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**THE ISLAND IN CONTEMPORARY ART:
a curatorial gaze**

by
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ABSTRACT

THE ISLAND IN CONTEMPORARY ART: A CURATORIAL GAZE

This thesis explores the island in contemporary art through curatorial practice-lead research. It is driven by the perceived lack of critical discourse around this widely used artistic and curatorial motif. To understand the inherited concepts of 'islandness' and island metaphor, this thesis first maps the subject of island encounter within a broad range of Western historical, theoretical, literary and creative works. By doing so, a sequence of stages to island encounter is made visible – dreaming, journey, contact, settlement and departure. Island encounters marked by this type of sequence both generate and propagate enduring tropes of island figuration in the Western imagination.

The practice-lead research of this thesis is explored through three curatorial case studies. The first, *Nowhereisland* (2012) by British artist Alex Hartley, wholly subscribes to the aforementioned sequence of island encounter. It demonstrates how island approach has continuing relevance in the twenty-first century, but also how island tropes might prove artistically or curatorially generative. Beyond simply replicating the masculine heroics of colonisation, the island of *Nowhereisland* offers an alternative political and philosophical position on burgeoning questions of climate change and political efficacy. The two remaining case studies – *Ash Island and its Transformations* (2014) and *The Island Could be Heard by Night* (2015) – constitute curatorial investigations into concepts of place, memory and the construction of history, through the island motif. These case studies demonstrate the qualities shared by the island and the exhibition: both are unique spatial and temporal devices, offering an overview and compression of space and time; both are marked and enlivened by visitation; both are approached thematically; and, as a combination of these ideas, both the island and the exhibition are short-term, often an experimental occupation of location, ideas or philosophies. This thesis offers a unique contribution to the field of contemporary art by critically considering contemporary curatorial practices and philosophies by way of island studies, and vice versa.

SUMMARY OF CREATIVE WORK

The creative component to this research is extensively discussed within this paper, as it is both the subject and object of the curatorial philosophy in question. This document includes a link to the films of *Ash Island and its Transformations* and a full description of works from *The Island Could be Heard by Night*, including 'A Conversation Between Two Islophiles', attached in the appendix. The works chosen for final examination are a selection of elements on the subject of islands and curatorial practice gathered over the course of this study. As tools for thinking through the island motif and its tropes, analysis of these works and their relationship to the broader study is further outlined in the Appendix.

ISAAC –

BETWEEN A MOMENT OF AWAKE AND ASLEEP YOU SPUN ME A STORY.
I'VE DREAMT OF ISLANDS SINCE.

PREFACE

I grew up in a small tourist town on the mid-north coast of Australia. My early childhood home sat at the mouth of a road leading down to an unpatrolled beach below. As the stage for my own coming-of-age, this strip of coastal edge was, as Australian author Tim Winton describes, a 'force upon me...every bit as geological as family.'¹

One summer, around the age of ten, I nearly drowned. My brother, and a pack of his friends, wanted to make use of their newfound teenage-boy strength and swim out to a break just beyond a freshly formed sandbar. To reach the sandbar we first had to cross a wide channel, gouged out by a deep current below flowing crosswise to the water's surface. My brother and his friends swam out quickly. I didn't. I wrestled the waves. Every minute the safety of others was getting further and further away. And, every metre gained the waves pushed me back another two. After a quick succession – wave upon wave upon wave – I slipped under. No air. A white-washed vision. Instinct kicked in and I scrambled for the surface; chest compressed, arms and legs fighting. Finally, with a deep and fast rush of air, I breached the surface. I looked for my brother, who was too far to call, and soon realised even amongst all that struggle I had barely crossed halfway. I retreated. On the safety of solid shore, I lay blinking into the sun feeling the throb of adrenalin in my hands and feet. A strange mood washed over me. I wasn't fearful or scared. I felt ashamed.

Despite growing up with the ocean, I was twenty-three when I learnt to swim. No longer a habitant of a small town on the east coast of Australia, my home was now an ever-so-bigger town on the east coast of Australia. Like that 'familial ache', I couldn't bring myself to stray too far from the ocean's edge. I taught myself to swim in the largest ocean baths in the southern hemisphere; an incremental daily practice. It took nearly a year. Then, one day, amongst the regulars' early morning shuffles of "hellos" and "how are yous", I was posed an invitation: why don't you come swim in the ocean?

As if to make up for the twenty-three before it, I swam the same length of open ocean every day for a year. Beyond the break, beyond the surfers, all seasons, all conditions. More than just a child-like compulsion to swim off shame, I came to love the potential terror and redemptive qualities of the ocean's unbound geography. I also came to observe a communal obsession. The old 'clubbies', the young surfers, everyone was caught up in their own oceanic rituals. Before reading the words of I-Kiribati-American poet Teresa Teaiwa I had come to witness them; 'we sweat and cry salt water, so we know the ocean is really in our blood.'²

Over the course of this same year I wrote my Honours thesis – *No Artist is an Island*. The focus was contemporary Australian subjectivity in terms of Ocean. I was interested in Australia as an island continent, the world's largest island, and how this geographic figure might reveal something about our cultural habits and collective imagination beyond the already highly visible emblems of the red-centre or the grotto-esque landscape. To put aside land and

¹ Tim Winton, *Island Home: A Landscape Memoir* (Melbourne, VIC; London: Hamish Hamilton and Picador, 2015). Pg8

² Epli Hau'ofa, "The Ocean in Us," *The Contemporary Pacific* 10, no. 2 (Fall 1998). Pg392

instead consider ocean, the research was an opportunity to investigate how Australia is seen (from the outside) and how Australia sees/sees itself.

