certain strong-willed manner, these paintings also enable Lendis to resolve another aspect of the English imagination which mediates his experience of the land.

### Consolidating the Distance

When Lendis began to travel, he continued to use Lady Jane as an "imagining framework" (Pollock Gallery 2004), explaining: "As I set off to undertake new work in England and Canada, I too find myself unravelling in a dream of fog and travel to distant shores" (Art Society of Tasmania, no date). He began to feel more connected to Lady Jane as he realised she was not just a catalyst to help negotiate an English perception of the Tasmanian landscape, she could more openly serve as a figure to guide him through new experiences, serving as an anchor to help him visually respond to new landscapes. Lendis travels with Lady Jane, as Sidney Nolan did with Ned Kelly.

In contrast to early imagined portraits of Lady Jane such as *Detention Blend* (Figure 23) which conveyed a somewhat awkward relationship between figure and land, more recent imagined portraits such as *3 Windows* (2010) (Figure 27) reflect an open embrace of different lands. These paintings were made after Lendis returned to England to live in Moreton-in-Marsh with his Tasmanian wife Celia Lendis (Chadwick 2011). However, "he still spends regular time in Tasmania and his work is as much about living between two landscapes as it is about either place" (Celia Lendis Contemporary 2011). There is a greater sense of reconciliation with the landscape in Lendis's recent work. These works also seem more sexually charged. In these paintings, Lady

Jane is not remembered for her wifely devotion, she is liberated as an independent woman.

In *3 Windows* (2010) the figure of Lady Jane seems to rejoice in her surroundings. Her body spans beyond the edges of the canvas; she is completely free. Lines of window panes and arms create a grid-like pattern which conveys a sense of composure. This imagined portrait appears to reflect Lendis's ease in his new surroundings as it presents a confident and seductive version of Lady Jane. The outstretched curve of her body and arms, her thrown back red-haired head and lowered eyelids present her as a *femme fatale*.<sup>110</sup> The presence of a bed and the arm reaching out below her waist further sexually charge the image. This is a very different presentation of Lady Jane to that of earlier works such as *Detention Blend* (Figure 23).

There are three windows in this landscape, each a vision of a different environment: an industrial European landscape, a Gloveresque landscape, and an icy landscape (a European winter or the Arctic Circle where Sir John Franklin lost his life). They are three landscapes that shaped Lady Jane's life. In this work, they are shown to coexist evenly. Lendis seems to be expressing his own excitement of feeling released. It is as if he has found the redemption he sought in Tasmania, that his desire to connect with his Anglo Saxon heritage through natural forests was achieved. This allowed him to move back to England feeling self-assured. In *3 Windows*, Lendis paints the industrial scene without disdain; it is not distorted and made grotesque as a horrible product of human occupation as he described earlier, it is portrayed rather straightforwardly in muted sandstone colours. It seems being in Tasmania lifted his grudge against the infrastructure of human industry.

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<sup>110</sup> See Kingsbury (1973).



Figure 27: John Lendis, *3 Windows*, 2010

The bed conjures a sense of comfort and feeling at home. It also creates an intimate space for personal reflection, private thoughts and dreams. Some feminists have argued that the bedroom has been an oppressive space for women in patriarchal societies where their purpose was to please their husbands (Frye 1983, p. 94). In *3 Windows* the bedroom is Lady Jane's domain.

Another imagined portrait also set in the bedroom, *From Ludgate to Macquarie Harbour* (2010) (Figure 28), also reflects a more resolved relationship between self and place. In this imagined portrait a bed is located in the centre of the painting. It is the gateway between Ludgate, the historic entrance to City of London,<sup>111</sup> and Macquarie Harbour. The two landscapes on the left and right of the painting appear so similar they could continue and be one and the same. However, they are framed differently: Ludgate on the left is

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<sup>111</sup> The name Ludgate was associated with King Lud who, in legend, built the gate in 66BC. However, it was actually built in 200AD by Romans (Ayto & Crofton 2005).

shown through Renaissance-styled arched windows while Macquarie Harbour on the right is visible through simple, straight-lined window panes. This may represent the history of each place as the Renaissance arches represent European history, whereas the simple panes represent the younger Australian colony.



Figure 28: John Lendis, *From Ludgate to Macquaire Harbour*, 2010

Lady Jane is shown with her back to the viewer as a kind of *rückenfigur*.<sup>112</sup> Her gaze is fixed toward the landscape through one of the windows. The landscapes have lost the Romantic sunrise glow prominent in early paintings such as *Detention Blend* (Figure 23). The mountain shapes are misty and ill-defined, depicted in cool grey-greens. The sublime sense of awe evident in some early imagined portraits has been subdued to reflect a contented and natural perception of the land.

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<sup>112</sup> A *rückenfigur* is contemplative figure seen from behind, most frequently associated with German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774 – 1840). The *rückenfigur* in some of Friedrich's paintings, such as *Wanderer above the Sea and Fog* (1818), urged the viewer to put themselves in the place of the figure and imagine experiencing the landscape.

The lucent surface of the land contrasts with the thick, textured white paint of Lady Jane's dress. This use of paint sets the figure apart from the land. It gives her a tangible essence and a sense of being in the foreground even though perspective is flattened with the bed being pressed vertically against the wall in a flat block. The figure appears somewhat vulnerable although also comfortable. Inspired by Renaissance paintings (Chadwick 2011, p. 144), many layers of glaze give the painting a high gloss finish. This method gives Lendis continuity with European traditions.

## Conclusion

John Lendis's imagined portraits of Lady Jane are a testament to David Burn's statement on the Franklins 1842 overland journey to Macquarie Harbour that "imagination naturally colours our preconceptions of persons and of places" (Burn 1977 [1842], p. 33). In Lendis's paintings, Lady Jane and the land both exist in a timeless, dreamscape that reflects many layers of perception, always filtered through the mind. Lendis questions: "Who is it, after all, that decides what is history and what is memory or fiction?" (Lendis 2010).

Connecting with Lady Jane in Tasmania facilitated Lendis's exploration of his Anglo-Saxon identity. His imagined portraits of Lady Jane intimately reflect changes in his personal life. Rather than struggling to fit in, or adapt his vision to fit the landscape, Lendis ended up feeling resolved that different landscapes and memories can coexist. Featuring simple motifs of windows, boats, and arms reaching for human touch, Lendis's imagined portraits of Lady Jane are poignant. Lady Jane drifts through the canvas, always connected to the land. Lendis reminds us of her adventurous spirit. In his works, she is not remembered purely as a devoted, grieving widow; she is an independent

woman who boldly traversed the land. Her Englishness, confidence, agency and love of travel made her a strong and suitable figure for Lendis to use.

Lady Jane was an outsider who deviated from Victorian feminine norms. While Lendis primarily focused on her travels, one aspect Lendis excluded, which leads into the next chapter, is her fixation on female convicts. Her letters indicate she felt compelled to help them, even though she was not sure how to (Alexander 2013, pp. 95-8). Much to her surprise, when she visited the Cascades Female Factory, a group of female convicts bent over, lifted up their skirts and began slapping their bare bottom cheeks (Alexander 2013, p. 100). These mischievous women became appropriately known as ‘the flash mob’.<sup>113</sup> This is one of the few stories to emerge from the enigmatic Female Factory. In contrast to Ned Kelly and Lady Jane, female convicts were largely written out of Australian historiography until the 1970s. Their marginalisation intrigued photographer Anne Ferran who first visited two Tasmanian Female Factory sites in the early 1990s.

In the next chapter I analyse Ferran’s anonymous group imagined portraits of the female convicts. As well as being of very different subjects, Ferran’s use of photography is markedly different from Nolan’s and Lendis’s use of paint.

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<sup>113</sup> This story may not have been true; it may have been fabricated or exaggerated (Alexander 2013, pp. 100-4).

## Chapter Four

### Writing Lost Lives in Light: Anne Ferran's Anonymous Imagined Portraits of Female Convicts

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*My 'real' subjects are all ones that can't be photographed directly, in the usual way.*

—Anne Ferran (quoted in Batchen 2009)

Since its inception, photography has been used as a tool to record people, places and events. It is a medium that traditionally requires the subject of the photograph to be present. Conversely, Anne Ferran's subjects are absent. Her 'real' subjects –the female convicts and their babies – vanished over a century ago. Unlike Ned Kelly and Lady Jane Franklin, the female convicts could not be studied in depth nor visualised through previous portraits. Do these figures have any less right to be remembered? How can they be remembered when so little of their lives has been recorded? Ferran can only recover names and scant details of appearance and offences; her subjects "can't be grasped visually" (Ferran in Batchen 2009). Ferran's photographs express how imagined portraits can be made when very little is known about the subjects.

The dearth of material pertaining to the female convicts intrigued Ferran, who has no interest in individuals who have made it into official historical record. Her photography explores the lives of women who have been deemed unimportant and largely excluded from mainstream historical accounts. In contrast to Nolan and Lendis who figuratively portrayed their subjects, Ferran's imagined portraits are empty; the focus is purely on the land. As the place of the erased history, Ferran promotes the land as a channel to the past. Ferran's works were made in response to specific sites which led her to explore the lives of women who once walked the same soil but whose presence

has since been erased. French historian Pierre Nora suggested that *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) require “a will to remember” (Nora 1989, p. 19). I argue that Ferran’s photographs trigger such a will.

I consider Ferran’s photographs imagined portraits because they are about specific historical figures – they are not just about a place layered with history, they spark remembrance of the female convicts and their children. Ferran’s empty imagined portraits invite viewers to consider the historical treatment of female convicts. In her essay ‘Under the House’ (in Brennan & Ferran 1995, p. 6), Evelyn Juers explains that visitors to historic sites are:

... caught between detachment and intrigue. If we choose to remain distant, we add a speck of indifference – a small donation – to the amnesia-dust and grave-dirt encrusting those gestures from the past. We look and shrug and leave. If instead we choose to simply stay a moment, we also unwittingly select one of the fragile connecting threads ...

Ferran encourages us to look at the land at Ross, take a thread and imaginatively trace it back to the past. She encourages intrigue so viewers can gain an awareness of women excluded from colonial history. Her photographs of the ground at Ross work towards this resolve.

Learning more about, and connecting with, marginalised women gives Ferran a sense of belonging. She describes feeling a “sense of absorption and reward” when creating works about historical figures (Ferran 2008). By engaging with lost lives, she gains a broader understanding of Australia’s past which enables her to feel at home (Ferran 2008). This chapter explores the ways in which Ferran’s artworks conjure a sense of the presence of the female inmates who have been erased from history. As I illustrate throughout this chapter, Ferran does not seek to prescribe a specific way to remember these women; she insists on encouraging personal empathetic connections. Since photography is, in the words of Eduardo Cadava, “nothing else than a writing



of light, a script of light” (1997, p. xvii), Ferran’s imagined portraits write lost lives in light.

### Drawn to Marginalised Female Lives

Ferran thrives on historical gaps and silences. Her work follows in the vein initiated by 1970s Australian feminism, which sought to identify and include women who had previously been excluded from mainstream Australian history.<sup>114</sup> For Ferran, this interest in marginalised women developed in 1988 during a residency in Cité, Paris. There, she was drawn to nineteenth-century photographs and archival records of women in a French asylum, the Salpêtrière Hospital. The body of work she produced, *I am the Rehearsal Master* (1989), depicted women acting out different psychological states, such as ecstasy. Back home in Australia, Ferran became interested in abused women,<sup>115</sup> women in nineteenth-century asylums and historic houses and, later, convict women and their babies. Much of her early work used material remains, such as clothing, to evoke these women and convey their anonymity. For example, Ferran took photographs of empty white bonnets during a residency at Hyde Park Barracks. These photographs, titled *Soft Caps* (1995) (Figure 29), were created as mementos of anonymity, representing “all unremembered people” (Ferran 2011).

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<sup>114</sup> Two pivotal texts which decisively wrote women into Australian history were Anne Summers’s *Damned Whores and God’s Police, the Colonisation of Women in Australia* (1975) and Miriam Dixson’s *The Real Matilda: Women and Identity in Australia* (1976).

<sup>115</sup> In *No Words for This* (1991) Ferran used video footage, slide projections of brick and glass walls – where the glass was inscribed with anecdotes from local newspapers – to convey violent crimes committed against women in Canberra (see Armstrong 2002, p. 439).



Figure 29: Anne Ferran, *Soft Caps*, 1995

At a historic house in rural New South Wales, named Rouse Hill House, Ferran similarly used material remains to emphasise the anonymity of her subjects. She spent six months making photograms of clothing she found at the house (for example, Figure 30). The overwhelming mass of physical material left by six generations of hoarders alienated Ferran from the family because she felt there was too much remaining evidence of their everyday lives. There was little enigma. Thus, Ferran decided not to make her work specifically about the family. As an alternative, her photograms “float free of their originators” (Ferran 2008). Like the bonnets, they were more intent on expressing anonymity than portraying the real people from which they originated.



Figure 30: Anne Ferran, *Untitled (baby's dress)*, 1998

While Ferran's photograms evoke a sense of presence in the raised arms and full shapes of the clothing, they are somewhat detached because they are devoid of context. Set against a black backdrop like the bonnets, there is no visible indication of where they are from; there is no sense of place. This dramatically contrasts with Ferran's more recent evocations of the Tasmanian female convicts which I will soon discuss where the place is all that is given.

Ferran's residencies at historic sites, such as Rouse House Hill and Hyde Park Barracks, greatly altered her perception of history. Before her residency at the Barracks, Ferran says she had "no sense of depth" about Sydney, the place in which she had grown up (Ferran 2008). The past felt remote and inaccessible, as if the "history of the place began with [her own] birth into it" (Ferran 2008). Ferran sees this as a condition of settler societies. Because Australia "invented itself not that long ago, it demands that we kind of

forget certain things about its beginnings” (Ferran 2008). To learn more about Australia’s past, Ferran immersed herself in former Female Factory sites in Tasmania.

The sheer emptiness of two old female convict sites at Ross and South Hobart captivated Ferran. Unlike other female convict sites in Australia, such as the Parramatta Female Factory, which remain relatively intact, there is virtually nothing remaining of the Female Factories at Ross and South Hobart. Ferran became mesmerised by the erasure of the past at these sites.

### The Female Factories at South Hobart and Ross

When Ferran began researching the lives of convict women in Tasmania in the early 1990s Female Factories were seldom discussed. This largely reflected the broader marginalisation of women in Australian history. Women were not part of the foundational vision of mateship promoted in Australian literature. Miriam Dixon attributes the lower position of women in Australia to negative attitudes towards convict women, “our founding mothers” (Dixon 1999, p. 115). Convict women were perceived in a far more negative light than convict men. The gender inequality was embedded in the language. Convict women were described in terms of “a special kind of ugliness, despair, demoralisation far beyond that of convict men” (Dixon 1999, p. 124). The combination of being female and low class made convict women doubly abhorrent.

In contrast to the much celebrated Tasmanian male convict site at Port Arthur, the Female Factories received little attention. Female convicts in Tasmania were rarely spoken of, even in their day, as the Factories were designed to keep convict women out of sight and out of mind. Surveyor General John Oxley expressed this view when he wrote in 1810: “A well

regulated factory is the only means of rendering the women convicts in some degree useful to the public, without being quite a burden to it” (quoted in Frost 2004, p. 4).

Female Factories were based on the model of the British Workhouse System (Casella 2001, p. 104). The term ‘factory’ was abbreviated from ‘manufactory’ as female convicts had to partake in “feminine industries, including sewing, textile production and laundry work” (Casella 2001, p. 104), which were intended to prevent idleness and facilitate reform. As well as working, the women were taught to be good Christians who understood not to sin. Governor Arthur believed this was key to their reform (Frost 2004, p. 16).

The Cascades Female Factory at South Hobart was established in 1828 under the cool, omnipresent shadow of Mount Wellington (see Figure 31). The “sun-starved site”, as historian Lucy Frost calls it (2004, p. 5), was a miserable place that also often flooded making its windowless, unplastered walls dank and unhygienic. It was converted from a brewery and was constantly changing and expanding as new ‘yards’ were introduced to segregate different classes of criminals.<sup>116</sup> Over its twenty-eight years in operation, thousands of women and babies lived within its walls.<sup>117</sup> Many prominent figures visited the factory during its operation, mainly out of curiosity.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> In 1844 a new system of probation for women was introduced. This involved introducing a number of stages, each designed to facilitate moral reform and enable the women to eventually be reintegrated into society. The first stages involved punishment and religious instruction, the last stages allowed the women to undertake contract work before being assigned to a household (Frost 2004, p. 25).

<sup>117</sup> The infants will be discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>118</sup> Lady Jane Franklin, who was discussed in the previous chapter, was one of many prominent figures who visited the Cascades Female Factory.



Figure 31: J.W. Beattie, *Photographs of Cascades' Female Factory, Hobart*, 1892

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Female Factory buildings at South Hobart were modified to house other outcasts, including “lunatics; paupers; the chronically ill, aged and blind; boys under sentence; women giving birth to illegitimate children; women deemed prostitutes and locked up under the Contagious Diseases Act” (Frost 2004, p. 44). In the 1920s<sup>119</sup> the buildings in Yard 1 were completely demolished. Two tennis courts and clubrooms were erected in their place, transforming the site into one of leisure. Over the next few decades the rest of the buildings were demolished. It was not until the 1970s that the taboo lifted regarding discussions of Tasmania’s convict past (Rayner 2004, p. 5) and an awareness of female convicts was brought forth and preservation of the site was proposed. Walking around the site today, four large stone walls enclose a small field of grass which was once Yard 1 of the Factory (Figure 32).

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<sup>119</sup> After the site was sold and divided into lots by the government (see Tasmanian Heritage Council 2008).

To outline another Yard, a manmade wall of caged stones has been created. Within these walls, open archaeological digs expose narrow solitary confinement cells (Figure 33). In recent years theatrical tours and re-enactments have been popular with tourists, the most famous of which, Louisa's Walk, has been rated the best tourist attraction in Hobart on Trip Advisor<sup>120</sup> since 2007. Inside Yard 1, information panels detail the history of the site and two individual stories of Catherine Bartly and Eliza James, who were chosen because they are the only women whose photographs have been recovered. The photographs were taken many years after the women left the Factory, when they had established free lives for themselves. There are no photographs of the women inside the Cascades Female Factory when it was operating. Their appearance was only recorded in information tables in dry facts, such as height, eye colour and hair colour.



Figure 32: The Cascades Female Factory Today



Figure 33: The solitary confinement cells of the Cascades Female Factory

Even less remains of the Ross Female Factory which operated from 1847 to 1854. The only building left standing at the Ross site is a Victorian cottage which originally housed the staff of the Female Factory (see Figure

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<sup>120</sup> Trip Advisor is a popular online travel site. Attractions are rated by travellers. See [www.tripadvisor.com.au](http://www.tripadvisor.com.au). For more on 'Louisa's Walk' see the travel review in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'A Tough Act to Follow' (Miller 2010).

34). The Factory buildings at Ross were torn apart in the late nineteenth century in an effort to conceal the past and assuage the embarrassing fact that most Tasmanians were descended from convicts, a feeling that became known as ‘the convict stain’. At the turn of the twentieth century there was very little indication that a Female Factory ever existed at Ross.<sup>121</sup> Despite the blank surface, below the ground the Ross site is “the most archaeologically intact female convict site in Australia” (Parks and Wildlife Services Tasmania 2008). Archaeological studies exposed the way the site was arranged to spatially impose hierarchies of power (see Casella 2001).



Figure 34: The Ross site today

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<sup>121</sup> For several decades after its closure the Ross site remained largely vacant except for a caretaker and some railway workers. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the cottage was extended using stones from the factory buildings to house the Superintendent of Police. Two years later, in 1897, the rest of the factory buildings were demolished. After the police left in 1938, a private family, the Knowles family, lived in the cottage until 1974. In 1980 the site was declared an Historic Site to be managed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (Parks and Wildlife Services Tasmania 2008).



This deliberate erasure fascinated Ferran who felt compelled to remember the female convicts and their babies. She photographed vestiges – the lumpy ground at Ross and the remaining wall of the Cascades Female Factory at South Hobart – intermittently for over a decade (Holmes & Batchen 2008, p. 50). In contrast to her earlier residencies at Hyde Park Barracks and Rouse House Hill, at Ross and South Hobart there was very little to work from, no clothing to tangibly feel and press to paper. Thus, Ferran found a different way to represent the female convicts, conscious that “Though its roots are in the past it is more truly about the here and now – about evidence, remembrance, disintegration, photography” (Ferran 2001).

