

Mount Olive

Anne Graham at Mount Olive Studio Gallery

Anne Graham's *Memory and Things*, subtitled *The mnemonic function of objects and materials as constructors of identity* began in 2000. The artist conducted this project with elderly women residents living in an aged-care home in Newcastle, New South Wales. This remarkable body of photographs and installation transcends the boundaries suggested by the words 'art exhibition.' In part it is an extended, university-research-based project, while at the same time constituting a form of social activism. As such, *Memory and Things* is as much about process as about product. Notwithstanding, the photographic portraiture, installation, and written texts (excerpts from interviews conducted with each of the 14 ladies who participated) that collectively comprised the exhibition component, can be adjudged as stand-alone artworks. Both as research project and art exhibition *Memory and Things* is original, powerful, and absorbing.

Graham's underlying research methodology meshes with the feminist theoretical approach that has come to be known as 'Ethics of Care,' which is premised on value systems, performative actions and interpersonal bonds that emphasize relationships, relatedness, trust and social continuities. Thus ethics of care stresses the importance of interpersonal relationships—how people, particularly women, interact with others in the world.

In *Memory and Things* Graham pushes this notion further, by demonstrating the relatedness of human beings to *objects* that are part of the material world. While this is a phenomenon that we implicitly, intuitively understand—for example, repressive régimes deliberately destroy statues and other monuments associated with previous régimes—Graham's brilliance is to apply this idea to the domestic realm and to feminize it.

When individuals—mostly women, demographically—grow very old, they often outlive their peers. When this happens, sometimes practically everyone that person has ever known, loved or cared for is gone. The

same psychic alienation occurs when elderly people are shunted into nursing homes by uncaring relatives who rarely or never visit. How, then, does one secure or maintain one's identity when everybody one has loved is either dead, or has otherwise exited from one's life?

To some extent at least, these elderly survivors manage to stay in touch with their past lives by means of cherished objects that are strongly inflected with happy memories. This is the tenet upon which Graham's suite of photographic portraits of these elderly, and in some cases, extremely old, women and their meaningful "stuff" from the past is founded.

When circumstances forced these old women to make the transition from their homes to an aged care facility in Newcastle, each took a small number of meaningful objects from their 'former lives' to their new abode. While the majority of these items are small or compact, they are immeasurably rich in terms of affect, associations, and memories, connecting each woman to a familial, shared, and presumably less socially isolated past.

These 'everyday' objects linking the old women to that happier, more fulfilling past act not only as *aide-memoires* but are symbolically loaded. These objects are imbued with metonymic functions, acting as substitutes for significant aspects of the residents' earlier lives. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary offers the following definition of metonymy: (1993:1760) "...The substitution of a word denoting an attribute or adjunct of a thing for the word denoting the thing itself; an instance of this."

This concept extends beyond the linguistic. Hence, that 'special' vase proudly held up by a beaming Mrs. Jean Jones is a metonym for that former suburban domestic life. The vase is not only part of that larger narrative of Mrs. Jones' life, *but now stands in its place*. The walking stick that Mrs. Topsy Lyon has taken with her to the retirement village belonged to her late husband, and has come to represent him, in his absence. Mrs. Ella Perrett's prized brush-and-comb set is also an 'attribute' or 'adjunct' of her previous life, as are Mrs. Elsie Grisdale's porcelain pig ashtray and her costume jewelry. Graham's photographs point to

the importance of objects that we have valued over a long period of time as not only as a way of *individualizing* identity, but also as a means of actively *constructing, maintaining* and *securing* it.

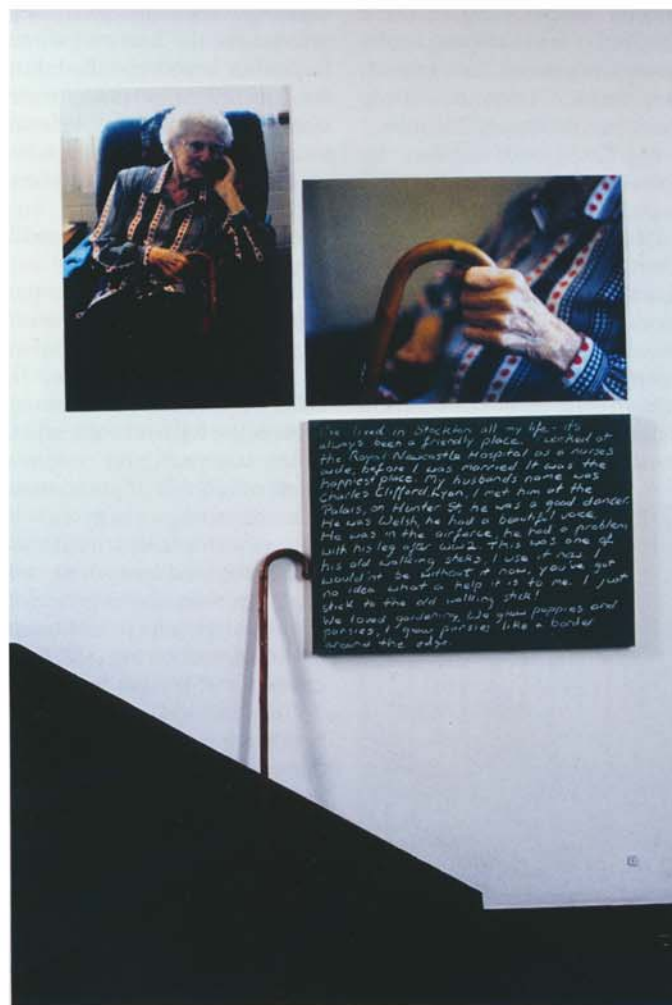
Graham's interest in how object-based memories might secure *identity* in the present and in a specific, perhaps unfamiliar place has also been informed by research into the role of environmental design factors in triggering people's memories and their sense of who they are. Groundbreaking research by American Dr. John Zeisel has demonstrated that taking such factors into account can offset Alzheimer's disease and other illnesses associated with aging. Of note, too, is the fact that Graham developed warm relationships with each of her 'subjects,' which she sustained over time.

Collectively, Graham's photographs and texts constitute a powerful counter-narrative that contests the ways in which aged people are (mostly) regarded and treated by

contemporary youth-oriented societies. *Memory and Things* shows Graham to be one of a small minority who actually cares. The artist also demonstrates through her project that a level of continuity of identity is still possible even when people have lost practically everything that they have ever valued. The meaning that the women invest in their small treasures is not insignificant.

Anne Graham's photographic portraits also constitute a form of meditation on the power of the object in a secular era. The project as a whole is a fine exemplar of dialogic artistic practice, of visual art as social and cultural action. One can only hope that in the context of an aging society, the model and methodology underlying this body of work will prove inspirational for generations of artists. It would also act as an excellent template for future art school student projects, with the added spin-off of connecting young people with old.

Christine Nicholls



Anne Graham, Mrs Topsy Lyon and her husband's walking stick at the Westcott Retirement Village. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.