Although this research was well received, I encountered a persistent refusal to think of Australia as an island (unless, of course, it was politically or economically convenient). Even earlier this year, when presenting a paper to an international research community tied together by the subject of islands, I was asked: Do Australians really think of Australia as an island?

Questions like these stick. Although my instincts around the subject remain reasonably unmoved – that Australia the island is a deeply influential geography on its arts and cultural status – it was doubt that prompted me to return to academia and expand my ideas beyond an Australian context. This thesis, then, is a study of islands in culture. Which, it must be said, is an antithetical field to island or islander culture. This research is an investigation into those who look *to* an island, not *from*. I've chosen this position for two reasons. First, because it doesn't feel right to speak with authority 'on behalf' of others who do look *from* an island, particularly small islands. And second, because looking *to* an island, within a Western history, is the dominant gaze. As this study traces and critiques the pervasiveness of island figuration within Western frameworks of literature, image culture and academia, it demonstrates how this gaze continues to shape our understanding of islands, even today. Part of this research, then, is not only to understand inherited ideas of islands and 'islandness' but to understand my own complicit-ness in maintaining or replicating this gaze.

With an expanded survey of artists, curators, curatorial models, theorists and authors who make use of islands to articulate their ideas, we come to recognise a specific set of qualities unique to islands as well as the processes of what American historian John R. Gillis calls "islanding". The relationship to the island edge is complex, layered and contradictory. Over the course of Western history, and into the present day, the island figure has been continuously ritualised, politicised, celebrated and mourned. And, it is multiplicitous in its meaning: death, salvation, possession, dispossession, longing, belonging, health, wealth, whimsy and libido.

Although never explicitly addressed, the framing of this thesis never strays too far from an Australian perspective. I have observed, over the course of thinking and writing about the subject, within my want to understand the island condition is a want to understand the Australian condition. Having studied the gaze of European and American literature, typically resting on small islands of the Pacific or outlying territorial arms of their own empires, I imagined their eyes also rest on Australia. Although it is not the overt subject of their writing, nor mine, this perspective has produced a deeper understanding of the spatial, political and geographic relationships to elsewhere that continue to inflect the Australian condition today.

The subject choice of islands within curating is also framed through a personal, experiential lens. I grounded the curatorial case studies using two islands I live near – Ash Island of the Hunter River and Nobbys, Newcastle, NSW. They are united by the fact that neither island, today, is an island; both were destroyed through large-scale environmental intervention and processes of colonisation. Neither case study was produced in mourning or longing for these lost islands, nor as a call to return them to some imagined previous glory, but rather, to

investigate their palpability as islands despite their physical erasure. These case studies, then, point to the phantasmagoric island, suggesting that island lure is as much figurative and imaginative as it is geographic.

There are a number of questions within this thesis that, given the scope and range of the research, remain open-ended. Primarily, the possibility of curating: what does an exhibition do that looking at artworks doesn't? Although my response to this question can only lie strictly within the parameters of my own case studies, a full answer goes well beyond the limits of a PhD. There is an observable fractal pattern within the curatorial role – an exhibition means different things to different people at different points in time and under different contexts, as does an artwork, as does the art historical evaluation of both – and therefore makes the subject difficult to fix with an unequivocal meaning. It is a question that bridges practice and theory – begging for the refinement of skill, rehearsal, innovation and contemplation over time – one that could (and does) propel a lifetime's worth of research.

Another open-ended observation that cannot wholly be addressed within the limits of this thesis is the lasting effect of an exhibition. How might we measure and produce consensus around the power of art to influence, interrupt, interrogate or act in solidarity? Museums and galleries tend to gauge the immediate effects of their activities under the funding paradigms handed to them by the state, typically defined by numbers: visitation, subscribers, followers, number of programs, diversity of programs, number of artists employed, number of works produced, etc. They hand the challenge of ascribing cultural meaning and legacy, after the fact, to those in academia and art history. A revelation within this thesis, then, came from my position between these worlds: our relationship to the work we produce changes over time. What was once the golden fruits of one's labour may have since turned sour. And, work that was considered simply part of the process or overlooked becomes a the seed for the next project. The lasting impact of an exhibition, either publically or personally, is as fluid as the perspective and context from which we view it.

This research, then, endeavours to describe these moving targets – the island condition, the curatorial condition and the combination of the two. It is a personal and professional investigation into the places that shape us.