Figurative representation fills absence with a token presence. Noticing the lack of figures in the work of other artists dealing with history in the exhibition *The Stuff of History* (2008), Ferran suggests that historical figures are not included, not only because of the physical impossibility, but primarily because to do so would be “a kind of travesty” (Ferran 2008). Instead of resurrecting the female convicts at Ross and South Hobart through some figurative form, her artworks raise an awareness of their existence and neglect. Ferran does not single out any one individual. She promotes the anonymous women collectively. Rather than attempting to fill the historical gap regarding these women, Ferran’s aim is to draw attention to it. She does so because she feels the absence of physical remains and the gaps in official records reveal:

a lot about our culture’s values and priorities so instead [of trying to close the gap] I try to make an image that will indicate where the gap is without filling it in or covering it over (Ferran 2011).

In the next three sections, I analyse three different kinds of artworks (one per section) which indicate the gap.

## Enigmatic Glimpses of the Past

The first works are from Ferran's 2001 exhibition *Lost to Worlds*. These works, which are all titled *Female House of Correction (after J W Beattie)*, convey the elusive nature of the past. Exploiting traditional notions of photography as a means to verify existence, they transform Beattie's original photographs to present a different kind of emotional response to the Factory.

To make the *Female House of Correction (after J W Beattie)* works, Ferran used a magnifying loupe to isolate small details of nineteenth-century photographer John Watt Beattie's photographs of the Cascades Female Factory (for example, Figure 31).<sup>122</sup> She then re-photographed these details of Beattie's photographs through the loupe. This led to a soft, blurred appearance with a bright central glow and heavy vignetting. As Geoffrey Batchen has observed, the appearance is comparable with photographs produced by a pin-hole camera (Holmes & Batchen 2008, p. 8). The way the images refuse to come into focus seems to echo the way history can never be clearly known in the present. Historians may shape the presentation of the past as they bridge the gaps in annals by finding patterns and imposing order to narrativise and moralise the past,<sup>123</sup> but the past remains inextricably distanced and elusive. The close-up focus and blurring create intriguing yet enigmatic glimpses into the Cascades Female Factory.

Ferran's re-photographed images place the viewer within close proximity of the now vanished Female Factory. The viewer is positioned as if hovering alongside or just above the walls of the Factory (for example, Figure

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<sup>122</sup> Beattie was a prominent Tasmanian photographer who was interested in convictism (amongst other interests). He photographed the Cascades Female Factory after it had closed. He was appointed official photographer to the colony in 1896 (Roe 1979). See also Cato (1955).

<sup>123</sup> See White (1987)

35 and Figure 37). While most of the images focus on the architecture of the building, in one of these images (Figure 36) the foggy silhouette of a horse and cart can be seen. There were no women in Beattie's photographs because the factory had already closed when he photographed the site.



Figure 35: Anne Ferran, *Female House of Correction* (after J. W. Beattie), 2000



Figure 36: Anne Ferran, *Female House of Correction* (after J. W. Beattie), 2000



Figure 37: Anne Ferran, *Female House of Correction* (after J. W. Beattie), 2000

Beattie's original photographs have a documentary function as they present vacant shells of buildings which have since been torn down. Art theorist Susan Sontag saw a photograph's ability to "furnish evidence" as a compelling aspect of the medium (2002 [1977], p. 5). Beattie's photographs certify that the Factory existed. They reveal the structure of the buildings and give an overall impression of the site as it existed. However, the straightforward appearance of Beattie's photographs and the guarantee of physical existence they provide is destabilised through Ferran's handling and re-presentation. Ferran lifts Beattie's photographs to another level as she transforms them into dreamlike apparitions. Rather than providing proof that the Factory existed, in *Female House of Correction* (after J. W. Beattie) the Female Factory now appears unreal.

The innovative treatment heightens the sense of intrigue as Ferran scrutinises and distorts minute details of Beattie's photographs. This charges the images with emotion. They no longer appear like old documents but are cryptic and affective. The sombre glimpses encourage viewers to imagine what

it might have been like inside the Factory walls. For instance, in Figure 38 the viewer is faced with a mysterious narrow window. I see this as the strongest of these artworks. It is an alluring and chilling image. The blurred effect animates the work making the tree leaves appear to flicker across the surface like a flock of birds. Eerily, the vignetting creates a sense of looking through a keyhole. It is almost as if the viewer is positioned as another inmate, peering through some gap to a parallel set of cells. There is something unsettling about this image in the way the viewer's eye is drawn into darkness, into the void of the black rectangular window. The window is presented as the gateway to an arcane chamber – the innards of the Female Factory. Notorious in its day for being filthy and miserable, a place of suffering and cruelty, also plagued with death, this is a place you may not want to see inside.

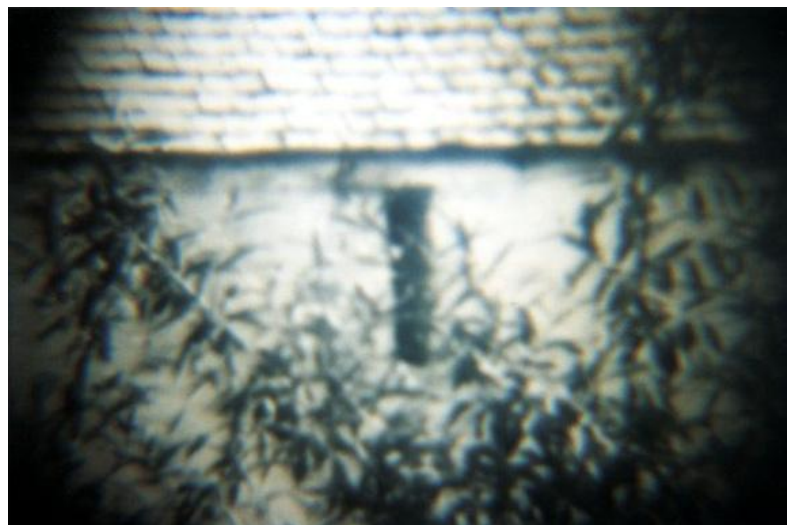


Figure 38: Anne Ferran, *Female House of Correction* (after J. W. Beattie), 2000

Geoffrey Batchen proposes that Ferran's work "transforms Australia's history into a kind of séance" (Holmes & Batchen 2008, p. 16) as it communes the past and the present. In placing viewers in close proximity to the Factory, these works incite empathy. They urge viewers to think of the women who were there, who suffered in darkness and who remained shadowed for so many

years. As Batchen writes, Ferran asks viewers “for a momentary acknowledgement of the suffering and loss that has made our own comfortable lives possible” (Holmes & Batchen 2008, p. 9). This empathetic connection is important in all of Ferran’s artworks about Tasmanian female convicts. It is an essential part of what makes them imagined portraits as they encourage viewers to connect with the historically neglected women. In her later series about the convict women at Ross the land itself emerges as the single most potent symbol of the absent women. Where land is used in conjunction with the figure in Nolan’s and Lendis’s imagined portraits, in Ferran’s work the land becomes the sole means of evoking her subjects.

### Emptiness and Absence

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes declared: “Every photograph is a certificate of presence” (1981, p. 87). Conversely, Ferran’s photographs of the ground at Ross in her series ‘Lost to Worlds’ are certificates of absence. Ferran uses photography in a way that counters its traditional function. According to critic John Berger, photography traditionally “relieves us of the burden of memory” as “the camera records in order to forget” (Berger 1984, p. 56). In Ferran’s case, because her subjects are temporally distanced, her photographs cannot record her subjects to relieve us of the memory burden. Ferran’s photographs of the ground at Ross are all empty which suggests that something is missing. The missing component is Ferran’s ‘real’ subject matter – not the ground but the long vanished female convicts. Unlike the bonnets and photograms of clothing I discussed earlier, no human form is conjured – the place is all that is given (for example, Figure 39).



Figure 39: Anne Ferran, *Lost to Worlds 13*, 2001

By creating empty imagined portraits, Ferran puts the onus on viewers to remember. This strategy echoes the work of other postmodern artists who have deliberately used absence to evoke lost lives, such as European artists who have reproduced absence to remember vanished victims of the Holocaust (see Young 1992). Presenting absence to insist on remembrance is a sensitive way of recovering lives that were lost to practices we now consider reprehensible. It counters didactic history paintings that portray a particular version of figures, traditionally celebrating the victors. According to professor of literary and Judaic studies James Young, accentuating absence forces viewers to internalise memory (1992, p. 294). As they now have an active duty in remembering, they are less likely to forget. Thus, absence can be a powerful tool of resuscitating otherwise neglected past lives.

The absence in Ferran's photographs differs from the time-related absence observed in most photography by theorists such as Berger. In 1972

Berger proposed that photography finds its meaning between “poles of absence and presence” (Berger 1972a, p. 180). Photography for Berger is all about time. The photographer’s job, in Berger’s eyes, is to select a moment. That isolated moment also evokes absence in not showing the moments leading up to or immediately following the frozen photographic moment, such as “a grief to a tragedy” (Berger 1972a, p. 181). Berger concludes that a compelling photograph is one that reveals as much about what is absent as what is present (1972a, p. 181). This may be true for photographs where the captured moment is privileged. However, Ferran’s photographs are not about one frozen moment in time. The captured moment is not important; it reveals nothing of the women. Rather than stemming from events that instantly precede or follow what the photograph depicts, the absence in Ferran’s photographs reflects the gulf in time, the physical absence of material at the site today and the intangible, but equally significant, lack of information available about the women detained at the site.

Ferran’s empty imagined portraits raise an awareness of the women through portraying their absence. Therefore, they function in a similar manner to the work of other notable artists who have used emptiness to evoke particular subjects.<sup>124</sup> Mexican photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo, for example, created empty ‘implied’ portraits to portray the way marginalised

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<sup>124</sup> Most of these portraits focus on intimate, interior spaces. Many of them portray chairs as expectant seats awaiting human presence. For instance, the day after Charles Dickens passed away, Luke Fildes completed an illustration of Dickens’s study featuring the chair he spent much of his life sitting in while writing. In 1888 Vincent van Gogh painted an empty chair representing himself, and another representing his colleague Paul Gauguin. In 1907 Gwen John painted the chair in her studio as an empty self-portrait. More recently, Tracey Emin and Dexter Dalwood have conjured their subjects through revealing their private living spaces. In 1998 Emin used an empty presentation of her bed as a self-portrait. Dalwood similarly lodges the identity of his subjects in the material surroundings of their bedrooms or lounge rooms. Emin’s and Dalwood’s empty portraits allow the interior spaces to speak of the subjects through symbolic items without the subjects themselves being present.

people are, in a sense, invisible in mainstream society – much like the female convicts. For instance, *The Washerwomen Implied* (1932) (Figure 40) voices the laundry workers existence and exclusion from society by emphasising their absence from the photographed scene. The presence of the women is implied but not perceptible. As Esther Gabara writes, “the drying sheets signify that work has been done, but the women’s bodies that do the work are erased” (2008, p. 226).



Figure 40: Manuel Alvarez Bravo, *Las lavanderas sobreentendidas* [*The Washerwomen Implied*], 1932

Bravo was interested in exploring straightforward perceptions of photography and its assumed links to reality. His *Absent Portrait* (1945), which depicts an empty dress sitting on a chair, “reminds the viewer that despite the figurative precision of photographic portraits, they always indicate the physical absence of the person pictured” (Gabara 2008, pp. 225-26). *Absent Portrait* conveys a fundamental feature of all photography – that, in Susan Sontag’s words, photographs are “both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence” (Sontag 2002 [1977], p. 16). Even when the photographic subject is present, their presence is an illusion. Photography can never contain what it represents.



Ferran similarly challenges assumptions about photography: “I try to play off the *facticity* (the claim to factuality) of the photographs I make against the subject matter of my work, always something that has disappeared from view or from record” (Ferran in Batchen 2009). Her empty imagined portraits convey photography’s limitations in being able to record historical subjects because of the difference in time – “a distance that cannot be photographed” (Ferran in Batchen 2009). Ferran understands that photography can never capture the historical evidence that may exist at the Female Factory sites since the camera’s eye can only fix the surface layer that blankets remnants of the past buried in the ground.<sup>125</sup> Her use of emptiness thus signals photography’s limitations. It exploits the conventional expectations of photography to convey that something is missing.

My idea was that the fact of there being so little to see would somehow be underlined or augmented (made more telling) by the knowledge that photography is a machine for showing you things — by its failure in other words (Ferran in Batchen 2009).

I propose this sense that something is missing is what distinguishes Ferran’s photographs of the ground from other pictorially similar works, such as Marion Marrison’s ‘Bonnet Hill Bush Series’ (1974-85) and Lynn Silverman’s ‘Horizons’ series (1979). Like Ferran, Marrison and Silverman pointed their cameras down, directly photographing the ground. With descriptive titles, Marrison’s and Silverman’s photographs document particular environments. However, unlike Ferran’s photographs, the ground they document feels complete. Most of Marrison’s Bonnet Hill photographs (for example, see Figure 41) focus on fallen trees and leaves. In Silverman’s

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<sup>125</sup> Ferran explained this in an interview with Geoffrey Batchen (2009).

‘Horizons’ series (for example, Figure 42) the photographs appear to map someone walking as feet are often glimpsed in the foreground.



Figure 41: Marion Marrison,  
*Triangular Stump*, 1974-85



Figure 42: Lyn Silverman,  
*Horizons #22*, 1979

In Ferran’s photographs, the ground links the viewer to the missing subjects. It relates to Cliff Spargo’s idea of “the natural world function[ing] as an otherwise absent witness” (Ehrenreich & Spargo 2009, p. 226). As a silent witness, the land is the one constant that can bridge the past and the present at Ross. It is where to begin searching for the past. As Ferran states of her photographs, “It’s like peering into the place where the photos would be if anyone at the time had thought the subject(s) worth recording” (Ferran in Batchen 2009). Ferran photographed the right place but at the wrong time. This belated being-in-time Ferran experienced is also evident in other photographic portrayals of historical subjects, as Ferran explored in her article, ‘Empty’ (2002).

In 'Empty', Ferran examined how other contemporary photographers<sup>126</sup> have dealt with historical subjects by creating works that appear to be empty. For instance, French artist Sophie Ristelhueber's aerial and ground-level photographs depict debris and land markings in Kuwait after the Gulf War. Without any perpetrators, victims or survivors, her photographs withhold the human horrors of the war (Ferran 2002, p. 6). Ferran proposes that "there is something communicative in this withholding from view" (Ferran 2002, p. 6). She theorises that these photographers use emptiness as a way of dealing with the historical distance they experience. Depicting empty, void spaces highlights the missed encounter: "The photographers have come too late upon their subjects and they know it; the absence of any life in the images is their way of saying so for all to see" (Ferran 2002, p. 8). This echoes Ferran's conviction about her own work. Her photographs of the ground confidently state and share the missed encounter.

Some of the depicted ground in Ferran's series 'Lost to Worlds' seems pregnant with stories bulging just under the surface, yet the overwhelming mass of subject matter appears vacant. I used to live in South Hobart, a short walk from the Cascades Female Factory site. When I was younger I was told that hundreds of bodies were buried in the hillside behind the Factory. From then on, the land always appeared lumpy and unsettled as if it could never be smoothed and purged of its past. For me, Ferran's photographs of the ground are so affective because they capture this sense of unease – that something so terrible happened the land is forever scarred and haunted by the past.

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<sup>126</sup> Glen Sloggett, Roni Horn, Sophie Ristelhueber, Alan Cohen and Helen Grace.

Most of Ferran's photographs of the ground are single images. However, *Lost to Worlds 10* (Figure 43) is a diptych which presents paired images of slightly different views of the same spot. The coupling of the images and use of black and white brings to mind nineteenth-century stereoscopic documentary photographs, although *Lost to Worlds 10* does not combine to create a three dimensional image. Even if it did, there would be little to be gained by the added depth. Nor does it work in a documentary sense since the 'real' subjects are not recorded. The focal point is on the darkened recessed dimples which contain the least amount of information. This suggests that absence is more important than anything that is present in the photograph.



Figure 43: Anne Ferran, *Lost to Worlds 10*, 2001

There is a melancholic mood to these photographs. The dark brooding greys are sombre, while the soft quality of the light accentuates the texture of the grass which appears coarse. This abrasive feel evokes the hard lives the female convicts led. In images such as Figure 43, the angle and lighting also lends a heavy feel to the image. Still in the same square format as the negatives that produced them, these photographs are rather understated. Ferran does not apotheosise the women of the Factories. Instead of memorialising their lives,

she conveys the sense of neglect they were shown. She imparts that these are the women history forgot.

Serendipitously, an accidental light leak caused some images to have “a bloom of light across them” (Ferran in Holmes & Batchen 2008, p. 51) (see Figure 44). For Ferran, this accident was exciting. Normally, these photographs would be discarded because technically they are flawed and not considered ‘good’ photography. This attitude of not being considered worthy was similar to the one afforded to the women of the Female Factories – their lives were not considered important enough to enter recorded history. In this way, keeping these ‘damaged’ photographs reflects her broader project. Ferran calls the accidents “a gift that the medium was trying to make to me” (2011). The light leaks also highlight photography’s limitations: that photography is not a transparent window to the world and that photography cannot be relied upon to record everything.



Figure 44: Anne Ferran, *Lost to Worlds 9*, 2001

The emptiness of the photographs became even more apparent when thirty of the images were transferred onto aluminium in 2008. In the accompanying catalogue to *The Ground, The Air*, a major survey show of Ferran's work exhibited at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and subsequently at the Wollongong City Gallery, Geoffrey Batchen likens these works to "metallic headstones" as the aluminium "turns these pictures into a kind of permanent memorial" (Holmes & Batchen 2008, p. 10). However, I see the aluminium as having a different function. To me, the aluminium creates a sense of fragility as the silver sheen of the aluminium evokes the daguerreotype process. Like daguerreotypes, I could imagine the depictions of the ground gently floating from the surface of the plates. The tonality of the aluminium artworks is also so soft that the viewer is required to move around the images to catch them in different lights. The daguerreotype process was used in Tasmania at the time the Female Factories were operating. Thus, as well as creating ethereal quality, the aluminium links the works to the mid-nineteenth century. They are not permanent memorials, but subtle, seemingly evanescent evocations.

In *The Ground, the Air* the works were placed alongside each other in even squares as in a large filmstrip. From a distance, this appeared to suggest there might be a narrative sequence (see Figure 45). While some of the natural curves seem to continue across panels, most of the images appeared disjointed. The serial form of these images echoes the move away from the single image that occurred in the 1970s, except Ferran's images are much larger than most serial images of 1970s photography. For Lynn Silverman, as for many artists of the 1970s, the serial form was about "not taking the camera for granted as a "natural" recorder of "reality" (Silverman 1980 n.p.). The serial form functions

in a similar way in Ferran's ground photographs. Together, the photographs of the ground at Ross offer disjointed, partial views of the landscape conveying the inability to photographically reconstruct the entire landscape.



Figure 45: Installation view at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart

The aluminium surface contributes to this notion; there is no one place to stand and take in the entire set of images as the reflecting light off the aluminium renders some details obscure from different angles. Unlike the traditional documentary format of the matt photographs from the 2001 series, the aluminium images are not static. On the aluminium surface, finely etched lines of overgrown grass appear like scratches (see Figure 46). Because the metal is empty in these lines, they brightly reflect the light and scintillate as viewers walk around the gallery. Viewers can momentarily glimpse themselves in the empty aluminium lines. Their presence thus fleetingly fills the land. This elicits an awareness of viewing the photographs and reminds the viewer of their role in completing the work – remembering the female convicts.





Figure 46: Anne Ferran, *Untitled [detail]*, 2008

Ferran's collected views of the land disrupt the way one photograph can be used to remember in a linear way. John Berger proposed "memory works radially, that is to say with an enormous number of associations all leading to the same event" (1984, p. 60). According to Berger, radial memory associations can be achieved through the right context. I propose the somewhat disconnected nature of the photographs of the ground at Ross, together with some information about the site, provide valuable traces to remember the female convicts. As Young states of monuments, contemporary works can only provide traces as they cannot contain the history in any direct way (1992, p. 279).

