

Fiona Hall's evocative new installation *Occupied Territory*, on display in the Museum of Sydney's Shop, is a bold and welcome beginning to a series of monthly installations for the Museum. The title of Hall's finely crafted installed eight fruit/seed pod objects aptly resonates the museum's underlying curatorial vision: to create a self-critical museological site depicting the shifting culture and spatial concerns, nuances and tensions between the European settlers of this country and her indigenous people.

The exquisitely wrought eight fruit/seed pods with their various textual embellishments include fig, pear, angophora, acorn, banksia, peach, Norfolk Pine and Sydney Wattle. Each of them are representative of the indigenous and imported plants located around Governor Phillip's House in Sydney. Hall's consummately rendered objects of glass beads and nails are metaphorically expressive of Captain Cook's act of placing these various materials on Australian soil when he first arrived. These particular items represented, in the words of Robert Hughes, "the visiting cards of the South Pacific".<sup>1</sup> In addition, the fruit seed pods are also indicative of how they have been co-existing with each other since Europeans first settled in the country.

In accordance with the main objective of the proposed monthly installations, Hall was invited to construct a subjective response or narrative to certain issues relating to the museum's overall concern with Australia's colonial history between 1788 to 1846. *Occupied Territory*, as a subtle sharply delineated cabinet installation, invites reflection about the complex processes involved in European settlement of Australia as incarnated in the changing attitudes between the Eora and Sydney Koori people who first encountered the invading Europeans. These attitudes changed from initial curiosity about the Europeans to one later of confusion and resentment.

Further, the installation's delicate aura, form and surfaces do not so much construct a rigorous deconstructive critique of traditional museumology as to provide a contemplative commentary on its questionable orthodoxies. Thus, though *Occupied Territory* addresses important questions dealing with our recent colonial past it also significantly comments on the criss-crossing histories, plural voices and spaces germane to the colonisation of Australia. The latter point is graphically displayed in the open-ended design of the Museum's exhibits and its attendant emphasis of a self-reflexive museological practice. The installation also further enhances the shop's aim of presenting a wide array of different merchandise and objects in keeping with Sydney's colonial legacy as a vital regional trading port. (Something that is acutely evident with the commercial and trading connotations of the bond store and given a particularly vivid atmospheric focus with Ross Gibson's audio-visual narratives in the Museum's theme gallery room.)

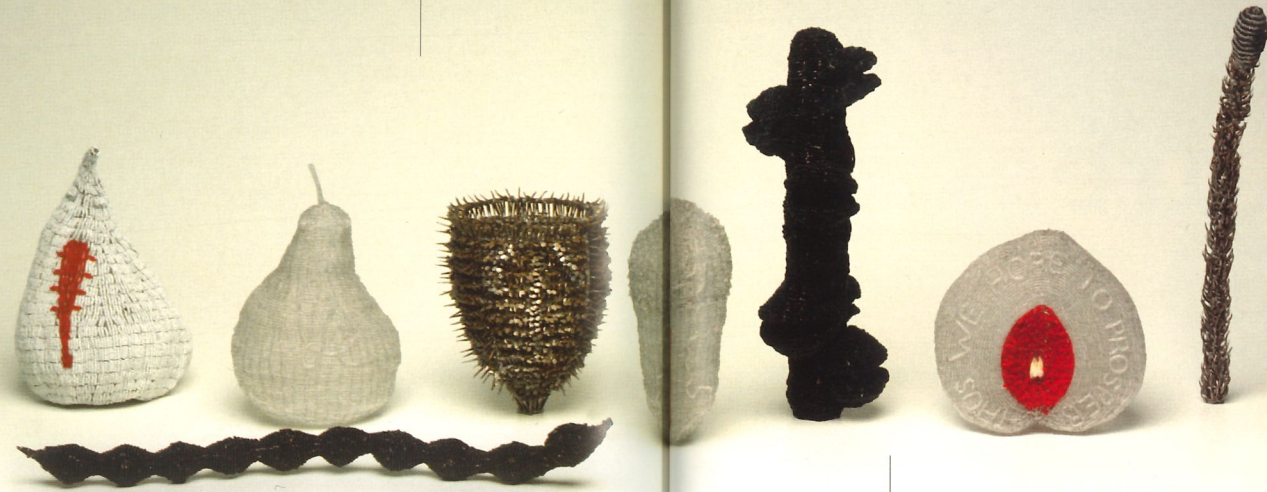
As for the suggestive textual markings on the different fruit/seed pod objects, the red club which adorns the fig was appropriated from Lord Bathurst's own logo. The swirling configurations of the word 'etc' which feature across the extraordinary fine clear glass bead surface of the pear refer to how the colonial European settlers would put down a number of 'etc' after their formal signatures on contracts, documents and letters. This specific white Australian habit concertises the colonial gaze and its vast sweep of appropriating the country's landscape and her native people in terms of European law and Renaissance linear perspective.

The body decorations that mark the nail surface of the spectacularly sinister looking angophora pod are suggestive of the paintings done by the so-called Port Jackson painters of the eighteenth century whose works were consumed back home in England. The striking red arrow that is beaded into the translucent surface of the acorn is a cartographical marker depicting a significant part of Sydney Cove as inhabited by the Europeans: namely, between Bennelong Point and the Observatory.