INTRODUCTION

There is scarce assessment of islands within contemporary art. The phenomenon itself, however, is observable. The presence of both real and metaphorical islands, as well as their great diversity of meanings, use and purpose, is more pervasive than we tend to think. We assume islands, more typically, are the subject of anthropology, ethnography, biology, geography, geology or marine studies, or they are the testing grounds for technological, social or political reform. Even more so, imagined or invented islands have a tendency to dominate the written word rather than the visual image, spatial object or experiential moment of contemporary art. Islands *do* provide the setting for a great wealth of Anglophone fiction, from the “high” literature of *Robinson Crusoe* or More’s *Utopia* to the abundance of island-set “pulp-fiction” of popular crime and romance novels.³ And so, these assumptions are all very reasonable.



Figure 1: Digital photograph used to advertise the Rabbit Island Residency. Rabbit Island of Lake Superior, Michigan. Accessed 10 October 2017. Image courtesy of <http://rabbitisland.org/art>

³ Ralph Crane and Lisa Fletcher, "The Genre of Islands: Popular Fiction and Performative Geographies," *Island Studies Journal* 11, no. 2 (2016). Introduction. Pg638

Islands, however, are also present in contemporary art and their occurrence deserves our attention. They are the subject of artwork – such as Anton Ginzburg’s *Hyperborea Series* (2011), Lisa Reihana’s *In Pursuit of Venus* (2012), Ben Quilty’s *The Island* (2014), Megan Jenkinson’s *Outer Limit – Morrell’s Islands* (2009) (Figure 2). They are the site of artistic production – such as Andrea Zettel’s *A-Z Pocket Property* (1999), Charles Avery’s *The Islanders* (2004-currently), Allora and Calzadilla’s *Under Discussion* (2005). They are sites of display – such as Naoshima and the Setouchi Triennale of Japan, Lofoten International Art Festival above the Arctic circle in Norway and Cockatoo Island of the Biennale of Sydney. They are locations for artist residencies – such as Rabbit Island of Lake Superior in Michigan (pictured in Figure 1), Fogo Island Arts in Newfoundland and Bruny Island of Tasmania. And, they are even geographic models for curatorial theory – such as Nicholas Bourriaud’s *Altermodern* (2009).



Figure 2: Megan Jenkinson, *Outer Limit – Morrell’s Islands*, 2009. From the *Morrell’s Islands* series. Lenticular, 25.5cm x 38cm. Image courtesy of Stills Gallery.

Island-bound art is by no means a category of art unto itself, nor would I argue for such a thing. But the island as a location for ideas – practical and philosophical, artistic and curatorial – is enriched by centuries of Western thought. A scarcity of critical attention on the subject,

then, does not reflect triviality. Rather, it arises from a wider pattern and set of circumstances. First, there are the broader changes in attitudes and histories towards art criticism, creative and curatorial practice that shape our receptivity to such an idea. As just one example, American academic Grant Kester looks to littoral art – a loose category of artwork manifested beyond the walls of the gallery or museum; a practice that occupies a liminal space (theoretically and physically) or is driven by social engagement and subjects of social reality; and, as we will come to observe, a philosophical framework pertinent to two of the three case studies investigated within this thesis. In his essay *Dialogic Aesthetics: A Critical Framework for Littoral Art* Kester describes an enduring critical inability to think beyond an ‘I like’ response towards art of this nature, a reaction that both epitomises and reinforces modernist hierarchies and systems of value.⁴ He writes,

...There are aspects of Littoralist practice that simply can't be grasped as relevant (or in some cases identified at all) by conventional art critical methodologies... When contemporary critics confront Littoral projects they often lack the analytic tools necessary to understand the work on its own terms and instead simply project onto it a formal, pleasure-based methodology that is entirely inappropriate... The reliance of contemporary criticism on the writer's personal response also has the effect of treating subjectivity as an unquestioned, a priori principle, rather than recognizing the extent to which the critic's "personal" taste is structured by forms of identification and power based on class, race, gender and sexuality.⁵

Another reason for the dearth of criticality is the rise of the cultural tourist and industrialisation of culture. Figure 3 – Nathan Coley's *YOU CREATE WHAT YOU WILL* (2014), installed on Cockatoo Island as part of the 19th Biennale of Sydney – is just one example amongst a wealth of exhibitions and biennials that make use of the island as a device for cultural tourism. There is a specialised journey required to reach an island-bound exhibition, biennale or festival: buying tickets; assigning a day for travel; the physical act of voyaging (by water, bridge, tunnel or air); the 'enclosed' psychology of space; and finally, with spatial limits

⁴ Grant Kester, H., "Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework for Littoral Art," *Variant* 9, no. Winter (1999/2000). Pg4

⁵ Ibid. Pg3-4

come temporal limits as the ritual of journeying is defined not only by arrival but departure too. This sequence of special conditions appears to be an obstruction; the island is difficult, out of the way, and requires exceptional treatment by both organisers and audiences. Displaying art on an island, however, leans more towards philosophies of cultural tourism than any kind of conceptual curatorial premise. The experience of art is more saleable, more readily consumed, as a packaged and rarefied island experience. The island not only adds geographic weight and significance to the art on display, performing as a kind of geographic white cube, but the power of pilgrimage also heightens one's experience. Even more importantly, the custom of displaying art on an island injects money into broader economies of transport, accommodation, goods, services, and retail, making the island-bound exhibition easier to sell to both the public and public funding bodies.