In Gail Jones's novel, *Sixty Lights*, set in the early days of photography, the protagonist, Lucy Strange, likens photography to a kiss because "it is devotional. Physical. A kind of honouring attention" (Jones 2005, p. 200). Ferran's imagined portraits are also like a kiss in this sense. They reflect devotion and special attention, the kind that was never shown to the women during their time at the Female Factory.



## Remembering the Infants

The most scandalous and disturbing facts about the Cascades and Ross Female Factories relate to the high rates of infant mortality. Ferran felt she needed to take a different approach to creating imagined portraits of the babies. Instead of using clothing<sup>127</sup> to outline their small and delicate form, or associating them directly with their mothers, Ferran found another way to recover memory of the babies. The short lives of the babies only exist in birth, death and burial records. Ferran sifted through these records to find the names of the babies and their cause of death – records which had barely been accessed at the time Ferran read through them. She created two works to communicate this information and conflated the names of the babies of the Cascades and Ross Factories, even though far more infants perished at the Cascades Factory. Learning about the mistreated babies enables a broader understanding of the lives of convict women in Australia.

To commemorate the short lives of the babies of convict women, Ferran created ‘In the ground on the air’ comprising three parts. The first part included eleven baby-sized blankets.<sup>128</sup> Nine of the blankets recorded the causes of death using the two first letters: BR for bronchitis, CA for catarrh, CO for convulsions, DI for diarrhoea, DY for dysentery, HO for hooping [*sic*] cough, MA for marasmus, PN for pneumonia and SY for syphilis. The letters were cut into the blankets, exposing contrasting colours underneath. As well as naming the causes, Ferran also wove the statistics of infant mortality for each cause in a dual coloured vertical bar graph. The bottom block of colour represents the

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<sup>127</sup> As she did with bonnets and clothing photograms discussed earlier.

<sup>128</sup> Ferran collaborated with English designer Frederique Denniel to make the blankets. Denniel helped with the design and did the weaving (Ferran 2006).

number of babies that died – information that could not be conveyed easily in a photograph.

In contrast to the aforementioned bonnets and photograms, there is no sense of a human form; the blankets are flat and empty. As with the ground at Ross, the resounding emptiness draws attention to the absence of the infants from historical memory. The way the blankets hang on the wall resembles washing hanging on a line – a sight the Female Factory laundry houses often provided. Hung closely together in one room, as they were exhibited in the Port Arthur Project (2006),<sup>129</sup> they evoke the close confines and overcrowding of the dormitories (see Figure 47).



Figure 47: Installation view at Watchman's Quarters, Port Arthur, 2006

Ferran explains: “The work also includes two ‘extra’ blankets, one light and one dark, that don’t conform to the code, and which I think of as representing the air and the ground, respectively” (2006) (for example, Figure

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<sup>129</sup> An exhibition at Port Arthur curated by Noel Frankham as part of the 2006 Ten Days of the Island Festival.

48). These elements are represented because the history of the female convict sites has disappeared “into the ground or vanished into the air” (Ferran in Batchen 2009). Hence the title, ‘In the ground on the air’. There is another level of significance to the ground and air dichotomy: the air symbolises the “intangibilities of memory, story, rumour, gossip” while the ground symbolises the factual evidence (Ferran in Batchen 2009). Ferran elaborates that the ground is too dull without the air so she aims to balance the two elements. She is motivated by a desire to restore emotion to the bare bones of history (Ferran 2011). Using tangible materials that relate to the Factories, Ferran brings the statistics to life.



Figure 48: Anne Ferran, *Untitled (air)*, 2006

Visually sharing the statistics on blankets is arguably more stimulating and more immediate than numbers on a page. Precision of the data is not important. What is important is conveying the significant proportion of babies

dying from different, possibly preventable, conditions.<sup>130</sup> The blankets also relate to the Factories and the time period. They remind viewers of the sewing that went on in the ‘manufactories’. The coarse blankets reflect the lack of care afforded to the babies.<sup>131</sup> They are “too lightweight and too harsh in texture to offer comfort” (Ferran 2006). The rough texture of the blankets also echoes the coarse-looking texture of the grass described earlier. The blankets have an earthy palette. For example, the bottom block colour in *Untitled (convulsions)* has an umber tinge, while the two tones of *Untitled (catarrh )* and *Untitled (dysenteria)* (Figure 49) are steel grey and charcoal. As well as appearing earthy, the limited colours are similar to those of black and white and sepia photographs; they have an historic feel.

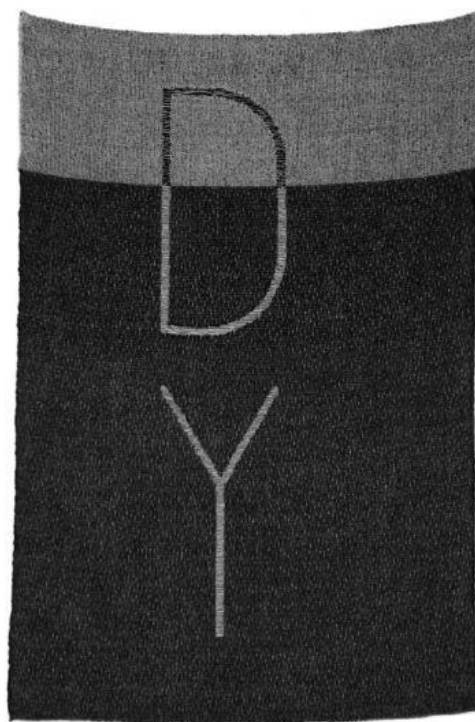


Figure 49: Anne Ferran, *Untitled (dysenteria)*, 2006

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<sup>130</sup> For example, marasmus could have been prevented with proper nutrition.

<sup>131</sup> Recent archeological research at the Ross Female Factory site has suggested that mothers were allowed to stay with their babies (Mounster 2011).

Women who fell pregnant in the Factories were punished, as were women who, after being assigned a service position, had a bastard child with their master (Tardif 1990, p. 30). “It would almost seem that the babies of convict women were deemed to have ‘inherited’ their mothers’ stigma” (Dixon 1999, p. 132). At the Cascades Female Factory, nurseries for the babies and their mothers<sup>132</sup> moved around several different locations. As early as 1829, the high numbers of infant deaths were reported with alarm in local newspapers (Rayner 2004, p. 146). The staggering number of deaths became a scandal again in 1838 (Frost 2004). The nursery was moved to a house in Liverpool Street to calm those distressed by the number of deaths. However, this solution did not last long. The nursery was soon moved again to a house in Dynnyrne and then back to a new nursery at the Factory. The new nursery was still crowded and the conditions were ripe for diseases to spread. In 1855 the high death rate was attributed to “mismanagement and neglect” (Daniels 1998, p. 119). A dry account of prostitution and infants starving from insufficient breast milk is put forth in Bryce Courtenay’s well-known novel *The Potato Factory* (1995, pp. 390-91).

The second and third parts of ‘In the ground on the air’ feature two videos. Each video combines names of the babies who died in the Factories with the photographs of the ground at Ross described earlier (see Figure 50). The first video was for the babies who died in their first year of life; the second for the babies who died in their second year. Ferran uncovered nearly 1500 babies who died at the South Hobart and Ross Female Factory sites. She expresses “It didn’t seem right trying to memorialise lives that had ended

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<sup>132</sup> Mothers stayed with their babies until the compulsory weaning period which was initially six months then extended to nine months. They were then subject to six months of hard labour.

before they began” (Ferran 2006). The videos are subtle and respectful. The names gently surface then float across, from right to left, before fading back into the ground. The length the baby’s name hovers over the ground represents the length of its lifespan. Each group of names represents a decade; there are three groups for the three decades of the operation of the Cascades Factory and the Ross Factory which operated within that time. Ferran likens the slow progression of the names to “the passage of clouds in the sky” (2006). The temporal nature of the video work is a powerful and evocative way to articulate and convey the brevity of life. It is a poetic and understated way to incite remembrance and compassion.



Figure 50: Anne Ferran, ‘In the Ground, on the Air’ (second part), 2006

On display at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, the background morphed between pairs of the different photographs of the ground at Ross. In the darkened viewing space, the videos were absorbing. The two videos were usually displayed facing each other in the same room. Standing between the two large projections created an immersive experience. In a similar manner to fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Netherlandish diptychs which used two images to create an intimate dialogue that was “conducive to prayer and contemplation” (Hand, Metzger & Spronk 2006), this work induced quiet, mediative reflection.

There was no sound track to this subtle video work. The silent passing of the names seems indicative of the way these babies silently passed into the records and became the subject of a kind of historical amnesia. To rescue the memory, viewers were encouraged to read each name aloud or whisper each name under their breath. The full names probably were not spoken since they were chosen and announced by their mothers in the Factories. This invitation to participate makes the viewer an active part of the process of remembering.

I found the gentle passing of names more poignant than a permanent list of names on a memorial statue. The transient nature of Ferran's video works echoes the brevity of life. This work lingered in my mind long after I saw it. It has a haunting nature that ensures a more powerful permanency than any physical memorial monument. Young proposes that fleeting commemorative artworks can be more effective and leave a greater lasting impression as they force viewers to remember rather than providing them with something fixed they can return to at any moment (1992, p. 268). Viewers have to look inward for memory as there is no longer anything external they can refer to. Ferran's artworks require viewers to form and keep their own memories of female convicts and their babies.

## Conclusion

Anne Ferran's imagined portraits of the female convicts at Ross and South Hobart and their babies are always somewhat elusive and never fully revealing: the re-photographed images of John Watt Beattie's refuse to come into focus, the photographs of the ground at Ross refuse to show us anything of the women, the blankets refuse to outline babies, the video projections share names but not appearance. This reflects Ferran's belief that "a ruined past can never

be made whole again. It can only be glimpsed, gestured towards, evoked, conjured, lost again” (Ferran 2001). Ferran challenges photography’s ability to capture and reveal through a single isolated moment. The limitations of photography reflect the limitations of being able to know and portray historical figures.

Ferran has no desire to recreate her historically invisible subjects. Her imagined portraits visually draw attention to the women and babies of the Cascades and Ross Female Factories through highlighting their absence. While raising awareness of the past, they also convey the impossibility of knowing the past. They incite empathy through urging viewers to reflect on the suffering the women endured at the Factories. The resounding emptiness and sombre tonality is poignant. Like Nolan did with Ned Kelly and Lendis did with Lady Jane Franklin, Ferran formed an empathetic bond with her subjects. Part of that connection developed through spending time in the place they once resided. Her knowledge of the previous inhabitants connected her with specific places in Tasmania and with Australian history more generally, providing her with a sense of continuity with the past.

The artworks discussed in this chapter illustrate how imagined portraits can be made when very little is known about the subjects. The next two chapters, on Leah King-Smith and Julie Dowling, extend this line of inquiry. Chapter Five explores King-Smith’s imagined portraits of mostly anonymous Aboriginal people. However, King-Smith uses photography to portray historical subjects in a very different manner. In contrast to Ferran, King-Smith draws on archival photographic portraits and uses layering techniques to visually revive her subjects. The final chapter returns to painting through Julie



Dowling's imagined portraits of her Aboriginal ancestors. Dowling is also faced with a shortage of material pertaining to her subjects.

The next two chapters form Part II of this thesis. Instead of being led to the historical subject through a particular place, as Nolan, Lendis and Ferran were, King-Smith and Dowling begin with historical figures and seek to return them to the land.

## PART II: RETURNING FIGURE TO LAND

**Note:**

Aboriginal readers are advised that the following chapter contains photographs of deceased persons.

## Chapter Five

### Layered with Land: Leah King-Smith's Photo-compositions

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*The work is delicately erasing the white man's past and bringing through a spiritual presence that is in the now, in the eternal present.*

—Leah King-Smith (2006, p. 57)

In contrast to Sidney Nolan, John Lendis and Anne Ferran, Aboriginal artist Leah King-Smith did not connect with her subjects through a particular place because the subjects of her celebrated series 'Patterns of Connection' (1991) were removed from their homelands. The connection King-Smith has with land thus differs greatly from that of Nolan, Lendis and Ferran. For King-Smith and Julie Dowling, whose work will be examined in the next chapter, the challenge is not finding a way to connect with land through historical figures, it is finding a way to reunite historical figures and land. The historical figures featured in their imagined portraits were denied their relationship with the land. In creating imagined portraits that reconnect historical figure and land, King-Smith and Dowling reassert and strengthen their Aboriginal heritage and solidify their own connection to country.

Of Gamilaraay-Koamu descent on her mother's side, King-Smith was drawn to her subjects through historic photographs held in the State Library of Victoria. She was initially given two grants by the Stegley Foundation through the Koori Oral History Program to create a picture book of a hundred nineteenth-century photographs of Aboriginal people by European photographers (Downer in King-Smith 1992c). However, she found these portraits so moving she felt she had to change the direction of her project. She recalls:

uncovering those powerful images evoked, in time, such strong feelings in me that my work needed to evolve creatively in order to deal with the overwhelming feelings that were coming up. I was seeing the old photographs as both sacred, family documents on one hand, and testaments of the early brutal days of white settlement on the other. I was thus wrestling with anger, resentment, powerlessness and guilt while at the same time encountering a sense of deep connectedness, of belonging and power in working with images of my fellow indigenous human beings (in Black, Huggins & King-Smith 1994, p. 7).

To visually resolve these feelings, King-Smith created a series of what she terms “photo-compositions” which combine re-photographs of the historic photographs and her own new colour photographs of the Victorian land. They are “single exposure compositions of two visual planes simultaneously merged into one another” (King-Smith 1992b, p. 41). As I will explore throughout this chapter, King-Smith’s artistic techniques dramatically alter the way the subjects of the original photographs are perceived. King-Smith’s imagined portraits exemplify Vivien Johnson’s memorable expression that contemporary Aboriginal photographers “are searching for, and finding, ways to disrupt and challenge, to counter an oppressive history of dehumanised images with a spark of human passion” (1993, p. 61).

After contextualising the production and reception of the archival photographs, this chapter analyses the series King-Smith created from the archival photographs, ‘Patterns of Connection’ (1991).<sup>133</sup> I analyse King-Smith’s aesthetic strategies of intervention and examine her visual reunion of figure and land.

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<sup>133</sup> ‘Patterns of Connection’ has been exhibited widely in the following exhibitions: *Aratjara* (1993-94), *Sweet Damper and Gossip* (1994), *Voices of the Earth* (1996), *Urban Icons* (1996), *Colonial – Post Colonial* (1996), *Spirit and Place* (1997), *Retake* (1998-2000), *Art and Land* (2000), *New Trends* (2004), *Before Night, After Nature* (2004), *Blackspot* (2004), *The Changing Face of Victoria* (2005), *Black Photography* (2005), *Extra-Aesthetic* (2005) and *The Vizard Foundation Art Collection of the 1990s* (2008).

## The Source Photographs

The source photographs King-Smith used to create her imagined portraits depict Victorian Aboriginal people taken between 1860 and 1910 at government-run reserves, such as Coranderrk,<sup>134</sup> or church-run missions, such as Ramahyuck and Lake Tyers<sup>135</sup> (King-Smith 1992b). These places were established to manage Aboriginal people. They allegedly gave “the ‘dying race’ a safe refuge to live out their remaining years” while educating and training the young, especially those of mixed descent, so they could be of use to society (Van Toorn 2006, p. 123). In the confined spaces of the missions and reserves, Aboriginal people could be studied and viewed. More dramatically, from at least 1888, residents from Coranderrk mission were taken to publically perform at Melbourne Zoo (Lydon 2005, p. 203). Hundreds of Aboriginal people were photographed at the zoo, the missions and reserves by visitors, missionaries and professional photographers.

King-Smith’s chosen photographs were all taken by professional European photographers, not missionaries or visitors, and all portray Aboriginal people in European clothing (King-Smith 1992b, p. 41). There are many ways in which their production and reception has been controlled and misused. For King-Smith, the source photographs are innately negative. She declares “From an indigenous perspective the colonial camera has been a weapon of mass destruction” (King-Smith 2006, p. 16).

Photography has long been associated with power and control. American Indian activist Vine Victor Deloria Junior also likened colonial photography to a weapon that was used against his people (Hoelscher 2008, p.

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<sup>134</sup> For more on the history of Coranderrk see Edmonds (1997).

<sup>135</sup> For more on these missions see ABC et al. (2006).

12). Cameras fired upon Indigenous peoples in a range of colonial contexts and aimed to neutralise and possess the subjects. As art theorist Susan Sontag elucidates, “To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have; it turns people into objects that can symbolically be possessed” (2002 [1977], p. 14).

Nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century photographs of Aboriginal people were commonly staged to fulfil European desires. They were shaped by a myriad of colonial ideologies, artistic and scientific interests, even though at the time photography was largely understood as a neutral medium that transparently recorded reality. In the nineteenth century, Australian Aborigines were believed to be lower on the evolutionary scale, seen as “living physical relics from the dawn of human time” (Mulvaney 1985, p. 69). Within the framework of realism,<sup>136</sup> photographs of Aborigines were often used as empirical evidence to support this Darwinian notion that Australian Aborigines were a dying race. Although King-Smith’s source photographs were not used for scientific documentation, they are still steeped in imperial ideology.

Photography can lock people into a particular presentation. It can “appropriate and decontextualize time and space and those who exist within it” (Edwards 1992, p. 7). There are several ways in which this can happen, for example through the use of studio backdrops. Staged backgrounds were a common feature of early photographic portraits of Aboriginal people, especially those made for postcards.<sup>137</sup> They decontextualise the people

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<sup>136</sup> For a discussion of how realism was linked to photography and science see Peterson (1985)

<sup>137</sup> See Peterson (1985).

photographed and present them in a romantic, ethnographic light. Transformed into aesthetic phenomena, such photographs render Aboriginal people distant and unthreatening (Peterson 1985, p. 165). The use of studio backdrops is evident in two of the photographs King-Smith has reworked, *Christina and Phillip Pepper* (Figure 53, p. 152) and *King Billy* (57, p. 162).<sup>138</sup> Other photographs which were taken outdoors record the mission housing and the confines of the reserves, as in one of King-Smith's source photographs, *Barak Throwing Boomerangs* (Figure 55, p. 154).

Another decontextualising tool is the naming of images. Many photographs of Aboriginal people from the nineteenth century are titled in ways that broadly categorise Aboriginal people, such as two of the photographs King-Smith used: *Aboriginals, Coranderrk* (Figure 58, p. 164) and *Group of Aboriginal Girls, Gippsland* (Figure 62, p. 167).<sup>139</sup> This indicates that the portraits were intended to be representative, not of individual people, but of Aborigines in general at particular missions or reserves. They were not intended to convey the personality of each subject because they were not really about each individual. They instead present Aboriginal people as objects to be looked at.

At the time of their creation the photographs were most likely embedded in a viewing structure where the white photographer and viewer believed they had control of the gaze. Alan Thomas characterises photographs of remote peoples taken in the nineteenth century as reflecting "a sense of a privileged view" (1978, p. 38). Many nineteenth-century photographs of

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<sup>138</sup> King-Smith's later series 'Beyond Capture' specifically highlighted the fake nature of studio photographs by cropping details such as government-issued clothing and potted foliage (King-Smith 2006, p. 63).

<sup>139</sup> These images will be discussed in relation to King-Smith's imagined portraits later in this chapter.



Aboriginal people exemplify this kind of view. However, it cannot be assumed that the photographer had complete control. In her book, *Eye Contact: Photographing Indigenous Australians* (2005), Jane Lydon insists that Aboriginal people were at times in control of their representation; that they were not merely victims forced in front of the camera. Along these lines, Leonarda Kovacic asserts that the new technology of photographic equipment may have fascinated Aboriginal people. They may have thus at times willingly participated in being photographed out of their own curiosity and interest (Kovacic 2006, p. 98). One of King-Smith's source photographs (Figure 53, p. 152) appears to be commissioned by the subjects themselves. Yet even though it indicates agency, it also reflects pressure to assimilate as I will explore later in this chapter.