In graphic contrast to the angophora with its 'Oceania' anthropological connotations, the black bead banksia that towers over all the other objects with the exception of the Norfolk Pine (that is located to the right of the banksia) has a weird surreal shape to it. (Both the angophora and the banksia suggest the combined surreal and ethnographic dimensions of Primitive art and the non-Western world. Eduardo Paolozzi's curated 1985 exhibition *Lost Magic Kingdoms* at the Museum of Mankind explicitly encapsulates the shifting dialectic between Primitive Art, Ethnography and Surrealism.)

Next we encounter the translucent half peach with its centred red cavity where the seed once was. Written along the perimeter of this deftly crafted object we read 'thus we hope to prosper' (taken from the *Sydney Gazette's* masthead), a reminder of the commercial nature of European imperialism and of the diaspora of colonialism. Both the two remaining black objects playfully connect with each other: the vertical shape of the Norfolk Pine markedly contrasts with the horizontal bean

# Occupied



photograph Clayton Glen

text John Conomos

shaped contours of the Sydney Wattle. These two objects particularly connote a strong surreal atmosphere in the overall context of the installation.

*Occupied Territory* has a cross-disciplinary conceptual and formal architecture to it and in this regard it points to the Museum's non-celebratory approach to questions of culture, history and museology. Hall's atmospheric objects constitute a highly personal and well-informed response to the complexities of the critical binary conflicts of colonialism and invasion, and nurturing and transformation, epitomised in the contesting cultures and histories that first characterised European encounter with Australia's indigenous people. And like the Museum's refreshing museological perspective on questioning the cultural and historical significance of the museum's site, *Occupied Territory* poses many questions in a non-didactic spirit that are central to our past and present.

Hall's stimulating objects significantly complement the Museum's non-binary quest to turn itself into a theoretical object, a venue of many different frameworks of interpretation and new metaphors that strive to give voice to the (in)visible histories, inheritances and cultures of our country. Moreover, *Occupied Territory* wisely suggests that we (white and non-white) are constantly re-inventing ourselves in terms of questioning our own cultural baggage and the essentialist concept of an 'Australian national identity'.

In July, an installation by Fiona MacDonald was on display in the Phillip Street windows. The work, entitled *Port*, comprised woven posters in three parts: a woven 'portmanteaux' housed in a glass cabinet and two woven panels—one deconstructing the poster for the Museum's inaugural temporary exhibition, *Fleeting Encounters*, and the other reinterpreting a chromolithograph of Sydney in 1888.

Merchandising & shop manager, Ricky Subritzky, found that the themes and collection of a museum concerned with the period 1788 to 1846 posed certain merchandising challenges. "However, the Museum's framework provides generous latitude to interpret and 'play' in a commercial context. Artists have collaborated extensively on the Museum's exhibitions and this approach has been appropriated by the shop to deal with somewhat abstract and difficult concepts."

For example, Subritzky commissioned Fiona MacDonald to create four images on which to base two lenticular postcards (two images that flicker on one surface). The works, generated digitally in collaboration with new media artist, John Collette, reference the tension between white colonial authority and the Eora people. One lenticular presents a grid of portraits of the colony's first nine Governors (all of whom resided in the first Government House between 1788 and 1846) woven with a Port Jackson Painter image of an Aboriginal named Colebee. The 'flicker' of the lenticulars sets up a tension between the images and it was this dynamic which initially led Subritzky to approach MacDonald. "With Fiona's work the process encourages narratives based on tension and ellipses." Four 'originals' inspired by the 'digi' images used in the lenticulars have been hand woven by MacDonald and are available through the MoS shop. Other designs in the lenticular series were created by the MoS AV team and Anne Zahalka. Subritzky used some of Zahalka's early photomontage images which reference myths and misconceptions of the Sydney/Australian landscape.

A collaboration between sound artist Paul Carter, visual artist Narelle Jubelin and textile printers Vivien Haley and Julia Raath, based on a concept by Subritzky, produced a *Lost Subjects* scarf. Carter's soundscape of 'lost subjects' (people marginalised in conventional histories) speaking about issues, people and events of the period echoes through the Museum's third floor. Carter's text was transcribed by Jubelin as a cross-written narrative for the scarf's design. A woven text on a silk georgette square, the scarf reflects the Museum's 'woven' approach to history (or the plurality of historical narrative) while re-casting the historic cost saving technique of cross-writing as design.

Toni Warburton (whose ceramic oyster bowl references the prolific rock pool environment of Sydney Harbour) is among numerous other makers, visual, graphic and new media artists commissioned to develop product for this innovative merchandising project. But Subritzky's favourite product is the *Tree Pencil*. Inspired by Fiona Foley and Janet Laurence's *Edge of the Trees* sculpture in the Museum forecourt, the raw wood pencil is inscribed with Latin plant names along its length. Taken from J. H. Maiden's list of plants found in Sydney Cove around 1788, the pencil has a twist: each time it is sharpened another species is wiped out. ○

<sup>1</sup> Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, London, Collins Harvill, 1987, p58

# Territory