Figure 3: (Installation view) Nathan Coley, YOU CREATE WHAT YOU WILL, 2014. Illuminated text on scaffolding. 19th Biennale of Sydney (2014), Cockatoo Island. Image courtesy of the artist

The last reason, covered here, is more elusive. As I will argue in this thesis, there is an invisible dialectic between mainlands and islands, drawn from a long history of real and metaphoric island encounter throughout Western literary, creative and theoretical works. The concept of

island figuration itself is complex and far-reaching; islands have different philosophical meanings to different groups of people and at different stages of history. Yet, it is important to investigate this dialectic as it has produced an ideology towards islands in the Western mind; islands are isolated, remote, self-contained, experimental, utopian, dystopian, seditious and redemptive landscapes. The breadth, depth and scope of this ideology, which has been repeated and refashioned across Western history, means we now assume this is an island's natural and unchallengeable state. This seemingly natural state, particularly as location for ideas and desires, dreams and nightmares, is exactly why the island-bound art work or exhibition warrants a closer look.

We could be mistaken for thinking that islands, as a subject of study, are not particularly relevant to contemporary thinking. After all, we are continuously told we are living in a globalised civilisation, one that is theoretically and spatially 'de-tribalised, de-territorialised and de-centralised.'⁶ But, if the 2014-2016 mass-migration of refugees through the Greek islands of Lesbos and Chios; the ongoing territorial disputes over the islands of the South China Sea; or, the 2014 address to the UN Climate Leaders Summit by Marshallese poet Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner are any indicators, islands are not only primary locations as territories and subjects, they move in and out of Western history as a catalyst for greater political, geographic and historic change.

Real island geopolitics and encounters have also been translated into metaphor, continuously repeated and refurbished for each new generation over the course of Western literature, film and art. Ridley Scott's 2015 film *The Martian*, the 2004-2010 television series *Lost*, Wes Anderson's forthcoming animation *Isle of Dogs* (2018), or the plethora of reality television shows set on islands – such as *Temptation Island*, *Love Island*, *Dating Naked* or *Survivor* – demonstrate the enduring image and schema of an island as method for thinking and imagining in the West. As American author and historian John R. Gillis describes,

⁶ Grant McCall, "The 3d World and Nissology" (paper presented at the 15th International Small Island Studies Association Conference, Kangaroo Island, 4 July 2017 2017).

The chimerical character of islands is not just a product of physical conditions. It is equally the result of culture – Western mainland culture, to be specific – which has attributed to islands certain wondrous features that it rarely bestows on other landforms. For centuries islands have been playing tricks on us, appearing and disappearing, changing shape and size, moving not only in space but also in time. No other landform has been so illusory, none so subject to dream and nightmare. These are tricks that our unconscious minds play on our conscious awareness. We attribute to islands atemporal, liminal qualities that we would never associate with mainlands. Despite our best efforts to historicise them, to pin them down to our geographical coordinates, islands continue to be projections of the deepest layers of our subconscious.⁷

The ‘geographic precision’ of an island – that is, the hard-edged-ness of its terrestrial spread and the prevailing sense of containment manufactured by this boundary – makes it a figure of distinctiveness and particularity.⁸ Although we find substantial consensus concerning islands as unique beings, evidenced by a wealth of trans-disciplinary theory under the field of island studies, the difficulty of resolving just *how* and *what* makes an island so enigmatic remains. As Tasmanian poet and academic Pete Hay describes, although islands are charged with an identity discrete from other geographic forms, there is a bounty of literature – theoretical and creative – that struggles to articulate particularity.⁹ Earlier this year, in the closing ceremonies of the International Small Island Studies Association’s 15th annual conference, Hay publically reflected on a Tasmanian sense of “islandness”. When he asked residents to elaborate on what makes Tasmania special their response was: “because it is unique”.¹⁰ Although his recount was mere anecdote, the paradox demonstrates two points. Not only is there a synonymy of terms used to define an island – special, unique, endemic, distinct, different, alternative – there is a pervasive inability to pin down the more ephemeral aspects of island figuration, even amongst those who live it.

⁷ John R. Gillis, "Island Sojourns," *Geographical Review* 97, no. 2 (April 2007). Pg274

⁸ David Weale quoted by Godfrey Baldacchino, "Islands as Novelty Sites," *ibid.* Pg169

⁹ Pete Hay quoted by Godfrey Baldacchino. *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Pete Hay, "Small Island Communities: Models for Global Survival, Summative Session" (paper presented at the 15th International Small Island Studies Association Conference, Kangaroo Island, 7 July 2017 2017).