Early photographs of Aboriginal people have long been locked away in archives. Around the time King-Smith began working on 'Patterns of Connection', Aboriginal activist Henrietta Fourmile published a provocative essay entitled 'Who Owns the Past? Aborigines as Captives of the Archives' (1989). Fourmile asserted that non-Aboriginal ownership and control of archives imposed "a serious barrier to Aboriginal people in the making of our own history" (1989, p. 2). Even today, permission to use archival photographs resides with the creator of the photograph, not with the photographed subject or their descendants.

King-Smith's resolve to re-photograph the original photographs was largely a way of "taking issue with the cultural dominance over Aboriginal culture – symbolised partially today in the management of archives by public institutions that maintain ownership and copyright of their collections" (King-Smith 2006, p. 56). Fortunately, conditions are slowly changing as the

permission of all subjects is being sought for photographic releases (Say in Briggs, Lydon & Say 2010, p. 114). Many institutions<sup>140</sup> are now opening their photographic collections for collaboration with descendants (Briggs, Lydon & Say 2010). This is important for Aboriginal descendants to regain some degree of control over representations of their ancestors. King-Smith asserts if the photographs continue to be “kept in government archives they continue to be owned and captured by the government. It’s vital (and being done now) that Aboriginal people manage these archives” (pers. comm., 3 September 2012). Before using the original photographs for ‘Patterns of Connection’, King-Smith asked Aboriginal communities for permission because many Aboriginal people consider reproducing images of the deceased taboo. She emphasised that she wanted to personally use the photographs to heal the past (King-Smith 1992a, p. 57). With her benevolent motivations taken into account, she was able to reproduce and alter the images with permission from descendants.

Koori Liaison Officer of the State Library of Victoria, Maxine Briggs, believes the people photographed in the nineteenth century by European photographers “are not distant relatives because they lived a hundred years or so ago, they live on in the photos and we are responsible for them just as we are for our living kin” (in Briggs, Lydon & Say 2010, p. 121). In a similar manner, King-Smith believes there is Aboriginal spirit present in these portraits. According to King-Smith, “seeing these portraits can only be deeply heart-felt ... through the powerful role of the portrait to convey the psychic presence of the person” (1992b, p. 41). However, in the original photographs

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<sup>140</sup> For example, State Library of Victoria, Museum Victoria, the South Australian Museum’s *Ara Irititja* project, and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies’ Indigenous Knowledge Centre, Galiwin’ku (see Briggs, Lydon & Say 2010).

this spirit is eclipsed by the imperial context under which they were produced (King-Smith 2006, p. 16).

What I have described thus far has highlighted the negative aspects of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photographs of Aboriginal people by white photographers. However, there are ways in which they are useful. The archival photographs have two different meanings: firstly, they are products of nineteenth-century imperial endeavours, and secondly, they are “treasured family portraits and important records of material culture” for Aboriginal descendants (King-Smith 1992b, p. 41). King-Smith aimed to diminish the first meaning and enhance the second. This meant taking the photographed people “out of their time confinement” (King-Smith 1992a, p. 53). She recounts, “I have re-photographed people who were confined to a particular and very prejudiced society that didn’t (and still doesn’t) understand Aboriginal people” (King-Smith 1992a, p. 56). Her insistence on the failures of understanding Aboriginal people is reinforced by Aboriginal scholar Marcia Langton’s assertion that “Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists” (1993, p. 33).

King-Smith does not want people to continue to remember the Aboriginal people pictured in the original photographs as they are depicted – that is, photographed against staged backdrops or within the confines of missions and reserves as these settings inescapably evoke white cultural dominance. ‘Patterns of Connection’ is designed to renew “white people’s perceptions of Aboriginal people” (King-Smith 1992c). It does so through conveying the importance of land to Aboriginal people. Furthermore, King-Smith’s recovery of the images ensures the subjects are not forgotten. Cultural theorist Chris Healy believes it is imperative that historic images of Aboriginal

people do not remain locked away unseen. Healy proposes that the impulse to look away from historic and clichéd images of Aboriginal people<sup>141</sup> is driven by a desire to strive for a better, egalitarian future. Regardless of these good intentions, to conceal images is a way of hiding from the past in the present. “It is to make Aborigines disappear,” Healy argues. “It is to forget” (Healy 2008, p. 4). To rekindle memory and bring the original photographs into the present in a positive light, King-Smith combines several different aesthetic strategies.

### Aesthetic Intervention

King-Smith began ‘Patterns of Connection’ shortly after Bicentennial celebrations in Australia led Aboriginal artists to question the historical treatment of Aboriginal people. There were many important developments leading up to and during the Bicentennial celebrations that resulted in Aboriginal people creating powerful artworks questioning racial identity and politics in Australia. It is within this context that King-Smith’s imagined portraits emerged as compelling works with their own innovative voice.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Aboriginal people began to demand the control of their representation (Langton 1993, p. 9). Photographs were reclaimed “as evidence of alternative cultural and social histories which were often oppositional to the mainstream” (Johnson 1993, p. 58). As well as reclaiming older photographs, many Aboriginal artists took up photography in the 1980s,<sup>142</sup> turning the camera from “a weapon of mass destruction” (King-Smith 2006, p. 16) into a tool for self-inquiry, political investigation and/or an

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<sup>141</sup> Healy cites Jessie Mackintosh’s *Corroboree* (1940) as an example.

<sup>142</sup> For example: Brenda L Croft, Ricky Maynard, Kathy Fisher, Kevin Gilbert, Alana Harris, Ellen Jose, Peter Yanada McKenzie and Tracey Moffatt.

enjoyable leisure pursuit. The diverse range of interests and styles of Aboriginal photographers in the 1980s was highlighted in the exhibition *Retake: Contemporary Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Photography* (1998). However, the outburst of photography in the 1980s was not just a “spontaneous combustion”, it coincided with publications about Aboriginal art and history, many of which featured photographs of Aboriginal communities (Johnson 1993, p. 58).

In the early 1990s Aboriginal scholar Marcia Langton proposed that rather than idealistically expecting others to stop portraying Aboriginal people, Aboriginal people should make their own self-representations (1993, p. 10). This is precisely what King-Smith did in ‘Patterns of Connection’. She presented her own personal interpretation of her fellow Aboriginal people. In doing so, she, like Julie Dowling and many other contemporary Aboriginal artists,<sup>143</sup> “made intellectual and aesthetic interventions which change the way Aboriginal people are perceived” (Langton 1993, p. 10). Her main strategies of aesthetic intervention include leaving the works untitled; the use of paint; a large scale; colour; multiple perspectives seen simultaneously; Cibachrome and the use of a fish-eye lens to photograph the land.

King-Smith deliberately leaves her imagined portraits untitled to offset the way titles were used as a tool of classification, often branding Aboriginal people as types for ethnographic purposes. As untitled portraits, the subjects remain out of reach from such racial generalisations. King-Smith’s subjects are also freed from another mechanism of colonial control – the way Aboriginal people were at times given English names by colonists. While these names may have “protected their personal names, and therefore their Aboriginal

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<sup>143</sup> Especially Destiny Deacon, Brenda Croft and Fiona Foley.

selves”, as Rosalind Poignant suggests (2004, p. 25), they were often enforced and thus represent the kind of power King-Smith is determined to mitigate. King-Smith wanted her artworks to be as “wordless as possible” with the English language not intercepting or interpreting (pers. comm., 3 September 2012). This reflects a common strategy of postcolonial literature which involves rejecting the English language because control over language – for instance, not allowing Aboriginal language to be spoken in Australia – was one of the main forms of oppression (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2002, p. 7). Being untitled, King-Smith’s works are thus released from a form of imperial control.

King-Smith had access to the Anglicised names and ethnographic records of the people in the photographs, however she did not want to follow this line of research because “the more identification happened, the more on English/British terms the ‘knowing’ became” (pers. comm., 3 September 2012). Files were kept on every Aboriginal person living on a reserve. Aboriginal historian Jackie Huggins likens these files to “skeletal remains” as they are traces of lives which have been unjustly possessed (1998, p. 133). The files recorded physical details and life events in a cold, factual manner. As with the archival photographs described earlier, Aboriginal people were restricted from accessing files on their ancestors until recently. For instance, Huggins fought hard to access the file on her mother, Rita Huggins, which was “controlled by white gatekeepers” (Huggins & Huggins 1994, pp. 4-5). For Rita Huggins, the file represented thirty-two years of biased surveillance; it was not indicative of how she wanted her life to be remembered (Huggins & Huggins 1994, p. 5). King-Smith’s refusal to use the files undermines the authority they once held.

‘Patterns of Connection’ presents sensitive imagined portraits of Victorian Aboriginal people. The static original photographs are enlivened by complex layering. Imprecise and passionately hand-drawn marks on the re-photographed images counteract the intended precision of the nineteenth-century camera lens and the belief that the camera showed the world as it was, free from any subjective interference (for example, see Figure 51). They introduce personal expression and offer another perspective which disrupts straightforward viewing. Formally, the technique of painting over photographs is reminiscent of Gerhard Richter’s ‘overpainted photographs’ which began shortly before King-Smith’s in 1986. For King-Smith, the added layer of paint introduces an important emotional component to the photographs.



Figure 51: Leah King-Smith, *Untitled #10*, 1991

Not unlike Anne Ferran’s thoughts regarding the symbolism of *The Ground, the Air* discussed in the previous chapter, King-Smith uses the paint to represent intangible spiritual elements that are “vital to the claiming of an alternative perspective, especially an indigenous voice speaking of land”

(King-Smith 2006, p. 57). The paint, like the air for Ferran, symbolises memory, stories and personal beliefs, while the photographs, like the ground for Ferran, symbolise factual evidence. With both intangible and tangible elements represented, King-Smith's imagined portraits are multifaceted.

Up close, the photographic and painted layers appear quite abstract in many of the works. At over one metre-squared each, the large scale nature of the photo-compositions forces the viewer to stand back to take in the whole image. Both land and figure clearly exist, but they do so simultaneously. Displayed at eye-level, in some individual portraits viewers are met with near-life-size faces or confronted with larger-than-life-size faces. The large scale dramatically contrasts with the small scale of the original photographs. Being substantially larger than the original photographs, the subjects in King-Smith's imagined portraits have a strong presence. The large photo-compositions are also beyond the possessive clutch of one viewer's hand. Many of the artworks in 'Patterns of Connection' put viewers face-to-face with Aboriginal people. For example, in *Untitled #1* (Figure 52), the viewer is met with the direct gaze of an Aboriginal woman. In this imagined portrait the piercing gaze of the original photograph is preserved.

*Untitled #1* is sourced from *Christina and Phillip Pepper* (Figure 53) Christina and Phillip Pepper were from Ramahyuck Mission. The original photograph portrays Phillip sitting in a chair with Christina standing by his side. It is similar to marital studio portraits of white Australians made around the same time. It brings to mind Michael Aird's description of his Aboriginal ancestors paying for professional photographs so they could say "we are as good as Europeans, you can't touch us" (in Braithwaite 2010). While there is a rebellious spirit to such a photograph viewed in this light, the need to have



such a photograph taken, dressed in European attire, also suggests pressure to conform and be accepted by white officers. This contradictory reading highlights the complexity of understanding such photographs.

In *Untitled #1*, King-Smith seems to have isolated Christina's face for the way her eyes look directly into the camera. The cropping heightens the dominance of the gaze. *Untitled #1* presents a proud, independent woman whose gaze is confronting. Karina Eileraas asserts that eyes can have the potential to enact what Hommi Bhabha referred to as "the threatened return of the look" as portrait subjects can gaze directly at the camera and look out to the viewer with "a spirit of challenge and inquisition" (Eileraas 2003, p. 828). As the spectator looks at the woman in *Untitled #1*, the woman's eyes stare directly back. Under the returned gaze of the Aboriginal woman, the viewer is no longer in an active position of control over the photographed subject.



Figure 52: Leah King-Smith, *Untitled #1*, 1991



Figure 53: George R. A. Glenny, *Christina and Phillip Pepper*, 1896

*Untitled #1* presents Christina as enmeshed in a coloured scene of arced trees. In all of the photocompositions of ‘Patterns of Connection’, the content fluctuates between figure and land. King-Smith used mirrors to combine two single exposure photographs. She scraped some of the back off the underside of a mirror, leaving patches of mirror and clear glass. She then placed two images – one on top and one underneath the altered mirror – so that she could photograph three planes at once: the two images and the reflection from the patches of mirror (King-Smith 1992a, p. 56; pers. comm., 3 September 2012). This innovative formal treatment leads to multiple perspectives at once. The multiple perspectives “disrupt the authority of the camera’s fixed window frame” (King-Smith 2006, p. 12).

Nineteenth-century photographs of Aboriginal people are generally treated as documents from and of the past. This perception “repeats oppositions of lost past and active present, [and] links photographs to one past time only”

(Edwards 2001, p. 11). Instead, King-Smith's photo-compositions rupture the notion that photographs capture one point in time. To change the photographs from being understood in this singular way, King-Smith's multidimensional approach "proposes multiplicities [*sic*] of pasts (and futures) and brings into question the notion of the past as an idealised cultural moment" (King-Smith 2006, p. 8). The two visual planes that are seen simultaneously – one black and white of the past, the other colour of the present – destabilise the authority of one particular photographic moment. This reminds viewers that "photographs are sites of multiple, contested and contesting histories" (Edwards 2001, p. 22). It opens the photographs to a range of different interpretations. King-Smith's imagined portraits subvert the viewing dichotomy of active European viewer and passive Aboriginal object of the gaze. They change this power structure and positively reposition the Aboriginal people depicted. *Untitled #3* (Figure 54) clearly illustrates this repositioning.



Figure 54: Leah King-Smith, *Untitled #3*, 1991

*Untitled #3* was based on *Barak Throwing Boomerangs* (Figure 55) which depicts Wurundjeri leader William Barak standing in a barren field. He is posed leaning with a boomerang in each hand in front of two dogs, seemingly teasing the dogs to fetch the boomerangs. The two European buildings in the background of this photograph evoke the Aboriginal station, Coranderrk. Barak was undoubtedly the most famous Aboriginal person at Coranderrk.<sup>144</sup> A leader who fought hard for independence, he boldly requested Coranderrk's first manager John Green to "give us this ground and let us manage here ourselves ... and no one over us" (quoted in Marcard 1969). Barak became renowned for his boomerang throwing, his storytelling, as well as his watercolour illustrations of traditional Aboriginal cultural activities.<sup>145</sup>



Figure 55: Photographer unknown, *Barak Throwing Boomerangs*, c.1900

The title of the original photograph suggests it was primarily about Barak's performance of boomerang throwing. Boomerang performances were

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<sup>144</sup> Barak is one of King-Smith's ancestors (Barlow 2004), yet he is not afforded any special treatment. He is not singled out, nor is the familial relationship shared with viewers. He is presented in the same manner as each of King-Smith's imagined portraits in 'Patterns of Connection'.

<sup>145</sup> For more on Barak see Ryan & Cooper (2003).

popular amongst white visitors to the reserve. Aboriginal people most likely knew this performance was in demand. Partaking in it would have satisfied white onlookers while simultaneously allowing the performer an income to gain some degree of independence (Lydon 2005, p. 203). Performances of activities such as boomerang throwing “served to neutralise and render the idea of the ‘savage’ harmless” (Poignant 2004, p. 7). To curious white audiences, they were most likely seen in a romantic light as demonstrating ‘dying’, exotic traditions. In Figure 55 Barak is the object of both a dog’s gaze within the image, and the viewer’s external gaze.

In King-Smith’s rendition, the flat paddock of the original photograph is tangled with layers of foliage and paint. This dense layering makes the image enigmatic. From the base of the image upwards, earthy brown ochre tones lead into cool, steel blue-grey colours as if the warm earth is slowly rising. The body of the man is darkened, shadowed by the overlaid land. He stands tall, body leaning to one side, one arm clearly raised, holding the distinctive elbow shape of a boomerang. The black man and the white dog are vertically aligned in the centre of the image while the second dog is barely visible. In this version, the contrast between black and white is intense. The juxtaposition of black and white could represent Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal as the Aboriginal man and land are portrayed in black, while the European dog and housing of Coranderrk are portrayed in white. This heightened tonality dramatically changes the way the image is viewed. It is harsh and confrontational.

According to historian Jane Lydon, the camera framed meetings between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people at reserves in the mid 1880s and created “a formal space of encounter and performance” (2005, p. xix). This

is evident in the original photograph, *Barak Throwing Boomerangs* (Figure 55), where Barak is depicted performing to an audience. He was consciously under the intense gaze of the viewer. According to Rosalind Poignant (2004, p. 8), Aboriginal people performing to white audiences were inevitably “ensnared in a hall of distorting mirrors. Within their performance roles they were simultaneously themselves and reflections of the ‘savages’ of Western imagination”. The white viewing gaze of the live audience and camera thus affected Aboriginal people. In King-Smith’s reworked image, it is the stark white, introduced objects that capture the viewer’s gaze. They stand out and appear out of place. This lessens the focus on the Aboriginal man, who is somewhat camouflaged by the paint. Hence, there is a reversal of the gaze. With the focus on the white dog and houses, the man is freed from the viewer’s scrutiny and released as a shadowy figment of the land. The “sense of a privileged view” (Thomas 1978, p. 38) of active white viewer holding power over passive black subject is undermined in King-Smith’s re-presentation.

In ‘Patterns of Connection’ viewers are made aware of their position. The high gloss Cibachrome finish, which is a feature of all of the works in this series, has a self-reflective quality akin to Anne Ferran’s aluminium works described in the previous chapter. As in Ferran’s work, the viewer can glimpse themselves in the shiny, quasi-mirror surface. However, by looking at a depicted person as well as themselves, King-Smith’s works differ from Ferran’s where the viewer glimpses themselves amongst vacant land. King-Smith recounts, “People have spoken about the reflection of themselves in the image” (King-Smith 1992a, p. 56). The self-reflective nature of King-Smith’s imagined portraits makes the viewer conscious that they are looking at a photograph of another person or people. As viewers look at the Aboriginal

people depicted, they may also look back at themselves and be aware that they are engaged in a process of looking.

When the original photographs were viewed in the nineteenth century, they were predominantly treated as objective records for scientific purposes. There was little, if any, consideration of what cultural preconceptions and prior knowledge the spectator brought to the image that would have shaped their vision. The European photographer and viewer most likely saw themselves as invisible to the Aboriginal person/people. American activist bell hooks posits that the power structure of white active viewer in charge of the gaze that was prominent in the nineteenth century continues to affect the way some white people view black people:

In white supremacist society, white people can 'safely' imagine that they are invisible to black people since the power they have historically asserted, and even now collectively assert over black people, accorded them the right to control the black gaze (hooks 2008, p. 93).

By making viewers see themselves while looking at portraits of Aboriginal people, they are forced into considering their act of viewing. They cannot pretend to be invisible to the depicted Aboriginal people. This awareness is comparable to what Brook Andrew has achieved with his more recent work, *Ngajuu Ngaay Nginduugirr (I see you)* (1998), which uses text and cropped eyes to draw attention to the act of spectatorship.

I propose that King-Smith's imagined portraits can be thought of as metapictures, defined by W. T. J. Mitchell (1995, p. 82) as:

the place where pictures reveal and 'know' themselves, where they reflect on the intersections of visibility, language and similitude, where they engage in speculation and theorising on their own nature and history.

In re-photographing the original portraits, King-Smith produced portraits that are a representation of a representation. Moreover, with the multiple planes and

conscious spectator participation, King-Smith's imagined portraits draw attention to, and explore, their own construction and function. Mitchell explains that metapictures test the viewer and their vision, holding a kind of mirror to the viewer (Mitchell 1995, p. 48). They force the viewer to confront their identity and role as spectator. I see this as a strength of King-Smith's imagined portraits. The way they challenge the viewer offsets the imperial hierarchy in which the original photographs were produced.

In offering such different viewing experiences, King-Smith conveys the multifarious nature of photographic portraits – that there is no single, stable viewing position that can be applied to all photographic portraits. Reflecting her own ambivalent relationship to the original photographs, King-Smith's imagined portraits arouse complex and variable emotions. In the catalogue for 'Patterns of Connection', King-Smith asks viewers to "activate their inner sight to view Aboriginal people" (King-Smith 1992c). By activating inner sight she means for viewers to look beyond the external appearance of the portrait and its archival context.

