

ARTIST STATEMENT

This exhibition, *Whispering and Rustling, the Susurrus of People, Places and Things*, brings together elements of the various themes explored in my work over three decades: the historical, the habitations, and the portraits. I hope that they speak to each other and that the undercurrent of connection between these elements becomes clear.

My earliest memory is of sitting at my mother's feet as she rhythmically worked her treadle sewing machine. She was a tailor and magically transformed flat pieces of fabric into three-dimensional garments. I collected the offcuts and made small habitations under tables and beds, basic little tents. I occupied these solitary makeshift fabric structures and read. I read anything that I could get my hands on, but mostly the books were about someplace other than where I was in the far north of England. I dreamed of travel to faraway places and much later was fortunate enough to be awarded a travel scholarship to India from the Royal College of Art. I stayed in The Hindu Kush for months and then travelled on to Nepal, down through Thailand and Malaysia and finally arrived in Perth in 1975. The fascination with tent structures and the idea of mobile habitations has stayed with me over the years and is still evident in my work; the tent series in which I occupied the streets of many cities and created impromptu kitchens and theatre spaces is evidence of this.

In Perth I met other artists, also migrants and we formed a group called Media Space. We were all exploring this new place, how to live here, how to make art in this unfamiliar place.

I wanted to learn about this strange place and looked first at the colonial history of women in Western Australia, commencing another of the reoccurring themes in my work in which I respond to the history of a place. I was intrigued by the tenacity with which colonial women clung to the traditions of their previous homes, wearing clothes so inappropriate to the climate and lifestyle. The performance work *No Protective Layers* (1983) evolved from this. Dressed to the hilt in historical garb my collaborator and I slowly circled and shed the suffocating garments and eventually painted each other's bodies with the dirt of this new land, a kind of birth for us in this new place. Since then I have made many works in response to a specific historical location. For example *The Macleay Women* (1997) featured portraits of the first Governor of NSW's six red-haired daughters shown at their former residence at Elizabeth Bay House, and an installation shown at Shinohara's House, Gokohama, Japan in 2015 responded to the history and architecture of the traditional Japanese house.

Portraiture of a kind is another reoccurring theme. My portraits take the form of installations and sculptures that conjure the life and experiences of individuals I have taken time to know and engage with. From our conversations images emerge – fragments of half-remembered landscapes, faces from the past, the texture of cloth, the smell of earth or water – and I assemble small installations in which I hope to distill some resonance of the subject. In my books *Constructed Memory* and *Constructed Cities* (2010), photographer Allan Chawner and I made portraits that in

the end not only evoked the subjects but also embraced Beijing and became a portrait of the city. The portrait of my friend the artist Daniel Kojta, *Dangerous Games* (2015), is a play on his name but also on his quicksilver capacity with competitive digital games and words.

Some of the objects that I assemble in these portraits are sourced from my collections of garden and farming tools, culinary implements, measuring devices, weights and measures, combs and brushes; all of these things relate to some kind repeated human activity. The slow sweep of a brush around a yard, the gentle tug of a mother's hand brushing a child's hair, the rhythm of breath, the thud of a heartbeat, the sound of a footstep. These sounds and rhythms are part of everyday life and the ordinary objects we use to order our world have an unnoticed beauty. In the work *Angels and Insects* (2005), for example, I hope to draw attention to the skill and grace evident in the farm tools sourced from a Korean market.

There are materials too that are imbued with a sense of the passage of time, in the portrait of *Eugenia and Atom* (2014) Eugenia's coat is made from felted fur collected from Atom's grooming over a period of months as he grew from a puppy to adulthood. Mostly this fur would be discarded but to find a material like this and give it a place is also part of my practice. The dog hair works are a celebration of the relationship of the human and the dog, as is evident in *Julie and Cloud, Joni and Bacon and Sean, Michael and Biscotto* (2014). I use all sorts of recycled and found material and continue to be transfixed by the possibility of transforming a known and

ordinary thing into something not previously imagined. All of my cedar works are made from recycled timber that would normally have been burned, the surface is seductive and silky and the forms reflect the symbolic mandalas of Hindu and Buddhist cultures and the archetypal spirals so prevalent in nature.

This leads me to the most recent work in the exhibition, *Ada and Alan* (2016). Ada Lovelace (1815-1852) was the daughter of Lord Byron. She was brought up by her mother to be a pragmatic scientist, as her mother abhorred what she considered to be the self-indulgent romanticism of Byron's life. Working with Charles Babbage, Ada was instrumental in the development of the first calculator, then called the Analytical Engine, but she saw more than numbers in this new development, thinking that "*the engine might compose ... pieces of music of any degree of complexity or extent*" About ninety years after Ada Lovelace died, Alan Turing (1912 – 1954) entered the field. He postulated the idea of a universal mathematical machine, which became known as the Turing Machine. He also broke the Enigma code in 1939 and became enormously important in war technology. He provided an inspiration for the next generation of digital computers that came into being in the 1940s, and pioneered the use of punch cards in computing. Turing's work on morphogenesis remains relevant today, and is considered a seminal piece in mathematical biology. Experiments suggest that Turing's work can partially explain growth of "feathers, hair follicles, the branching patterns of lungs and even the left-right asymmetry that puts the heart on the left side of the chest."¹

How strange and how close Alan Turing was to Ada Lovelace in thinking about the possibilities and context of mathematics and nature: *We may say most aptly that the Analytical Engine weaves algebraical patterns just as the Jacquard loom weaves flowers and leaves* (Ada Lovelace, 1943).

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Anne Graham
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