The way in which this thesis addresses the combination of these ideas – first, the island as a product of Western imagining; second, as a subject of fascination for artists and curators; and third, how else the island might be curatorially or artistically approached – is explored through three case studies. The first chapter describes a hypothetical structure for ‘island approach’; it is a map of how islands have been historically, spatially and imaginatively approached within a Western and, more specifically, European history. This chapter lays out a sequence to island encounter – beginning with dreaming (the invention of mythological geography), and ending with departure (when the subject finally returns home). I have come to observe this hypothetical sequence by reflecting on historic island encounters, such as Cook’s exploration of the Pacific or Columbus’ exploration of the Atlantic, fictional island encounters within key texts of the Western canon, such as *Robinson Crusoe* and More’s *Utopia*, as well as the trans-disciplinary academic literature of island studies. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how islands have come to be ‘naturalised’ as isolated, remote, special, endemic, resilient and alluring; to reveal the dominant mentality and movement *towards* an island; and to outline the tropes inherent to making use of an island as a location for ideas.

Chapter Two is a case study on the 2012 artistic project *Nowhereisland* by British artist Alex Hartley. Produced as part of the London Cultural Olympiad, *Nowhereisland* is a contemporary, large-scale, well-funded and high-profile example of an artist using an island – both physically and metaphorically – as a location for ideas. This project is an exact replication of the conceptual sequence of island approach as observed in Chapter One. It provides evidence of an enduring fascination with islands, island metaphor and island tropes. It makes visible the lingering attitudes inherent to island encounter and island approach.

The following three chapters discuss the creative outcomes of this research. Chapter Three and Four focus on two different curatorial case studies I produced – *Ash Island and its Transformations* (2014) and *The Island Could be Heard by Night* (2015). These case studies are a practical investigation into the theoretical ideas presented in the preceding chapters. As practice-based research, the projects themselves are under investigation too. Whilst both exhibitions centre on questions of island encounter within contemporary art, they also question the exhibition form, the authority of the curator, and are as much experiments in curating as they are in handling the tropes of the island, ‘islandness’ and concepts of place.

As a result, the two case studies take on a looser theoretical approach than the structure posited in Chapters One and Two. They are driven by the histories and geographies of the sites themselves and therefore explore alternative relationships and approaches to island metaphor. Chapter Five brings the conclusions and results of both case studies together. Couched in an overview of curatorial philosophy the conceptual focus of this chapter is: 'place' and 'place-making', alternative curatorial practices such as collaboration, and the processes and practice of exhibition-making. This broader theoretical position works to tether some of the more open-ended and unanswerable questions or results of *Ash Island and its Transformations* and *The Island Could be Heard by Night* to a genealogy based in art theory rather than island studies.

CHAPTER ONE – ISLAND APPROACH

DREAMING

In his introduction to *Islands of the Mind*, John R. Gillis borrows Laurence Durrell's term *islomania* – a medically unclassified affliction in which sufferers find islands irresistible¹¹ – to describe a Western obsession with islands:

Islomania in its many different guises is a central feature of Western culture, a core idea that has been a driving force from ancient times to the present... Islomania is most common among those who seldom, if ever, reside on islands. It is one of those things generated by absence rather than presence. It is not real islands that are irresistible, but the idea of the island that is the true source of Western islomania.¹²

It is important to acknowledge that *islomania*, and the metaphorical subtleties of 'island' and 'islandness', are largely as Gillis suggests – a Western preoccupation. A geography shaped by a long and complicated history of European incursion and imagining, island figuration within the Western imagination has been 'highly contingent upon the repercussions of European colonialism and continental migration towards island spaces'.¹³ What American academic Elizabeth DeLoughrey so neatly expresses here is an orientational metaphor that plagues our understanding of islands, even today; we move *towards* an island. This spatial relationship is absolutely fundamental to grasping the contradictions and, often times, obfuscated meaning of 'island' and 'islandness'. It bears insight on, first, a geographic understanding of islands, second, their mythological place in Western creative and theoretical works and, third, the asymmetrical dialectic between island and mainland. There are a number of tangible histories explaining how islands have come to entice, capture, fascinate and shape-shift as a dream-like landscape beneath the Western gaze. From Homer's *Odyssey*, to a prelapsarian imagining

¹¹ Laurence Durrell, *Reflections on a Marine Venus: A Companion to the Landscape of Rhodes* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960). Pg11

¹² John R. Gillis, *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004). Introduction. Pg1

¹³ Elizabeth DeLoughrey, "Island Ecologies and Caribbean Literatures," *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 95, no. 3 (2004). Pg301

of the earth's origins, to the anachronistic pilgrimage of the twenty-first century tourist, islands have come to represent many different, and often contradictory, desires.