My aim in re-photographing these people was to shift the emphasis away from their outer-world condition, since that is determined by the dominant culture, to engage the viewer's attention inwardly to see these indigenous people in a positive and spiritual light" (King-Smith 1992b, p. 41).

Western portraiture's focus on external appearance differs greatly from Aboriginal art in which identity is expressed through relationships to land. Whereas the original photographs concentrated on showing the external appearance of the Aboriginal subjects, King-Smith's imagined portraits oscillate between land and figure. They introduce an Aboriginal perspective which is deeply connected with the land.



## Re-Placing in Land

In 'Patterns of Connection', King-Smith returns the people portrayed in the original nineteenth-century photographs to the land. This counteracts the way Aboriginal people were placed in front of fake backdrops, or were photographed in reserves or missions that were not their traditional homelands. The photographed landscapes King-Smith blended with the portraits in 'Patterns of Connection' bear traces of her own personal connection with the land. Photographing the land was "an engaging experience connected with nature" for King-Smith (2006, p. 2). By using her own photographs, she shares her emotional connection with land and endows it to her fellow Aboriginal people depicted in the original photographs.

When taking her own photographs of the Victorian land King-Smith used a fish-eye lens – a kind of lens that spherically bends what it captures. In photo-compositions such as Figure 54 (p. 153), the fish-eye lens amplifies the sensation of space as a line of land arcs above the central figure, as if bulging. The land and figure seem beyond containment. The results of the fish-eye lens are largely unpredictable. Describing later work<sup>146</sup> which used similar techniques, King-Smith (2006, p. 62) explains:

The fish-eye lens is held over the camera lens that cannot be viewed through when the photograph is taken, resulting in an effect that is not altogether controllable and the lens curvature can end up in the frame in a variety of different ways.

The uncontrollable outcome of the photographs made with the fish-eye lens contrasts with the controlled nature of the composed and painted landscape backdrops often used in nineteenth-century photographs of Aboriginal people by European photographers.

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<sup>146</sup> *Beyond Capture* (2004)

King-Smith intends her imagined portraits to reflect an Aboriginal perspective, one that is spiritual and deeply connected with land. By reuniting figure and land, her imagined portraits give her Aboriginal subjects the dignity they were deprived of by ethnocentric European officials who could not comprehend the importance of land to Aboriginal people. Land and identity are connected as Aboriginal people “are truly of the place of origin; are of the land ... [their] skin is synonymous with the Earth’s covering” (Huoston in King-Smith 1992c). Country does not broadly reflect a generalised landscape, as it does in English; it is a conscious, living entity (Rose 1996, p. 7).

Aboriginal curator Margo Neale likens ‘Patterns of Connection’ to Fiona Foley’s ‘Survival’ series (1988) because both artists symbolically re-bury ancestors with respect – “a reclamation similar to that of taking the remains of an unknown soldier from a foreign land and re-burying him in his own place, thus memorialising him individually and collectively” (Neale 1999, pp. 27-8). This comparison highlights the importance of reuniting Aboriginal historical figures and land. When ‘Patterns of Connection’ was made in the early 1990s, demand to see Aboriginal remains returned to Australia was gaining currency (Poignant 2004, p. 12). In 1993, the return of Tambo<sup>147</sup> was “more than a recovery of history; it was a matter of spiritual reincorporation of the lost one” (Poignant 2004, p. 241).

Returning the bones of Aboriginal people has a vital spiritual role.

Poignant explains:

There is a core Aboriginal belief that the return of the spirits of the dead to their dreaming sites is vital to the harmonious ordering of the universe, and to the preservation of spiritual well-being of kin and community (2004, p. 242).

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<sup>147</sup> Tambo was an Aboriginal person abducted by circus recruiter Robert A. Cunningham to perform in America.

King-Smith's imagined portraits have a similar function. Her retrieval of images of ancestors from the archives, aesthetic intervention and inclusion of land restore a sense of spiritual harmony. Created with heartfelt care and respect, King-Smith's imagined portraits aim to heal the community.

When it was first exhibited, 'Patterns of Connection' was accompanied by a soundscape of the Australian bush by King-Smith's partner, Duncan King-Smith. Duncan King-Smith intended his installation to deepen the meditation of King-Smith's images (King-Smith 1992c). The soundscape created an immersive viewing experience that aroused more than visual senses. It subtly conjured a sense of being in land. For Duncan King-Smith, "the rhythms and inflections of a place's bioacoustics are a direct expression of spirit" (in King-Smith 1992c). The sound thus enhanced the spiritual dimension of King-Smith's imagined portraits. It made the works feel alive.

The renewed vitality King-Smith gives her subjects is largely achieved through the placement of King-Smith's photographed land, as is particularly evident in *Untitled #5* (Figure 56). In the source photograph of *Untitled #5*, *King Billy* (Figure 57), an Aboriginal man is portrayed in front of a painted scene of a classical balcony and landscape. As discussed earlier, the studio backdrop is a decontextualising tool. On many levels, this photograph encapsulates what Margaret Maynard terms "melancholy heroism" (1985, p. 96). The use of the word 'King' in the title connotes a regal status. Aboriginal elders were at times named Kings and Queens by Europeans as it elevated subjects who were seen as doomed in evolutionary terms, even though "there weren't any kings in our culture, only elders" (Huggins & Huggins 1994, p. 15).



Figure 56: Leah King-Smith, *Untitled #5*, 1991



Figure 57: Davies & Co., *King Billy*, n.d

In *King Billy*, the wide-leg stance of the man is strong and heroic, yet at the time he was photographed, he was also believed to be a passive victim of the forces of evolution. Standing alone in a relaxed, frontal pose with bare feet, he appears unthreatening. He is dressed in European clothes but they are dishevelled, well-worn and torn at one knee. The photograph is similar to other photographs of settler Australians by the same Melbourne-based photography studio, Davies & Co, except the clothes and backdrop differ. Most of the photographs of settlers use real props rather than a purely painted backdrop; their clothing is also neat and intact. In Figure 57 the battered clothes reflect the man's old age and suggest that he is a living fossil who will soon no longer exist.

The painted backdrop of the original photograph is barely visible in *Untitled #5* (Figure 56). The artificial nature of the image is abolished, as is the air of melancholy brought about by perceptions of the man as a specimen of a dying race. Looking at *Untitled #5*, viewers are presented with a strong, indomitable man. The man stands in the centre of the image. A vertebrae-like tree runs through the centre of his body. As a strong and central vertical line, the tree stabilises the image and strengthens the presence of the man. The land is within him and a central part of his spirit; it cannot be taken away from him. It is a strong life-giving force that empowers him and that he, in turn, protects with his body. By fusing this portrait with land, King-Smith purges the photograph of its European fatalistic frame of reference.

In another of King-Smith's imagined portraits, *Untitled #6* (Figure 60), all European traces have been removed. The girl in *Untitled #6* was one of two girls in the original photograph who were standing on either side of an Aboriginal woman (Figure 58). Although it is not dated, the original

photograph may have been taken during the 1870s when Frederick Kruger's photographic portraits were popular. Kruger aimed to highlight the simplicity of Aboriginal life at Coranderrk, presenting Aboriginal people as having a "rustic peasant lifestyle amid the tranquil settings of the Yarra Valley" (Lydon 2005, pp. 122-23). In Figure 58, three Aboriginal women<sup>148</sup> are depicted in a bush setting, although a pale picket fence interrupts the naturalism and introduces a sense of enclosure. The loose clothes they wear and the objects they hold – a branch, a long stick and an axe – conjure a simplistic peasant lifestyle. Their bare feet appear to have vanished into the metallic silver of the photograph. This image feels melancholic, mainly due to the facial expression of the girl on the right and the way her body is fully cloaked, except for one arm which awkwardly clutches the handle of an axe (see Figure 59).

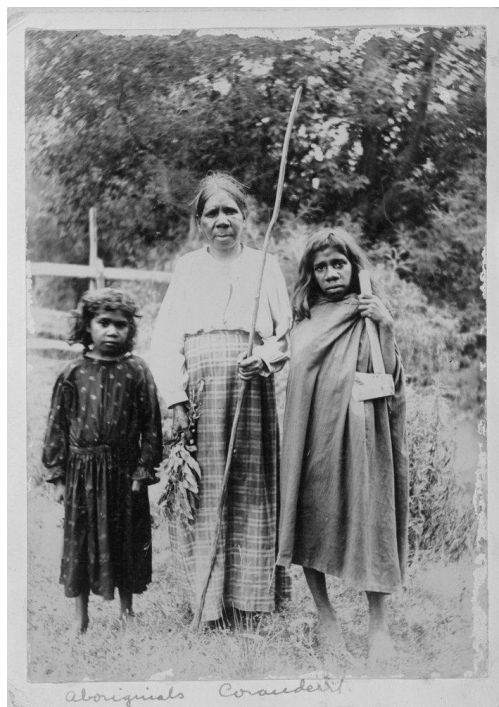


Figure 58: Photographer unknown, *Aboriginals, Coranderrk*, n.d.



Figure 59: Detail of face used by King-Smith used in *Untitled #6*

<sup>148</sup> The woman has been identified by her family as Jemima Wandoon. The younger girl may be her daughter Martha (b. 1898). The older girl, who Leah King-Smith has chosen, may have been one of her adopted children (State Library of Victoria).

In *Untitled #6*, the head of the axe the girl holds is not visible. Without its European end, the piece of wood she holds resembles a waddy.<sup>149</sup> In its indistinct appearance, the cloak draped around her could be opossum skin. The pale picket fence is no longer visible. In sum, the European-introduced elements are undetectable in King-Smith's reworked portrait. The land has a strong fiery presence with fine, arterial tree branches lit in golden threads. The warm amber tones ignite the land, bringing life to it and to the girl. In *Untitled #6*, her gaze is directed upwards and the deep sadness set in her eyes is softened as the different lighting makes the white of her eyes less prominent. This mitigates the sense of melancholy. She no longer appears despondent; she is an inseparable part of the warm land.

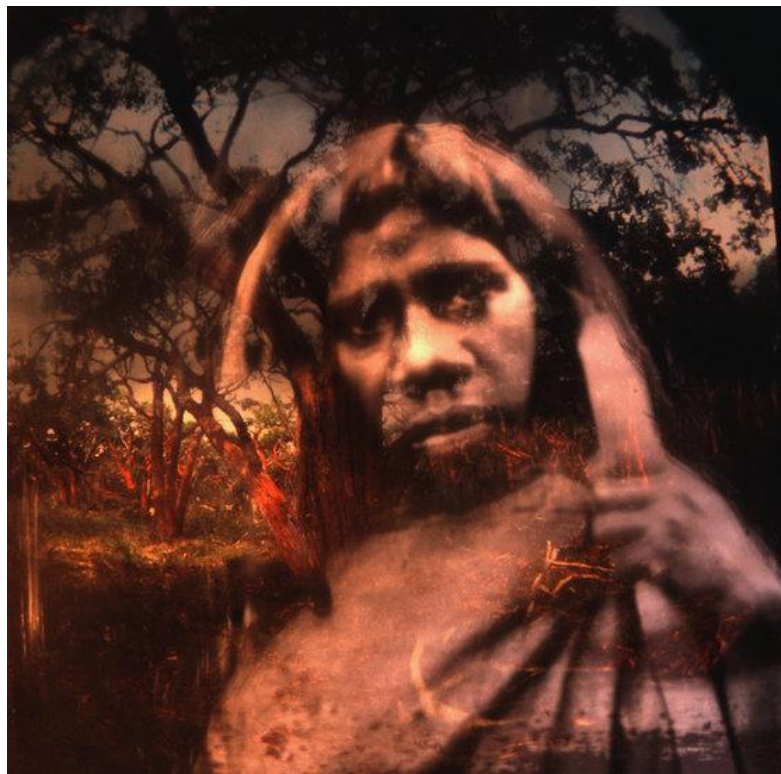


Figure 60: Leah King-Smith, *Untitled #6*, 1991

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<sup>149</sup> An Aboriginal hunting club.

So far the imagined portraits I have been analysing from 'Patterns of Connection' have been of individuals. However, there are three group imagined portraits. In one of these, *Untitled #11* (Figure 61), the staged, 'perfect' nature of the group pose is obscured by the land. This image is unusually vertically divided. On the right-hand side of the image, the land is in the foreground, shielding the figures. On the left-hand side, the figures are visible, although a ghostly tree trunk faintly snakes through them. In the original photograph, *Group of Aboriginal girls, Gippsland* (Figure 62), the figures are all uniformly posed kneeling, hands cupped together on laps. They are all facing forward, but none are directly looking into the camera, and none are smiling. The photograph was presumably taken at Ramahyuck or Lake Tyers in the Gippsland region. Even though it is set in natural land, there is a strong sense of control conveyed through the pose, the location and government-issued uniforms.



Figure 61: Leah King-Smith, *Untitled #11*, 1991





Figure 62: Frederick Alexander Dunn, *Group of Aboriginal girls, Gippsland*, 1870

In King-Smith's imagined portrait, the tonal arc above the figures shelters them. The land appears inky with its form smeared by paint. The land partially protects the figures from the viewer's gaze and releases them into the land. All of the girls appear bonded with the land, rather than through missionary ruling. King-Smith aims to convey the interconnectedness of living with the earth and respecting the land: "I believe that everyone today has to start understanding what incredible responsibility we have to this Earth ... The planet needs healing" (King-Smith 1992a, p. 57). There are thus two kinds of healing King-Smith strives for: the first concerns perceptions of Aboriginal people, the second concerns connections to the natural world. Her artworks not only encourage people to view historical pictorial records of Aboriginal people differently, they also encourage viewers to think about their own relationship with the natural environment. For Aboriginal people, it is important to care for the earth and be sustained by it in return. King-Smith wants to impart this importance to a white audience. Her imagined portraits convey that recovering

heritage and renewing connections to the land are related. In order to heal the scars of dispossession, reuniting figure and land and learning to respect the earth are vital.

## Conclusion

Leah King-Smith's innovative formal treatment retrieves Aboriginal people from the archives and places them in a living realm to be remembered in "a positive and spiritual light" (King-Smith 1992b, p. 41). Freed from the imperial endeavours that produced the original photographs, King-Smith's imagined portraits imbue the people of the original photographs with a spark of life ensuring they have a spiritual, continuing presence. Her aesthetic intervention dramatically alters the gaze of the viewer.

King-Smith had a strong empathetic bond with the people depicted in the original photographs. Her imagined portraits were made with a deep, connected sensitivity to Aboriginal beliefs. They reunite land and figure, setting the figures at peace. Land gives the figures strength and restores a sense of spirituality. King-Smith also incorporated land in order to try and impart the importance of connecting with, nurturing and respecting the natural world – a fundamental Aboriginal belief that King-Smith feels is lacking in settler contemporary Australian society. Imparting this message through art, King-Smith reinforces her own bond with the land.

'Patterns of Connection' emerged from a melting-pot in Australia as Aboriginal activists and artists began challenging the ownership and representation of images of their ancestors. In creating 'Patterns of Connection', King-Smith strengthened her own heritage and positively contributed to visual records of her ancestors. The next chapter explores how

Aboriginal artist Julie Dowling achieves a similar feat by visually working through the effects of dispossession and assimilation in her painted imagined portraits of matriarchs. In contrast to the artists discussed thus far, Dowling strives for lifelike portraits whilst still maintaining an idiosyncratic style.

## Chapter Six

### Feet on the Ground: Julie Dowling's Imagined Portraits of Matriarchs

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*We maintain our sense of culture, our sense of place because we're informed by survivors.*

—Julie Dowling (quoted in McGrath 2002, p. 39)

Aboriginal artist Julie Dowling strives for lifelike portraits. However, her desire for naturalism does not stem from wanting to replicate external likeness for documentary purposes; rather, she uses such portraits to spark an emotional connection between subject and viewer. Dowling paints lifelike faces of historical figures even when no appearance is known. She aims to individualise Aboriginal history, hoping viewers will connect with her subjects as if they are meeting them in real life (J. Dowling in Edmundson 2010). Her imagined portraits are both personal and political as they explore the emotional effects of dispossession and assimilation. I argue her imagined portraits not only allow viewers an insight into her family's pain from loss of land and culture but also facilitate a powerful empathetic connection through her idiosyncratic aesthetic language.

In contrast to the artists discussed so far, Dowling's link to the past is through family. She has produced, and continues to produce, an extremely large body of portraits, most of which depict her family members. Knowledge of her subjects is largely attained through oral history.<sup>150</sup> In a similar manner to

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<sup>150</sup> Some of Dowling's portraits have also been based on family and archival photographs. As the family photographs depict people Dowling knew in her life, such as her mother and grandmother, I do not consider them to be imagined portraits. Dowling's paintings based on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century archival photographs of Aboriginal people by European photographers use aesthetic intervention comparable to Leah King-Smith's 'Patterns of Connection' (1991). For example, *Woman and Baby I* (2005). However, as they do not reunite figure and land they are not considered in this chapter.

King-Smith, Dowling aims to present positive, spiritual portraits of Aboriginal people. She mainly portrays matriarchs as she emphasises the strength of Aboriginal women and the important role Aboriginal women have in guarding and sharing oral history. Using theories by Lucy Lippard and Joan Snyder, I argue that Dowling's imagined portraits have a feminine sensibility.

Dowling's paintings are autoethnographic, meaning they explore her own culture from within and are subjectively based on her own personal experiences.<sup>151</sup> Her imagined portraits aim to record and preserve cultural traditions from the perspective of being a member of the culture rather than an outside observer. Her art colourfully blends a diverse range of styles, such as traditional European portraiture, romanticism, Catholic iconography, Central Australian dot painting, social realism and the postmodern strategy of pastiche. The Aboriginal artist Lin Onus had a way of describing his style that seems pertinent to Dowling's work. He said that he belonged to "the Bower Bird School, 'picking up bits and pieces, here and there'" (cited in Neale 2000, p. 12). Dowling similarly explains "I have some heroes in art ... but I'm typically someone who grazes, I like variety" (J. Dowling in Ross 2007). As with Onus and other contemporary Aboriginal artists, such as Trevor Nickolls, Robert Campbell Junior and Ron Hurley, Dowling's mixed style is aimed at connecting with a wide audience.

Painting is Dowling's way of communicating stories about Aboriginal people. The stories Dowling shares with viewers "always come back to the land. Land has an underlying importance and is spoken about with reverence" (Dowling quoted in McGrath 2002, p. 39). In this chapter, I have decided to

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<sup>151</sup> Carol Dowling is also an autoethnographer who uses creative writing to explore her culture (for a definition of autoethnography see Reed-Danahay 1997, p. 2).

focus on six imagined portraits which relate to stories of particular places to illuminate distinctive features of her practice, including her connection to her ancestors through country, the importance of storytelling, her mixed aesthetic style, and her adoption of European portraiture to elevate Aboriginal people she admires.

### Damaged by Dispossession and Assimilation

As Dowling's imagined portraits are largely family-oriented, an extended biography is important to contextualise her work. Dowling is a Badimaya/Yamatji/Noongar artist who also has Irish, Russian and Jewish heritage. She explains, "I identify with indigenous, not as a political act but because I live in my community. I was brought up in a big Yamatji family" (McGrath 2002, p. 39). Dowling and her twin sister Carol Dowling were the first of their family to be included in the first Australian census that recognised Aboriginal people as human beings (J. Dowling 2006a). Prior to this 1971 census, Aboriginal people were classed under native flora and fauna. Dowling's family bore the brunt of detrimental government policies for generations. As such, her art is largely concerned with the consequences of government interventions which directly impacted her family, especially assimilation.

From 1930 to 1970 the assimilation policy of the Australian government "sought to transform mixed-blood Aboriginal Australians into white Australians" (defined by the anthropologist A. P. Elkin in Leslie 2008, p. 11). Assimilation was ambiguous because the term was applied to two different kinds of integration: biological absorption and social integration. The former referred to the removal of Aboriginal physical characteristics, the latter to

phasing out Aboriginal cultural practices (Chesterman & Douglas 2004, p. 48).

In both senses, assimilation had devastating consequences.