Figure 4: *The World According to Hecataeus*, 500 B.C. E. H Bunbury, *A History of Ancient Geography*, 1883. Vol. 1, John Murry, London. Image courtesy of J. R. Gillis, *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World*, 2004. Palgrave and MacMillan, New York, Pg7

First, there is the institution of the island as a mythological geography. Dating back to the *Odyssey*, ‘the Greeks were thinking *with* islands long before they settled them’.¹⁴ What ancient Aegean geographers ‘called ‘Ocean’ (*Okeanos*), the “vast river” thought to surround the landmass formed by Europe, Africa and Asia,’ was used as a central metaphoric device in

¹⁴ Gillis, *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World*. Pg5

the definition of islands (Figure 4).¹⁵ As Gillis describes, 'the notion of an earth island surrounded entirely by water is common to many civilizations, but it has been foundational to the West's way of thinking about itself as being at the centre of things.'¹⁶ With an emphasis on concentricity, Ocean was produced as a symbol of chaos and confusion, and represented unbound and unknowable space. As the terrestrial limit to the original earth island, '...on the inner side, Ocean is the threshold of all that is solid and everyday; on the other outer side, it melts into the primal airy chaos (*apieron*) of beyond'.¹⁷

In *Taking History Offshore*, Gillis points to a different, biblical vision of islands – as objects of dissent. The Fall of man destroyed the perfection and wholeness of Eden, shattering it into island fragments, scattering them across the flooded earth as rebellious parts of a whole.¹⁸

Islands figured prominently in the Christian understanding of the history of the earth, especially at the beginning and the ending of the story...Islands were the emblem of God's wrath, constant reminders of man's sinfulness. But they were also symbols of the hope for redemption and destined to disappear at the end of time, when God's grace would make the world whole again.¹⁹

No longer a uniform and smooth territorial spread which, it must be noted, contained no seas, it was man's fall from grace that prompted the great Flood, carving up the earth into a set of distinctive terrains.²⁰ Even up until the seventeenth century, this figuration of islands persisted. In 1603 George Owen wrote, the biblical flood had torn 'the erthe in peeces and

¹⁵ Ian McLean, *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Pg1

¹⁶ Gillis, *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World*. Pg6

¹⁷ McLean. Pg8

¹⁸ John R. Gillis, "Taking History Offshore: Atlantic Islands in European Minds, 1400-1800," in *Islands in History and Representation*, ed. Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith (London; New York: Routledge, 2003). Pg22

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Alain Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World 1750-1840*, trans. Jocelyn Phelps (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1994). Pg6

separated the Illands from the Contynent, and made the hilles and vallies as we now finde theme.'²¹

During the Middle Ages, the mythological production of islands was two-fold. First, was the practice of 'islanding' oneself, a process deeply connected to the production of concepts like boundaries, containment and isolation. Which, in turn, gave rise to the second mythological mechanism – locating islands elsewhere:

Europeans had been islanding themselves since the beginnings of Neolithic settlement. The first houses were round and grouped together in circles that constituted insular compounds or villages. The ideal form of the city was also a closed circle, and though the actual shape of settlement may not always have been regular, the representations of ancient and medieval cities invariably rounded off the rough edges. The circle was the symbol of wholeness, cohesion, and good order.²²

In the medieval mind, there was no need to explore beyond the limits of their own small-scaled worlds as insularity was not only a physical reality – 'roads were few, bridges even rarer'²³ – but the kind of restlessness and curiosity that today typifies a quest into the unknown was deemed unnecessary. All that was required for a good and decent life lay within the boundaries of their miniature domains.²⁴

The exercise of islanding one's self remains a central practical and theoretical philosophy to Western epistemology. Lasting works like Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, or the perennially re-imagined political treatise of More's *Utopia*, prove islands and islanding have been instrumental to the development of Western thought. Even today we see its expression; the islanding of bodies (particularly abject bodies) within prisons, detention centres, refugee camps, quarantine, hospitals and cemeteries; the islanding of plants and

²¹ Gordon Leslie Davies, *The Earth in Decay: A History of British Geomorphology, 1578-1878* (New York: Elsevier, 1969). Pg11

²² Gillis, *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World*. Pg14

²³ Ibid. Pg15

²⁴ Pyotr Mikhailovich Bitsilli quoted by Gillis. Ibid.

animals both theoretically, through systems of classification, and physically, by way of farms, zoos, gardens and reserves; the islanding of history and the past through museums and their collections; the islanding of culture within purpose-made buildings, such as the art gallery, theatre, cinema and concert hall; and the islanding of thought where, under a University context (an island unto itself), the overarching premise of human inquiry is sequestered into discrete faculties of knowledge. The act of islanding our thoughts and desires, questions and answers is, as American travel writer and essayist Gretel Ehrlich describes, a 'peculiar way we humans have of knowing something.'²⁵ It should be made clear, however, that rather than any kind of universal impulse Ehrlich might pronounce it is primarily Western thought that has been obsessed by the neatly bound and insulated island-object.