Photographs of Aboriginal people were often used as propaganda for assimilation (Croft 1997 p. 21). Dowling's grandmother, Mary (Mollie) Dowling,<sup>152</sup> was considered "the poster child for Catholic assimilation", and, as such, had her photograph taken every few months "as proof of what an Aboriginal woman could become" (J. Dowling in Ross 2007). At the age of six, Mollie was placed in the Catherine McAuley Family Centre (St Joseph's Orphanage) by her white father. Mollie embraced the Catholic Church and tried to disassociate herself from her Aboriginal family. Her story reflects the complex emotions of the Stolen Generations. As Peter Read emphasises in *A Rape of the Soul So Profound: The Return of the Stolen Generations*, Aboriginal children who were removed from their parents and raised in institutions often feel "a genuine sense of love and gratitude for the white people who raised them" (1999, p. 149). Mollie was so committed to the Catholic Church that she wanted to become a nun.<sup>153</sup>

In 1993 Mollie had a stroke. As the eldest, unmarried daughter, Dowling was required to look after her. Dowling admits, "before my grandmother had the stroke, I couldn't talk to her, she was scary, she was a liberal, a Catholic, [and she] loved the royal family" (J. Dowling in Bannister 2005). Dowling spent around two years caring for her. During that time she absorbed stories from visiting elders. Even though she was not painting at this time, she was thinking about the importance of oral history and the

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<sup>152</sup> Née Latham. Mary was also known as Mollie. I will use the name Mollie from here on to differentiate between Mary Dowling and Mary Oliver (Mary Dowling's mother and Julie's great grandmother). Mollie passed away in 2011.

<sup>153</sup> Mollie was abruptly told by white nuns that "gins don't become nuns" (J. Dowling in Ross 2007) so she had to find other employment, which she did as a tram conductress.

complexities of race relations in Australia – themes which would dominate her work when she returned to painting.

Dowling's mother, Veronica, was also raised by the Catholic Church to become a domestic servant and to marry a white person (J. Dowling in Coslovich 2007). Veronica Dowling describes religion as “a very dominant force” throughout her childhood (V. Dowling in Jebb 2008b). She was taught bushcraft and how to find bush tucker, such as kangaroo, emu and swan eggs, by her grandmother, Mary Oliver (Julie's great grandmother). Mary Oliver also wanted to teach her language, but Mollie prevented this as she had been taught by nuns that “home language” was unacceptable (V. Dowling in Jebb 2008b). Veronica Dowling recalls, Mollie “wanted us to be white” (in Jebb 2008b), evidently feeling that assimilation was the right path for her children. Much like Sally Morgan's grandmother in her autobiography *My Place* (1987), Mollie Dowling was ashamed of her Aboriginal heritage.

For Dowling, assimilation meant learning to hide Aboriginality. She recalls when she was growing up “the pressure to assimilate into Wudjula [white] society was intense” (J. Dowling 2006a). The Aboriginal ways she learnt had to be kept secret because they were not accepted in mainstream society (J. Dowling in Ryan 1998, p. 45). As a child, Dowling says she grew up with “two sets of enlightenment”: one from the Catholic Church and one from her Aboriginal heritage. She explains, “ever since I left high school, I have sought out those aspects of my own indigenous enlightenment – an enlightenment that was severely damaged by my family's dispossession and assimilation” (J. Dowling 2006a). Carol Dowling asserts (2008):

Julie and I were the first people in our family to ask questions and to push against such assimilationist ideology. We are now proud Badimaya women working to decolonise our family and to strengthen our language and culture for future generations to come.



To ensure the continuation of their culture, the sisters became founding members of a healing program called Kootamiara Quob.<sup>154</sup> This program involves uniting members of local Aboriginal communities to practice traditional cultural activities and share stories.

As someone who has both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal heritage, Dowling sees herself as a “litmus test” for race relations in Australia (J. Dowling in Ross 2007). She can explore both sides of her heritage by drawing on both western and Aboriginal art traditions. According to anthropologist Deborah Reed-Danahay, this kind of hybridity is a defining characteristic of autoethnographers: they are boundary crossers who have dual identities (1997, p. 3). Another characteristic Reed-Danahay cites is being motivated by displacement. Feeling “not at home”, she asserts, autoethnographers aim to rewrite “the self and the social” (1997, p. 4). Dowling’s autoethnographic paintings aim to convey Aboriginal cultural traditions to younger generations – a method she learnt from Aboriginal artist Robert Campbell Junior who painted to teach his family Aboriginal customs. Importantly, they are sensitively made from the perspective of being a member of the culture. This contrasts with colonial ethnographic paintings.

In a similar vein to the European photographers described in the previous chapter, colonial and early twentieth-century painters often portrayed Aboriginal people in a romantic light. Working when theories of social evolution were dominant, artists such as Thomas Bock, Tom Roberts, Benjamin Duterrau, Robert Dowling and Carl Magnus Oscar Friström sought to visually record what they saw as moribund Aboriginal culture since

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<sup>154</sup> Kootamiara Quob is run by the Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation. *Kootamiara Quob* is Noongar for healing together strong.

Aboriginal people were seen as victims of evolution. These artists drew on traditions of upper-class European portraiture to imbue the allegedly doomed Aboriginal people with a sense of dignity (Maynard 1985, pp. 94-5) (for example, Figure 63 and Figure 64). Dowling's grandfather was named after Robert Dowling who is famous for his group paintings of Tasmanian Aborigines.<sup>155</sup> Dowling recalls when seeing one of Robert Dowling's paintings in the Art Gallery of South Australia (Figure 65), "it freaked me out. Ever since then I've been coming to terms with colonial art and how it's regarded as valued history" (J. Dowling quoted in McGrath 2002, p. 39). Her imagined portraits seek to challenge colonial representations of Aboriginal people.



Figure 63: Robert Dowling, *Jimmy, of Hampshire Hills, Van Diemen's Land*, c.1853

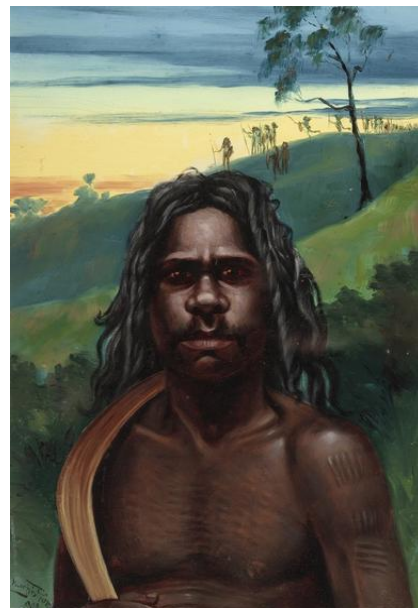


Figure 64: Carl Magnus Oscar Friström, *Portrait of an Aboriginal*, 1909

<sup>155</sup> Robert Dowling created these group portraits and other individual portraits from Thomas Bock's sketches of Aboriginal people. He did not study his Aboriginal subjects firsthand. His portraits were made to nostalgically remember Tasmanian Aboriginal people who were believed to be the victims of evolution. Oscar Friström similarly based most of his portraits of Aborigines on photographs rather than direct observation.



Figure 65: Robert Dowling, *Group of Natives of Tasmania*, 1860

Dowling's artworks offer a different perspective of history. She understands that romanticism was often used in colonial art in Australia to reinforce national and imperial sentiment. As discussed in the previous chapter in terms of photographic portraits, portraying Aborigines in a romantic light was a way of conveying their alleged doomed fate. Conversely, Dowling employs romanticism for decolonisation.

As an Aboriginal person, I feel that it is important to understand colonial art practices brought here and how they can be used for decolonisation. By using the colonial romantic imagery of Aboriginal people as a tool, I can inform non-Aboriginal people of the denial of Aboriginal culture in current representations of Australian history (J. Dowling 2006b).

By creating vibrant, dynamic portraits of Aboriginal people, Dowling subverts the tone of "melancholy heroism" (Maynard 1985, p. 96) that pervades many colonial portraits of Aborigines. Some of her paintings portray nameless, dispossessed Aboriginal people, echoing the work of social realists Yosl Bergner and Noel Counihan. Many of her imagined portraits which depict specific individuals fuse Christian imagery with traditional Aboriginal patterns, while other imagined portraits adopt grand European portrait traditions to empower Aboriginal people she holds in high regard.

Dowling finds painting cathartic. It enables her to explore deep personal emotions and vocalise “the things left unsaid” (J. Dowling 2006a). Carol Dowling says of her sister’s painting, “in a way it’s almost like an exorcism sometimes ... Aunty Dot or Uncle George’s image [is] there and it’s gotta come out” (in Maza 2006). As the appearance of the person emerges, so too do stories relating to that person. Dowling’s art enables her to come to terms with her family history. Reading Dowling’s work through a psychoanalytical framework, curator Jeanette Hoorn posits that Dowling’s compulsion to paint family stories reflects her way of dealing with the trauma of her fractured family history: “Freud says that the repressed always returns. Dowling’s art is a medium through which the artist undergoes the repetitions and re-enactments of events that constitute a type of personal and national drama” (Hoorn 2005, p. 284).

The cultural repression in Dowling’s family directly resulted from assimilation, from being discouraged from practising traditional lore. Her work is a kind of national drama because her stories – of Aboriginal midwives, Aboriginal pastoral workers, Aboriginal children stolen from their parents, Aboriginal freedom fighters, and experiencing racism – parallel those of many other indigenous families. Stories about dispossession and assimilation are laced throughout Australian literature and the visual arts.<sup>156</sup> What makes

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<sup>156</sup> For example, Aboriginal artist Tracey Moffatt’s short film *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1989) presented an evocative glimpse into the lives of two ordinary people, one Aboriginal and one white, forever touched by assimilation, neither one happy with the situation decades after it was implemented. Popular Australian films such as *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002), *Australia* (2008) and *Bran Nue Dae* (2010) conjured the terror surrounding forced separation based on skin colour. Sally Morgan’s autobiography *My Place* (1987) highlighted the way some families hid their Aboriginality until the 1970s. Gail Jones’s novel *Sorry* (2007), set in the 1930s and ’40s, eloquently portray the emotional consequences of separation and violence through the bodily manifestations of trauma.

Dowling's stories unique is the distinctive painted style through which they are told.

Dowling's family were dispossessed from their traditional lands in Coodingow in the Central West of Western Australia, north of Lake Moore, near the town of Paynes Find (C. Dowling 2008). Coodingow is the backbone of many family stories which are passed down through oral history. Dowling has strong connections to country through oral history. However, her family are still trying to come to terms with the effects of dispossession: "we're connected to one part of the country – we're descended from one woman who was taken away. She was picked out of the ocean of her community and stuck into a completely different world" (J. Dowling in Bannister 2005). That woman was Dowling's great-great grandmother, Melbin.

Philosopher Edward Casey proposes that physically returning to land from where one was removed can alleviate displacement. It is a process of reconnection and a means "to engage in a form of collective memory of one's ancestors: to commemorate them" (Casey 1993, p. 37). Standing on the dark reddish-brown soil that traditionally marks the boundaries of her land binds Dowling to the past. She asserts: "I find it difficult to have a cultural connection and an understanding of place as much as spirit if I don't have the land as well" (pers. comm., J. Dowling, 6 October 2012). Dowling's sense of belonging is enriched by being in her ancestral land. When she travels through country she is careful to respect and look after her family totem, the wedge-tailed eagle, known as the *Warridah* which "holds a map of the land and continues to soar over our country protecting it and bring[ing] healing" (C. Dowling 2004).

Standing in her country, Dowling feels the presence of her ancestors. *Self-portrait: In Our Country* (2003) (Figure 66) visually articulates this sensation (National Gallery of Australia 2010a). In this painting, Dowling portrays herself standing outdoors in a dry and russet landscape with a clear blue sky. Inside her body is another version of the same scene, this one populated with her matrilineal ancestors, including her great-great-great grandmother and great-great grandmother (J. Dowling in Bannister 2005). She explains: “I am situated [in this painting] as a member of [my ancestors] with time not separating our mutual connection to this country” (quoted in National Gallery of Australia 2010a).



Figure 66: Julie Dowling, *Self-portrait: In Our Country*, 2002

This painting powerfully encapsulates Dowling's aim to strengthen her identity and connections to country. Her identity is intimately linked to her ancestors: "I am the sum total of my ancestors and that they walk with me daily" (J. Dowling 2001a, p. 22). The figures in this large painting have a compelling presence. Their appearance is based on oral history. When Dowling paints, her relatives often describe the appearance and personality of their ancestors: "We're very descriptive, us Yamatji mob" (J. Dowling quoted in McGrath 2002, p. 39). Although the skin colour of Dowling and her ancestors differs greatly, the face of her great-great-great grandmother within her bears a close resemblance to Dowling with similar eyes and lips and the same hairstyle. Dowling thus strengthens her own sense of identity through imagining the appearance of her ancestors.

As a portrait within a portrait, *Self-portrait: In Our Country* reminds me of Italian Renaissance artist Sandro Botticelli's *Portrait of a Man with a Medal of Cosimo de' Medici* (c.1465) (Figure 67) in which an unknown male sitter holds the likeness of Cosimo de' Medici within his hands close to his heart. In Botticelli's painting, the living man seems to honour and protect the memory of the recently deceased Medici. His hands hold the medal carefully without covering Medici's image, suggesting he is proud of harbouring and sharing Medici's image. In *Self-portrait: In Our Country* Dowling similarly portrays herself in a protective, loving role as guardian of the memory of her ancestors with one of her hands placed over her ancestor's hands and the other on the head of her great-great grandmother.





Figure 67: Sandro Botticelli, *Portrait of a Man with a Medal of Cosimo de' Medici*, c.1465

In *Self-portrait: In Our Country*, Dowling's body is a conduit for family stories. This reflects the way Dowling sees herself as a translator, as a medium to facilitate a broader sharing of oral history, translating from voice to paint. "My paintings are about making 'yarns' happen. They perpetuate our storytelling traditions. These stories are precious to my family. They have endured" (J. Dowling 2001a). The stories surrounding her paintings publicise the survival of Aboriginal culture.

As an enthusiast of the immediacy of art, Dowling explains:

when we go bush you might not yarn for two or three hours and it might take you a month or two to get the whole story – I'm doing the fast way for *wudjulas* [white folk] so they get the story, but it's only part of it (J. Dowling in Bannister 2005).

The true depths of the stories reside with Dowling and her immediate family. What she gives viewers are glimpses of stories, enough to stir emotion and provoke discussion.



## Storytelling

Storytelling is a major component of Dowling's art. Art and storytelling are traditionally entwined in Dowling's matrilineal family who practised sand painting – an ephemeral art form that is all about the process. Dowling remembers sitting around a campfire watching her grandmother drawing patterns in the sand with a stick (J. Dowling in Bannister 2005). The evanescent patterns were linked to stories which unfolded on the surface of the land. Dowling's paintings cement some of the stories she was told, giving them a permanent form.

Family and community are vital to Dowling's portraiture. She describes Aboriginal cultures as "we cultures" as opposed to western "I cultures" (in Bannister 2005). Painting with people around her telling stories, her paintings reflect the community. Instead of trying to linearly map the lives of others, Dowling paints as she sees, "in relationships to stories and people and places, particularly country, as well" (J. Dowling in Bannister 2005). She does not think in terms of past/present/future but instead paints individuals at different stages of their lives at different times. This partly reflects the way she has learnt of her multifaceted identity through oral history.

Oral history connects Dowling to her ancestors. As a woman, she has a responsibility to honour, as accurately as possible, the voice of her ancestors (J. Dowling 2006a). Her need to protect the stories means they become as much her own as her ancestor's. She proclaims, "I talk about my grandmother and my mother's story as if its [*sic*] mine as well" (J. Dowling in Jebb 2008a). Firmly believing that oral history and art should hold the same weight as writing, she asserts: "A civilization must be legitimised by a multitude of expressions and not just by written word" (J. Dowling 2006a). While historian

Bain Attwood cautions that “memory is notoriously unreliable” (2005, p. 173), he proposes that oral history is useful to examine the way the past and present are connected (2005, p. 176). Following Attwood’s suggestion, I want to consider the ways in which oral history affects Dowling’s family in the present.

The stories Dowling recounts in paint are tied to specific places. One of the most important places is where her great-grandmother gave birth to her grandmother in the bush “using traditional Aboriginal techniques” – a story which is “legendary” in Dowling’s family (J. Dowling 2005b). Anthropologist Pat Baines explains, “In giving birth to children Nyungar<sup>157</sup> women are linked with the very identity of the land” (2001, p. 73). Dowling’s imagined portrait *Budjarri Maroubra* (2005) (Figure 68) conveys this connection. *Budjarri Maroubra* depicts Dowling’s great grandmother after having just given birth to her grandmother at Maroubra station near Lake Moore and Mount Gibson. Her great grandmother is presented as a small figment of the land resting under a Gascoyne tea tree, baby cradled in her arms. The clear-sky appears calm and nurturing. Since Lake Moore is famous for its pink colouring, the colours of the land specifically evoke the region. Dowling keeps some ochre from Lake Moore in a plastic container in her studio (McGrath 2002, p. 36). In imagined portraits such as *Budjarri Maroubra*, this ochre is used to embed physical traces of country in her paintings.

*Budjarri Maroubra* shares a personal family story. It recreates the scene of her great grandmother giving birth as Dowling learnt it through oral history. Every depicted detail is important as the painting “shows what [my great grandmother] took with her when giving birth: rifle, knife, dogs, blanket, and a Coolamon (wooden dish to carry the baby back in)” (J. Dowling 2005b). The

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<sup>157</sup> Also spelt Noongar, as Dowling spells it.

two Kanagroo Dogs,<sup>158</sup> sleeping amongst the flowers, provide protection from snakes and dingos. In the background a tall plume of smoke indicates where her husband is waiting for her return (J. Dowling 2005b).



Figure 68: Julie Dowling, *Budjarri Maroubra*, 2005

*Budjarri Maroubra* appears feminine. It is a warm and loving imagined portrait that feels maternal. I argue it possesses the qualities American artist Joan Snyder attributed to women's art: "a kind of softness, layering, a certain colour sensibility" (Snyder in Lippard 1976, p. 86). The pastel carpet of flowers surrounding Dowling's great grandmother and her newborn soften the scene, giving it a dreamlike aura. The subject of birth is also particularly feminine. *Budjarri Maroubra* depicts a tender and precious moment while also emphasising the autonomy of a woman birthing comfortably alone. It has a

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<sup>158</sup> Australian dogs bred for hunting.

sense of caring, a quality Lucy Lippard sees in much women's art (Lippard 1976, p. 89). In the statement for this work, Dowling speaks lovingly about the scene: "My Nana still brags about being born in a field of everlasting flowers as if it has some influence upon her living a long life" (J. Dowling 2005b). Personal details such as this enliven and narrate the painting, making it autobiographical – another feature which Snyder sees as characterising women's art (Snyder in Lippard 1976, p. 86). The feminine aesthetic of *Budjarri Maroubra* conveys Dowling's maternal love for her ancestors. It is a poignant imagined portrait with a strong sense of narrative.

*Budjarri* means pregnant or birth in Noongar language; *Maroubra* refers to Maroubra station in the Gascoyne region of Western Australia. Dowling often titles her paintings in Noongar as a strategy of decolonisation. Like Leah King-Smith, she wants to undermine the imperial power of English. Using Noongar is also her way of maintaining its continuation as she is acutely aware that many Aboriginal languages are disappearing (pers. comm., 6 October 2012). Her grandmother was taught not to speak Aboriginal language by the Catholic nuns who raised her. However, shortly after her stroke, her language came back in emotional bursts (J. Dowling in Bannister 2005). This marked the start of the recovery of Dowling's family language. Since then, the twins have embraced Noongar language. Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra assert: "The intense attachment of Aboriginal communities to their traditional languages is an antilanguage strategy, excluding outsiders (White Australians, and even other Aboriginal groups) and bonding the community" (1991, p. 206). Dowling's use of Noongar titles cements her ties to Noongar culture.

The representation of the land in *Budjarri Maroubra* reflects some degree of influence from Albert Namatjira in its realistic depiction and colour

palette. Dowling admires Namatjira's adoption of colonial artistic methods to represent his country (McGrath 2002). While sometimes seen as evidence of successful assimilation, Namatjira's art has also been seen in terms of its potential to bridge cultures (McLean 1998, p. 98; 2011, pp. 19-20). Generally speaking, Aborigines see his art as a political forebear of the Aboriginal art movement (McLean 1998, p. 98). In Western Australia, the public and commercial success of Namatjira's painting inspired the Carrolup mission to teach children to paint in the style of Namatjira. The Carrolup tradition, as it became known, continues to influence many contemporary Noongar artists (O'Brien 1999; Perth Festival 2011).<sup>159</sup> Dowling directly associates Namatjira's work and its influence on her own work with the Carrolup tradition (J. Dowling in Bannister 2005).

Adopting this realistic style as one of "the fair-skinned mob, urban and dispossessed", Dowling has had to face the authenticity debate (J. Dowling in Lloyd, McDonald & Hastie 2007, p. 66). Aboriginal people living in cities are often confronted with issues of authenticity. For decades only "the most traditional" Aboriginal art was accepted in the Australian art world,<sup>160</sup> even though the context of that authenticity could not be measured by the white audience at whom it was directed (Willis & Fry 2002, p. 124). The Australian art world's insistence on authenticity locks Aboriginal art into a particular mode of production which limits self-expression. It is sustained by the illusion that Aboriginal art emerges from a vacuum, isolated from other art and

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<sup>159</sup> In the 1940s the Carrolup mission arranged for the children's paintings to be taken to England to be exhibited, although the children were never paid for their work. Dowling explains that the tradition is now in its fourth generation but that it still has an impact (in Bannister 2005). Many contemporary Noongar artists continue to be inspired by the Carrolup tradition.

<sup>160</sup> By art world, I mean the institutions and networks of people who base their professions in art: galleries, museums, artists, curators, art dealers, art educators, gallery employees, art investors and so on (see Becker 1982).

experiences, yet this is clearly not the case (Ryan 2002). As with all art, Aboriginal art is responsive to surrounding influences. Insisting on alleged authenticity fossilises Aboriginal culture. Conversely, being dynamically open to different influences maintains cultural vibrancy (Hodge & Mishra 1991, p. 114).

Another of Dowling's series, the 'Nyorn' series (2005) which was also inspired by the legendary story of her great grandmother giving birth in the bush, illustrates the way her art combines different influences to striking effect. The 'Nyorn' series also highlights the importance of faces to her family.

### Facing her Ancestors

Faces hold the promise of connection for Dowling, who has produced a large body of imagined portraits of isolated faces.<sup>161</sup> Her fascination with faces stems back to her childhood. Dowling's family is incomplete with some Aboriginal members missing because they were separated from their relatives and placed into institutions run by white Australians. She remembers her mother trying to look into the faces of fair-skinned and darker-skinned Aboriginal people "to try and find family, to see if there was a gesture or a way that they walked that meant they were part of our family" (J. Dowling in Ross 2007). Her mother gave her a sketchbook to draw portraits of potential relatives. As Dowling drew, her sister questioned that person and recorded their answers. This process mainly took place on trains and buses. In an interview with John Bannister (2005), Dowling excitedly exclaimed, "we've actually met some of our relatives that way!"

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<sup>161</sup> For instance, see the series: 'Icon to a Stolen Child' (1997-), 'Federation' (2001), and 'Sable Valet' (2006).

Dowling's 'Nyorn' series (2005) (Figure 69) expresses Dowling's connection to country. It does not portray the land in a representational sense but more abstractly shares a story that has roots in a particular place. As described in the previous section, this place is where Dowling feels her strongest connection to country. It is "a very important place that has connections with thousands of years of rituals" (J. Dowling in Ryan 1998, p. 46). The imagined portraits of the 'Nyorn' series depict Dowling's grandmother and her siblings as infants just after they were born in the bush. They are "a stylized [*sic*] fantasy of what my elders must have looked like as little *Nunifas* (babies) as newborns" (J. Dowling 2005b). They are stylised in that they reflect Dowling's idiosyncratic aesthetic; they are a fantasy in that they imagine the appearance of her ancestors. The faces in the 'Nyorn' series are lifelike, although they cannot easily be discussed in terms of likenesses because Dowling could not have seen her grandmother and her siblings as infants. The 'Nyorn' series reflects a combination of oral history and Dowling's imagination.

Each portrait in the 'Nyorn' series is accompanied by a short written biography of the subject. For example, for *Frank* (Figure 72, p. 193) Dowling writes: "Uncle Frank worked with sheep all his life and eventually died from injuries when some rams doubled back and knocked him to the ground. He was a gentle and much loved man" (J. Dowling 2005b). This personalises the portraits and sets up an emotional connection between viewer and subject, a pathos that is deepened by the expressions of the babies' faces. As Carol Dowling expresses (2005a), "Julie implores her audience to see through Aboriginal eyes, as oppressed peoples, to have compassion and respond humanely, and to celebrate our survival".



Figure 69: Julie Dowling, [from top left to bottom right] *Richard, May, Mary, Frank, Violet, George, Edward, Fred, Dorothy* from the 'Nyorn' series, 2005

Dowling uses the old European technique of chiaroscuro to set the faces against a black background so they emerge from darkness and appear to float in the centre of each painting. This technique is redolent of European masters Rembrandt, Caravaggio and Rubens who used it for dramatic, emotional portraits. Dark and tradition-rich, these paintings are also incredibly contemporary, incorporating vibrant colours and glitter. A kaleidoscopic aureole surrounds the faces of the babies with patterns evocative of Central Australian desert dot painting.

The fusion of portraiture and Aboriginal motifs is reminiscent of some of Lin Onus's and Robert Campbell Junior's portraits.<sup>162</sup> In a similar manner to Campbell Junior's portrait of Bart Cummings (1989) (Figure 70), Dowling uses bright, artificial colours rather than natural earthy tones. Dowling's brightly coloured dots are accentuated by glitter. The dazzling pink, purple, green, gold and silver colours and pearlescent pigments of the mosaic patterns have a luxurious sheen. The viscosity of the glitter raises the dots from the surface of the canvas, lending the work a subtle sculpture-like quality. From a

<sup>162</sup> For example, see Lin Onus's *Portrait of Jack Wunwun* (1988) and Robert Campbell Junior's *Charlie Perkins* (1986), *Bart Cummings* (1989), *Senator Bonner* (1990) and *Untitled* (1991).



distance, the paintings glisten; up close, multiple layers of colour emerge from a dark undercoat.

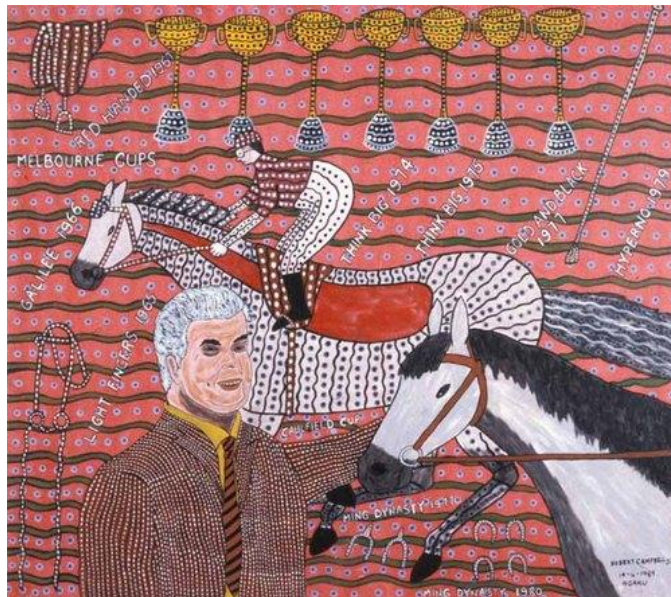


Figure 70: Robert Campbell Jr, *Bart Cummings*, 1989

The ‘Nyorn’ series also draws on the Catholic iconography Dowling learnt at school to portray her grandmother, great aunts and uncles as icons. Her allusion to the western tradition of icons urges the viewer to see these images as more than just portraits. In Christianity, icons are portraits of holy beings that contain the sign of God. They require the viewer to project his or her “otherwise invisible God, onto or into the portrait” (Soussloff 2006, p. 8). For Dowling, “The adoration of a Catholic artwork imbued you with some of the magic of that image” (quoted in Ryan 1998, p. 47). The unusual style of the ‘Nyorn’ series is indicative of Dowling’s two forms of enlightenment discussed in the previous section. Carefully constructed to blend cultural traditions, the vivid small square paintings inspire a sense of awe.

Dowling’s use of an elaborate portrait background with religious connotations echoes some of Ron Hurley’s portraiture. Hurley, an Aboriginal artist from Brisbane, appropriated the styles of Renaissance oil portraiture and

European religious paintings to portray urban Aboriginal people living in coastal communities around Queensland. He fused these styles with symbols from Aboriginal culture to communicate stories about Aboriginal people. Hurley declared that colonialism in Australia “only creates martyrs of the people it sets out to destroy” (quoted in McLean 2009, p. 9). To convey this sentiment, he created saintlike portraits of Aboriginal people he admired. For instance, in his portrait of George Everett Johnson (1989) (Figure 71), a Gooreng Gooreng man celebrated for his knowledge of Gooreng Gooreng history, Hurley filled the background with gold leaf. With its western historical associations of symbolising heavenly glory in portraits of religious figures, the gold leaf promotes the deification of the depicted subject. It elevates the subject using a well-known western aesthetic. It has a similar function to Dowling’s use of colour and glitter as both artists glorify their Aboriginal subjects.



Figure 71: Ron Hurley, *Portrait of George Everett Johnson*, 1989

Intimately presented with close-to-life size, realistic faces, Dowling hopes viewers feel as if they are meeting her ancestors: “I really want to simulate the sense of somebody meeting an Indigenous person” (J. Dowling quoted in Edmundson 2010). In a manner that became celebrated in history painting with Charles Le Brun’s influential theory on the passions, *Conference sur l’expression générale et particulière* (1669),<sup>163</sup> Dowling uses the eyebrows and mouths of the babies as the key indicators of emotions. The furrowed eyebrows of most of the babies and downturned lips appear sad. It is almost as if the babies know they will soon be removed from their homeland and “separated up and down the coast based on the colour of their skin” (J. Dowling in Bannister 2005). For instance, in *Frank* (Figure 72) the angle of the eyebrows and semi-open eyes form a pensive depressed expression evocative of someone much older. The soft, glinting eyes are moving. To me this particular imagined portrait in the ‘Nyorn’ series poignantly expresses the generations of sorrow Dowling’s family experienced.



Figure 72: Julie Dowling, *Frank*, from the ‘Nyorn’ series, 2005

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<sup>163</sup> See Montague (1994).

While Frank has his eyes open, the majority of the babies have their eyes closed. *Arthur* and *Mary*, for instance, appear completely still with closed eyes. It is hard to distinguish whether they are asleep or lifeless. Other babies who have their eyes closed, as in *Fred* and *May*, appear to be clenching facial muscles in a kind of tormented state of sleep. The ambiguity and tension in these imagined portraits is unsettling. This sense of unease is heightened by the way the floating detached faces are suggestive of death masks.

As with Leah King-Smith's source photographs which were both derogatory and useful, conflicting emotions underscore Dowling's engagement with Aboriginal history. Her paintings are inspired by stories which are often tragic and painful but this does not stop her wanting to celebrate the protagonists. The contradiction she feels is exemplified in her description of glitter, which she finds both "pretty" and "repellent" (J. Dowling quoted in Lloyd, McDonald & Hastie 2007, p. 66). The title 'Nyorn' extends this difficult duality. "'Nyorn' is a Noongar expression referring to something that is at one extreme endearing and at the other, something to be pitied" (J. Dowling 2005b). As visually alluring and celebratory as the colourful 'Nyorn' portraits appear, they are also melancholic. I agree with Hoorn that Dowling's art is uncanny because "it uncovers that which was previously hidden, bringing the private and public into collision, throwing the divine and the profane together and generally creating a sense of disturbance and disquiet in the unsuspecting viewer" (Hoorn 2005, pp. 285-6). Combining the delicate faces within ornate 'frames' which reference western and Indigenous spirituality is a powerful way of alluring viewers to impart painful stories.

Another technique Dowling uses is adopting the style of grand, full-length European portraits. These portraits traditionally sought to glorify

individuals in positions of power. By using this style to create bold imagined portraits of Aboriginal people she admires, Dowling gives her subjects a powerful, individual presence which challenges the way mainstream Australian history has frequently homogenised Aborigines.<sup>164</sup> In Dowling's art, as curator Tom Middlemost describes, "one is confronted by individual humanity and the corporeality of the group then follows" (Eagle & Middlemost 1998, p. 44). This technique is also a means to undermine white hegemony. As Hodge and Mishra argue in respect of literature, Aborigines who have been raised with white education must use white genres as political weapons to challenge the dominance of those genres (1991, p. 115). Harnessing the power associated with western full-length portraits, Dowling redescribes Aboriginal history in Australia.

### Apotheosising Aboriginal Women

Dowling's imagined portraits draw attention to the important roles of Noongar women and matrilineal ties to country. The term 'Noongar' means 'man' which may reflect that Aboriginal men are more visible than Aboriginal women (Baines 2001, p. 58). Aboriginal women are rarely mentioned as custodians of country in literature, or even decision-making individuals; they are seen as wives and mothers whereby their connection to country is mediated by another (Bell 2002, p. 50). While land rights entered mainstream politics in the 1960s, it was not until 1979-1980 that Aboriginal women's rights and matrilineal lines

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<sup>164</sup> Bain Attwood explains that Europeans saw and described Aborigines as if they were one homogenous group. However, before European arrival, "Their world was premised upon small groups and narrow division rather than upon broad unity, and they defined themselves in terms of their specific relationships with the land and other Aborigines" (1989, p. 149).

were recognised (Brock 2001, p. 10). Despite possibly being less visible, the notion that Noongar women are strong and talented is evident in Noongar cultural representation (Baines 2001, p. 85). The vast majority of Dowling's familial imagined portraits are of matriarchs, such as her great-great grandmother Melbin and her great grandmother Mary.

Melbin was the first person in Dowling's family to have contact with white people. Traditionally, women in Widi country had to "walk large strips of land to get connection to country" (J. Dowling in Bannister 2005). This form of initiation was important for young women to demonstrate their stamina to older women. Men and women were equal but lived separately. After completing their long walk, women would meet in certain areas to perform rituals – isolated in small groups, this is where many women were captured by white men. The most desirable Aboriginal woman was one who could find the precious resource of water. In the hot, barren Western Australian countryside, water was rare and more expensive than tin. Dowling's great-great grandmother, Melbin, was given the totem, *Warridah*, the wedge-tailed eagle, which meant she could find water by using star patterns: "that's why she was stolen because she could find water anywhere" (J. Dowling in Bannister 2005).

Melbin was given her name by the white man she married, Edward Oliver, who named her after his favourite city, Melbourne. It seems that Edward saw Melbin as an exotic charm he could profit from. Not long after they were married, he took his new wife to England to be paraded as a Savage Queen. With the money he pocketed from doing so, he purchased a house back in Australia. In that house they had a daughter, Mary. Rather than staying in Australia and living as a family, Edward could not resist the opportunity to make more money: he took both Melbin and Mary to England to be

photographed for one of Queen Victoria's world exhibitions (J. Dowling in Ross 2007). Melbin must have grown frustrated with being treated like an object as she eventually made the painful decision to leave Edward, even though it meant leaving her daughter Mary behind. Melbin then rejoined her Aboriginal community. Meanwhile, Mary became a servant to Edward, his new white wife and later his new white children.

Dowling has painted several imagined portraits of Melbin, two of which relate to her great-great grandmother's journey from Australia to England.<sup>165</sup> Melbin died a free woman between 1901 and 1910 but "she had lost her land, her family and her daughter (my great grandmother, Mary) to white men" (J. Dowling 2001b). There are no archival records recounting Melbin's travels (Hoorn 2004, p. 210). Her story is known only through oral history. It exists as a family memory, protected and recounted by her descendants.

In a large imagined portrait, titled *Warridah Melburra Ngupi* (2004) (Figure 73), Dowling returns Melbin to her land. Breaking down the title, the word *Warridah* refers to her wedge-tailed eagle totem; *Melburra* is Melbin in Badimaya language; the word *Ngupi* means water. *Warridah Melburra Ngupi* thus conveys Melbin's ability to find water using her totem and the stars of the night sky. This full-length portrait depicts Melbin alone at night in a desert. The azure streaks in night sky vividly contrast with the warm brown earth and small, blazing fire in the right-hand side of the background. Melbin's skin and the land are the same colour making her firmly planted feet blend into the

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<sup>165</sup> Jeanette Hoorn analyses these paintings through a "reverse captivity narrative" in her essay, 'Julie Dowling's Melbin and the Captivity Narrative in Australia' (2004). Hoorn describes the reverse captivity narrative as one where Indigenous peoples are held captive by Europeans (2004, p. 203).

earth. As with King-Smith's imagined portraits, this conveys Aboriginal people "are truly of the place of origin; are of the land ... [their] skin is synonymous with the Earth's covering" (Huoston in King-Smith 1992c). Melbin's tummy is gently sagging to reveal "she's had her baby already" (J. Dowling in Bannister 2005). This imagined portrait thus depicts her after she has left Edward and rejoined her community. Holding a spear and wearing a kangaroo skin cloak, Melbin casts a distinct shadow onto the dry, ochre-coloured land. The silhouette, which resembles the outline of a gallant, caped explorer like Caspar David Friedrich's wanderer, symbolises intrepidity.

This imagined portrait also imparts important cultural knowledge as Melbin has a kangaroo skin cloak, known as a *boogka*, wrapped around her shoulders. Knowledge of *boogkas* has been passed down through oral history. Dowling explains a *boogka* as "one of the only significant personal possessions by a Noongar person. It had your life's journey and Dreamings etched onto its tanned skin. It was wrapped around you when you were buried into the sacred earth" (2006a).<sup>166</sup> In *Warridah Melburra Ngupi*, grey etched lines of Melbin's imagined life journey are evident on the tan underside of the *boogka*. There is no sign of European influence upon Melbin's life in the painting.

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<sup>166</sup> As part of the Kootamiara Quob program, Dowling and her sister make *boogkas* using traditional techniques which had not been practiced for over 170 years (Dowling 2006a).





Figure 73: Julie Dowling, *Warridah Melburra Ngupi*, 2004

In *Warridah Melburra Ngupi*, Melbin is mostly naked. Her body is frontally exposed to the viewer, yet her spirited gaze bars any sense of voyeurism. Her powerful stare and angled face are reminiscent of Diego Velázquez's *Portrait of a Man* (c.1630) (Figure 74) and Frida Kahlo's *Self-Portrait with Monkey* (1938) (Figure 75).<sup>167</sup> Her eyes directly connect with viewers; she is not an object to be looked at but a strong woman in charge of her fate. There is no sign that she was taken captive; she appears a force to be reckoned with.

<sup>167</sup> Dowling cites Diego Velázquez, Francisco de Goya and Frida Kahlo as stylistically influencing her work (J. Dowling in Bannister 2005; Ross 2007).



Figure 74: Diego Velázquez, *Portrait of a Man*, c.1630-35

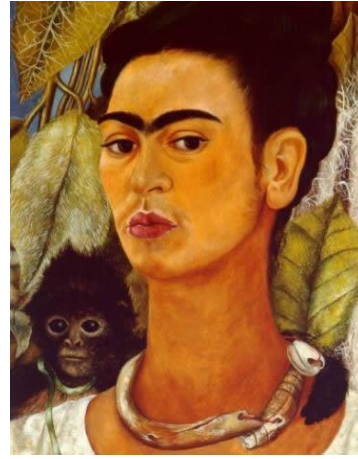


Figure 75: Frida Kahlo, *Self-portrait with Monkey*, 1938

Standing in the centre of the painting, Melbin dominates the pictorial space. Her grounded, frontal stance reminds me of Francisco de Goya's *Portrait of Ferdinand VII* (c.1814). The full-length standing pose connotes power. This pose, which was often used in portraits of elite rulers in western history, derives from earlier representations of saints (West 2004, p. 73). The familiar historical associations with this pose have the effect of ennobling Melbin. Dowling presents her great-great grandmother as a resolute and independent woman.

Dowling painted a similar imagined portrait of Melbin's daughter, Mary. In *Mary* (2001) (Figure 76), Dowling's great grandmother stands alone in the land dominating the centre of the painting. She seems confident in the land with a dingo standing loyally by her side. The dingo would have helped her hunt as Mary was a kangaroo hunter (J. Dowling in Ross 2007). Like Melbin, her bare feet blend into the land. However, in contrast to *Warridah Melburra Ngupi*, Mary is dressed in European clothing, wearing a white dress with a belt fastened around her waist. The white dress suggests virtue and purity. She is portrayed as an innocent yet independent young woman who is

touched by, but not impaired by, European culture. The bush tucker she holds firmly in one hand, a goanna, confirms that she maintains Aboriginal cultural knowledge; she is a woman of both worlds.



Figure 76: Julie Dowling, *Mary*, 2001

As described earlier, Mary was kept as a domestic servant for her white father and his white wife and children. She learnt Aboriginal culture from her mother but was denied the close relationship to country her mother had. I agree with Kerrie Jean Ross (2007) that Dowling has set Mary free and restored her dignity. This large painting gives Mary a strong presence. Like Melbin, she has a heroic stature and appears confident and determined. Whereas Melbin's

forceful gaze directly confronted viewers, Mary gently gazes into the distance. Her expression is calm and reflective with her eyes directed towards a realm beyond the viewer. This imagined portrait has a softer, nostalgic tone. However, unlike the romantic colonial portraits of Aborigines mentioned earlier, Mary appears brave and independent standing alone in the fiery desert. In this respect, it echoes the proud stance of men and women depicted in Dowling's imagined portraits of freedom fighters, such as Walyer.<sup>168</sup>

*Walyer* (2006) (Figure 77), depicts the Tasmanian Aboriginal female fighter of the same name.<sup>169</sup> Walyer learnt English and how to use firearms from sealers. She then led violent attacks against settlers and other Aboriginal groups. To Dowling, Walyer represents "the hundreds of women who fought for their land against the invading colonial forces" (J. Dowling 2006b). Like Mary, Dowling portrays Walyer alone in the land. Dowling presents Walyer dressed in traditional Aboriginal clothing wearing a wallaby skin cloak, a shell necklace and clay in her hair (J. Dowling 2006b). The soft moonlight which illuminates her body is evocative of Joseph Wright's romantic landscape scenes (for example, Figure 78).

In this full-length frontal portrait, Walyer looks directly towards the viewer. One hand clasps a gun while the other arm is outstretched with an open palm facing the viewer. The outstretched arm is directed towards a group of colonial houses (J. Dowling 2006b). Dowling positions the viewer as one of

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<sup>168</sup> Dowling has created several imagined portraits of Aboriginal freedom fighters. For example, she has portrayed Sambo (Saturday), Pemulwuy, Windradyne and Tunnerminnerwait – all of which were included in her exhibition *Widi Boornoo (Wild Message)* (2006). These imagined portraits extend what Yorta Yorta artist Lin Onus began with his celebrated 'Musquito' series (1979-82). Onus realised Aboriginal people had few heroes or models and that stories of freedom fighters were absent from Australian history books (Leslie 2010, p. 2). Ron Hurley similarly created imagined portraits of the Aboriginal freedom fighter Pemulwuy (2001).

<sup>169</sup> Walyer was also known as Tarenorerer and Te Nor.



Walyer's supporters. Standing tall in the moonlight atop a rocky cliff, Walyer gestures "to the viewer as if they were one of the fighters she has assembled to battle the colonial encroachments upon their land and hers" (J. Dowling 2006b).

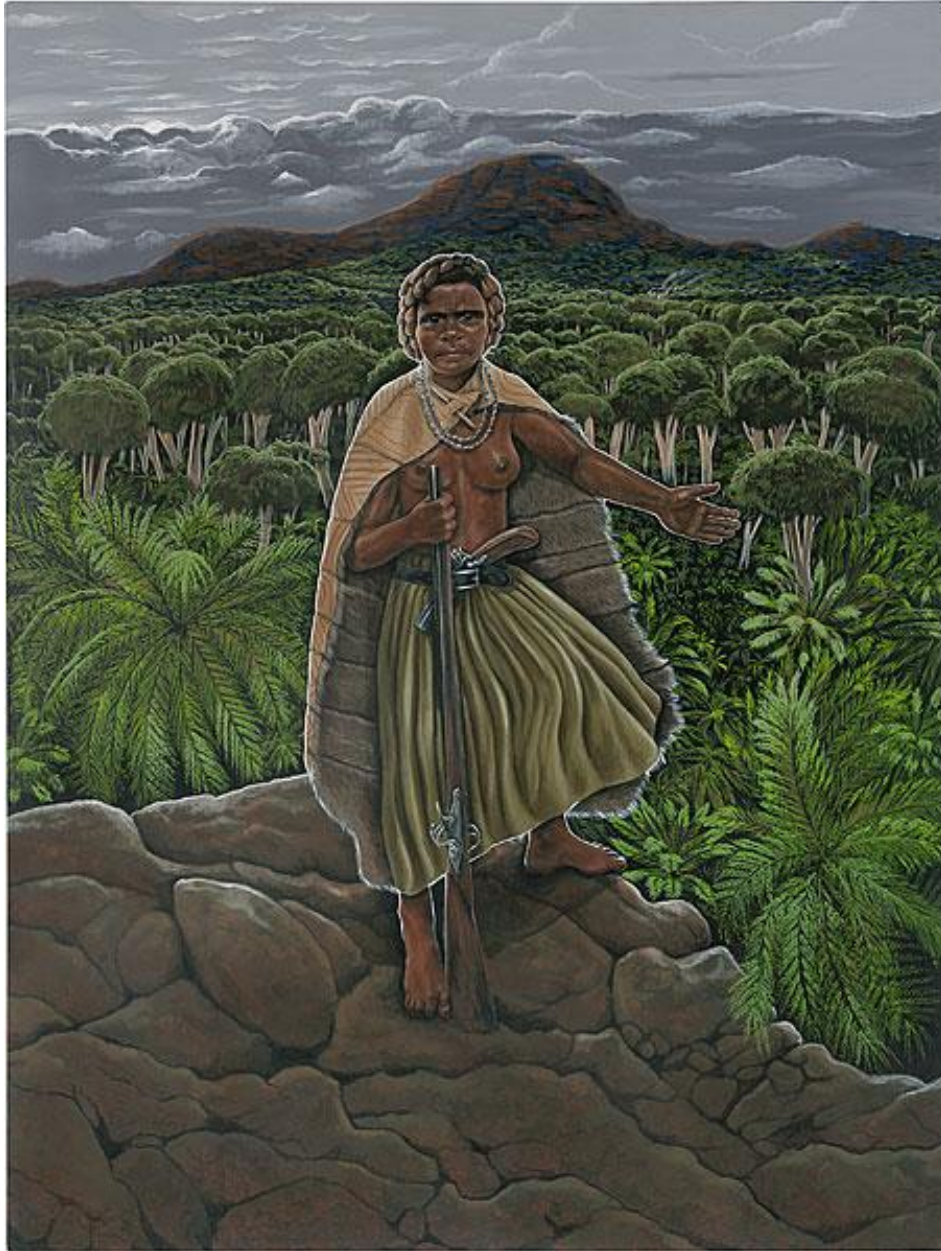


Figure 77: Julie Dowling, *Walyer*, 2006



Figure 78: Joseph Wright of Derby, *The Lady in Milton's 'Comus'*, 1785

In this two metre tall painting Walyer appears valiant. Like Melbin and Mary, her stance is confident and determined. Displayed at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, Dowling has ensured Walyer a place alongside other Australians deemed historically significant. The stories surrounding Melbin, Mary and Walyer are part of Australian history. Seeing these women depicted in grand, traditional full-length portraits historically associated with persons in positions of power immediately commands respect. In sharing her often sad and tragic personal stories, Dowling exposes aspects of Australian history that are often concealed and not discussed. As bell hooks argues, “It is the telling of our history that enables political self-recovery” (2008, p. 103). Even when the stories behind her subjects are of oppression, Dowling resurrects her subjects as survivors.

When asked in an interview what message she would like to leave with future listeners, Dowling responded:

See that part of country where you're standing right there I want you to find out who walked it before you did and figure out what totem it is and look after the bloody totem thanks ... when you've got no connection to something ... you're basically walking on the world with feather feet, you're not touching it ... Have more connection to your country and then you understand yourself. Which is sort of what universally blackfellas have been saying every since they met Wudjulas (in Bannister 2005).

Dowling's imagined portraits embody this conviction. Learning of her ancestors and respecting their totems ensures Dowling has her feet firmly planted on the ground. She does not walk with feather feet but is connected to her ancestors through country.

## Conclusion

Julie Dowling's imagined portraits of her ancestors are both elegiac and celebratory. Dowling puts viewers face-to-face with "strong people, but sad people" (J. Dowling in Maza 2006) as she shares stories with viewers. Her stories resonate with a broad audience, eliciting reflection on the deeply emotional consequences of dispossession and assimilation, of having to relearn culture and kinship. Imagined portraits such as *Warridah Melburra Ngupi* are proud declarations that this is Dowling's culture; it has been damaged but not destroyed by assimilation.

Dowling's imagined portraits work towards mending the damage of the past in a similar manner to Leah King-Smith's 'Patterns of Connection'. Using lifelike faces, vivid colours representing western and Aboriginal art, Dowling's imagined portraits use empathy to draw viewers into a close, emotionally invested relationship with her subjects. This connection enables viewers to see that:

Stories of our survival against oppression and the experiences of displacement from our lands are all embedded in the personal and social memories of Aboriginal communities in Australia and are within reach of the imagination of all (J. Dowling 2006a).

Land lies at the heart of Dowling's connection with her ancestors. Both physically returning to her grandmother's country and symbolically returning her ancestors to land in imagined portraits are important avenues for Dowling

to strengthen her heritage and positively contribute to the memory of her ancestors. Dowling's conviction that to connect with a place you need to learn who walked the land before you accentuates the importance of the past to constructions of place. None of the artists I have discussed in this thesis have "feather feet". By connecting past, present and place in various ways, like Dowling, they walk with their feet firmly on the ground.



## Conclusion

Land has been, and continues to be, paramount to a sense of belonging in Australia. Knowledge of the history that occurred in the land can help secure a sense of belonging. However, various mechanisms of suppressing the past have left many Australians, including the artists discussed in this thesis, feeling displaced. This thesis illustrates that being anchored to the land through a connection with the past enables the development of a strong sense of self in relation to place. As Lucy Lippard announced in her engaging book *The Lure of the Local*, “our personal relationships to history and place form us” (1997, p. 9). Hence, developing and nurturing relationships to history and place are vital to one’s identity. As they enable artists to visually articulate such relationships, this thesis argues that imagined portraits are an effective means of resolving crises of identity which stem from displacement. The five detailed case studies I have presented contribute to personal accounts of history that derive from the land.

Throughout this thesis I have suggested that belonging is a complex, self-reflective, individual process which requires a three-way connection between past, person and place. Rebe Taylor, the historian I opened this thesis with, wrote her story of Creek Bay Farm and bound herself to the place (2002b, pp. 112-6). Taylor’s story began as her own, of time she spent at a childhood holiday spot, but increasingly became about others, about those who had occupied the same land, those who had since disappeared but needed to be remembered. Discovering those others and empathising with the plight of their lives deepened Taylor’s attachment to the place.

If land secretes memory, as Taylor asserted (2002a, p. 16), then being in the land is an apt way to unravel the history that occurred there. Sometimes

memory in the land is self-evident; at other times, it requires a dedicated effort of recovery. Memory of historical figures can persist and strengthen over time in the land associated with the life of the figure, as Sidney Nolan discovered in 'Kelly Country'. It can remain in the public imagination, sometimes through place names or monuments. As Lady Jane Franklin's name resonates throughout Tasmania, John Lendis was drawn to learn more of her life. Lendis was enraptured by her travels through the Tasmanian wilderness. He felt connected to Lady Jane while retracing her travels in South West Tasmania. Lendis reminds viewers of Lady Jane's agency, which is often eclipsed by her husband's deeds. He also reminds viewers that men were not the only adventurers, even though masculine relationships to the land have been prioritised in Australian history.

Memory in the land may undulate with time. It is not always strung together and threaded through generations in a continual manner. In some cases, it can perish or deliberately be expunged. This does not mean it is forever lost. At Ross and South Hobart in Tasmania, Ann Ferran discovered the ground was pregnant with memory despite attempts to conceal it. As there were no visual remnants of her subjects, Ferran had to find her own way of voicing their presence in the land. Her imagined portraits exploit the truth claims traditionally associated with photography to explore the way her subjects are missing from historical memory.

When people have been dispossessed from their lands, memory of their lives may be placeless. Leah King-Smith found this to be the case in Victoria where memory of her subjects lived in photographic archives, bereft of their spiritual connections to country. Distressed by this situation, King-Smith sought to visually return her subjects to the lands from which they were

removed. Julie Dowling similarly reinjects memory into the land with her imagined portraits. Dowling draws heavily on oral history – a poignant means of maintaining memory in the land, even when those who carry the stories are displaced from the lands on which the stories are based. Dowling guards family stories yet shares them publically through her imagined portraits, asserting her family's continuing connections to country.

Memory of the historical figure can remain forever connected to the identity of the artist. For instance, Nolan and Kelly are often recalled in relation to one another. This is because Nolan continued to use Kelly throughout his life, even when he travelled overseas. Similarly, John Lendis continues to use Lady Jane Franklin to adapt to new environments. Kelly and Lady Jane are not just central motifs in Nolan's and Lendis's oeuvres; they are intimately linked to the artists' personal emotions regarding belonging.

All of the imagined portraits featured in this thesis are characterised by a strong empathetic bond between the artist and subject. In a similar manner to Taylor's action of writing the stories of others, the artists portray historical figures to work through their own relationships to place. Reading imagined portraits autobiographically, as I have done throughout this thesis, highlights the importance of empathy in bonding with historical figures to form meaningful relationships with the land.

Recovering the memory of historical figures requires time – time spent immersed in the land the figures once resided in, and time spent imagining their lives as intricate and emotional real human lives which are not too dissimilar from our own, despite the gulf in time. Expression, subjectivity and empathy are vital in connecting the past and present and visually reviving historical subjects. These aspects are what make imagined portraits individual,

memorable and of contemporary relevance. Imagined portraits not only help artists articulate their own sense of belonging, they also resonate with a diverse audience.

Imagined portraits imprint historical figures into present consciousness. The imagined portraits I have analysed in this thesis by Sidney Nolan, John Lendis, Anne Ferran, Leah King-Smith and Julie Dowling connect the past to the present. Although created in part for personal reasons, they grant their historical subjects contemporary relevance and provide compelling ways for their historical subjects to be remembered. While only five artists have been analysed in this thesis, wider conclusions have been drawn in each chapter regarding the historical figures and their portrayal in Australian historiography.

As imagined portraits, the once existing human subject of the artworks is brought to the fore. Analysing the artworks in this thesis as imagined portraits also highlights the intimate connections between the artist and subject, subject and viewer. Richard Brilliant (1991, p. 14) and Catherine Soussloff (2006, p. 4) argue that creating portraits is a natural way to visually think through our relationships to others. Portraiture is a social medium loaded with human insights. Exploring the creation of portraits sheds light on the artist's relationship with the subject, while exploring the reception of portraits illuminates the way viewers connect with the portrayed subject. It is this double value of portraiture that has been emphasised throughout this thesis as I have analysed both the intentions of the artist as well as the way their expression incites empathy in viewers.

Researching the intentions of the artists and analysing their imagined portraits has enriched my knowledge of Australia's past and secured my own sense of belonging in Australia. My own emotional responses to the artworks

have left me feeling connected to the historical subjects and the artists. On reflection, it seems that just as the artists used historical figures to mediate their own sense of belonging, I have used their imagined portraits to do the same. When I began this research my main interest was in learning more of the portrayed subjects. I did not anticipate that the artist's statements would be as emotive, rich and informative as their imagined portraits. The deeper I delved, the more it became evident that the artist's own personal reflections provide important commentary on Australian historiography.

This thesis presents a diverse range of stories of Australia's past. That said, there are many more dimensions of imagined portraiture and Australian history to be explored. I have focused on the two dominant mediums of portraiture: painting and photography. However, many artists are using installation and digital media to evoke the lives of others. Hence, there remains scope to explore imagined portraiture more broadly in terms of visual media. Aboriginal artist Julie Gough, for instance, often uses installation with text to convey anecdotes of the lives of her ancestors. Gough's installations incorporate a range of materials from books to synthetic and natural fibres.<sup>170</sup> Another interesting installation approach is Aboriginal artist Esme Timberly's signature medium of shells. In her work *Shellworked Slippers* (2008), Timberly drew on the La Perouse<sup>171</sup> Aboriginal craft of using shells to build tiny empty slippers which evoke Aboriginal children of the Stolen Generations who were taken from their homes.

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<sup>170</sup> For example, Gough's work *Force Field* (2007) conveyed a story about her Aboriginal ancestor, Dalrymple Briggs using a Magistrate's Report from 1825, a fireplace, a tree, a white picket fence and a floor collaged with pages of *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* which viewers were invited to walk on.

<sup>171</sup> A suburb in south-eastern Sydney, in the state of New South Wales, Australia.

Another avenue for further research could involve focusing on artists who are exploiting the truth claims of photography to create imagined portraits of invisible subjects akin to those of Anne Ferran, which were examined in Chapter Four. For example, as there is little visual documentation of early Chinese migrants in Australia, Liu Xiao Xian digitally implanted himself into nineteenth-century stereographic photographs of settlers. In the series, 'My Other Lives' (2000), Liu appears in the second half of each pair of stereographic photographs as a Chinese twin to the photographed subject to draw attention to the absence of Chinese people in Australian historiography.<sup>172</sup>

Beyond Australia, Chilean-Canadian artist Rafael Goldchain also created an intriguing series of photographs using his own image to represent others whose appearance is unknown. In his series, 'I am My Family' (2007), Goldchain created photographs in response to his incomplete family album. Goldchain had no photographs of many of his Jewish ancestors who had lost their lives during the Nazi regime. Yearning for a greater sense of family to share with his newly born son, Goldchain set about recreating his own visual portrayals of his ancestors. Using costumes, props and makeup, he assumed the identity of his ancestors and was professionally photographed in black and white. He conducted extensive research using Jewish records but still had to imaginatively fill in many gaps. Hence the series is about imagining as a way of remembering (Goldchain & Langford 2008, p. 13).

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<sup>172</sup> For more on this series, see Anna Edmundson's article 'But Where Are You Really From?: The 'Crisis' of Multiculturalism Examined through the Work of Four Asian-Australian Artists' (2009). Liu's work cannot strictly be considered imagined portraiture as his work is more general and not linked to specific individuals in any place or time. Nonetheless, it does incite remembrance as the imagined portraits in this thesis do. It is the closest work I have found as an example of imagined portraits of historical Chinese figures in Australia.

There are also cinematic imagined portraits produced by artists exploring the ability of film to resurrect past lives. In *Remembrance + the Moving Image* (2003) curator Ross Gibson cogently promotes the similarities between memory and cinema which make cinematic works deeply engaging. Some video artists have used archival film akin to King-Smith's use of archival photographs. For example, Hungarian artist Péter Forgács collected and manipulated old Hungarian home movies to convey details of the lives of those who have been oppressed and forgotten (see Trigg in Gibson 2003, pp. 70-3). Contrasting still photographic imagined portraits with cinematic ones would be an interesting exercise.

Goldchain's and Forgács's work leads to another way in which my research could be extended – that is, by analysing the creation of imagined portraits in a global context. Where are imagined portraits being created? Are they characteristic of countries with troubled or suppressed histories, such as those with colonial heritage or those that have experienced civil wars? For example, are there imagined portraits being made in Canada, New Zealand, the United States of America, Ireland, or South Africa? Examining and contrasting imagined portraits in different countries could intriguingly illuminate the ways in which they represent national narratives, history and heritage.

As capsules of human engagement and remembrance, imagined portraits are rich sources to study. The imagined portraits I have analysed in this thesis illustrate positive potential for developing meaningful relationships with the land through individual, empathetic connections with historical figures. Visually revived and linked to the land, imagined portraits ensure the lives of historical figures live on.

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