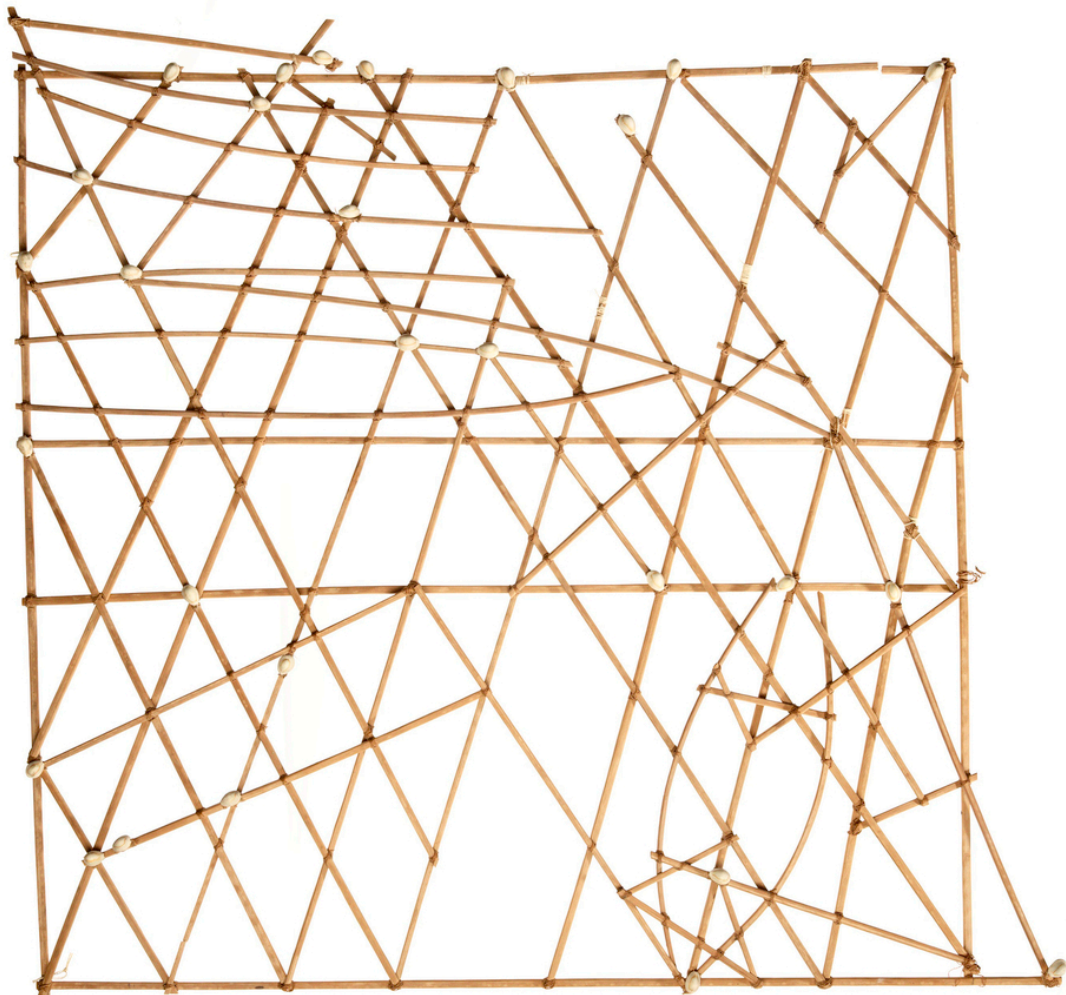


Figure 5: Stick Navigation Chart (Marshall Islands), before 1950. Carved wooden sticks, cowrie shells, twine lashing, 99.4 x 101.9 x 4.4cm. From the collection of the National Museum of Natural History. Image courtesy of Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum

²⁵ Gretel Ehrlich, *Islands, the Universe, Home: Essays* (London; New York: Penguin Books, 1992). Pg65

By looking at examples of how else the island, and its relationship to elsewhere, might be understood we can confirm the practice of islanding as primarily a Western preoccupation. One material example is the Marshallese Stick Navigation Charts, illustrated in Figure 5. Key to the longevity and success of Marshallese maritime navigational skill is a relationship to the sea – not only as a food source, for transport and exchange between islands, but equally as a source of cultural identity. The navigational stick charts visualise a pattern of long-term maritime observation; they describe changing ocean swells, oceanic patterns as the navigator approaches and passes land, and the characteristics of swell pattern interaction.²⁶ With an emphasis on ocean rather than land, the navigational charts demonstrate a relationship to island landfall by way of connection rather than difference.

Another compelling example of this orientational relationship can be found in the writing of Epeli Hau'ofa. The Tongan and Fijian anthropologist and author wrote two pivotal essays on the subject of Oceania – *Our Sea of Islands* (1994) and *The Ocean in Us* (1998) – depicting an expansive, interconnected vision of the islands in the Pacific. A counterpoint to the miniaturising gaze of European colonisers, as well as offshore sovereign leaders at the time of writing, Hau'ofa draws on a long and culturally rich maritime history of exchange and movement between islands, placing an emphasis on Ocean rather than land. He portrays Ocean as a metaphor of connectedness rather than separateness. And demonstrates that the inscription of Oceania and its histories occurs *between* landfalls:

There is a gulf of difference between viewing the Pacific as 'islands in a far sea' and as 'a sea of islands'. The first emphasises dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from the centres of power... The second is a more holistic perspective in which things are seen in the totality of their relationships... [The term] 'Pacific Islands'...connotes small areas of land surfaces sitting atop submerged reefs or seamounts. Hardly any Anglophone economist, consultancy expert, government planner or development banker in the region uses the term 'Oceania', perhaps because it sounds grand and somewhat

²⁶ "Stick Navigation Chart (Marshall Islands) ", Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, <https://collection.cooperhewitt.org/objects/35520475/>.

romantic, and may connote something so vast that it would compel them to a drastic review of their perspectives and policies.²⁷

As a coda to Hau'ofa's essay in *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*, academics Gerard Ward and John Webb describe the ancient navigational lore of *etak* as an alternative vision of islands, particularly the interrelation between navigator, ocean and land:

The European, at sea in a small vessel, tends to envisage his situation as one in which his craft moves towards, passes by and then away from fixed islands. The islands are secure and he is in motion... the Puluwat navigator, once on course, inverts the concept and in his navigational system considers the canoe to be stationary and the islands to move towards and past him. Such a vision seems to reflect a high level of security and confidence in the self-contained little world of craft, crew, and navigational lore... a western Pacific islander in the past might well sail east or south or north in search of new land, confident in the belief that, as usual, islands would rise over the horizon to meet him.²⁸

JOURNEY

The movement towards an island, as Hau'ofa highlights, is a Western trajectory. It was continental men who travelled to the Pacific, erecting boundaries and 'imaginary lines across the sea' that led to the contraction of a vast and interconnected Oceania.²⁹ Rather than a dynamic landscape rising up to meet you, the act of travelling to an island is a fundamentally Western movement. Within the notion of island remoteness and island isolation there exists this invisible trajectory; 'nearly every scientist, botanist, geologist, anthropologist, and travel writer has come to the conclusion that islands are remote by *travelling* there.'³⁰ Although

²⁷ Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (April 1994). Pg7-8

²⁸ Ralph Gerard Ward and Jennifer Webb, in *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*, ed. Eric Waddell, Vijay Naidu, and Epeli Hau'ofa (Suva, Fiji: The University of the South Pacific School of Social and Economic Development, in association with Beake House, 1993). Pg17

²⁹ Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands." Pg7-9

³⁰ DeLoughrey. Pg300

Hau'ofa's subject focus is post-colonial Oceania he provides evidence of an enduring Western perspective, one that continues to inflect island geopolitics today.

The physical act of moving *towards* an island has a long and complex history in the West but, most notably, it was the religious pilgrim of the Middle Ages who inspired subsequent centuries of empirical exploration. Drawing on the belief that the sea was equally as empty as it was chaotic, the concept of voyaging into the ocean, in search of vacant islands, neatly aligned with the religious pilgrim's quest for purity, holiness and transcendence. As Gillis explains,

Irish monks ventured into what they regarded as the "desert of the sea", to find barren isles where they could practice *kinosis*, the emptying out of the self, the opening-up to the divine...By the sixth century, islands off the Scottish and Irish coasts were peopled by holy hermits, becoming ultimately monastic and pilgrimage sites.³¹

The simultaneous action of emptying islands of meaning, imagining them as the original *tabulae rasae*,³² whilst also generating them as special and sacred through the trials and tribulations of pilgrimage, results in two fundamental perceptions of islands that endures today. The first is that the island is bound to the significance of journeying. The second is the construction of island time.

The act of journeying is a physical and psychological charge for imagining islands as remote, isolated, special or unique. The more difficult the journey towards an island, the more rarefied an object it becomes; 'the sacredness of any place is directly proportional to the effort it takes to reach it.'³³ In *Island Sojourns* Gillis describes how the ritualism of early Pagan and Christian pilgrimages not only built the case for islands as sites of redemption and salvation, but fixed their identity in relation to the mainland: 'Pilgrimage differed from ordinary travel in that it was a highly ritualized journey at certain prescribed seasons and along clearly defined routes,

³¹ Gillis, "Taking History Offshore: Atlantic Islands in European Minds, 1400-1800." Pg22

³² Baldacchino. Pg166

³³ Gillis, *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World*. Pg26

always undertaken with the intention of returning home.³⁴ Islands, it seems, were not just objects of passive contemplation – like the mythological geography of Ultima Thule or Atlantis. They were ‘prompts to action, to adventure, constituting a transcendent realm reached only by an arduous, even dangerous journey, attempted by godlike individuals – heroes like Odysseus and saints like Brendan – who returned home profoundly transformed.’³⁵ Drawing on these epic qualities, Salvatore Arancio’s 2013 photo-etching *Graham Island* (Figure 6) is just one example of the ambiguity surrounding myths of discovery and transformation. By digitally altering a found 19th century illustration of Graham Island – *Isola Ferdinanda* prior to British possession – Arancio produces an ‘impossible image’; an island vessel mysteriously illuminated from within, he questions inherited ideas surrounding beauty and the sublime in nature.³⁶

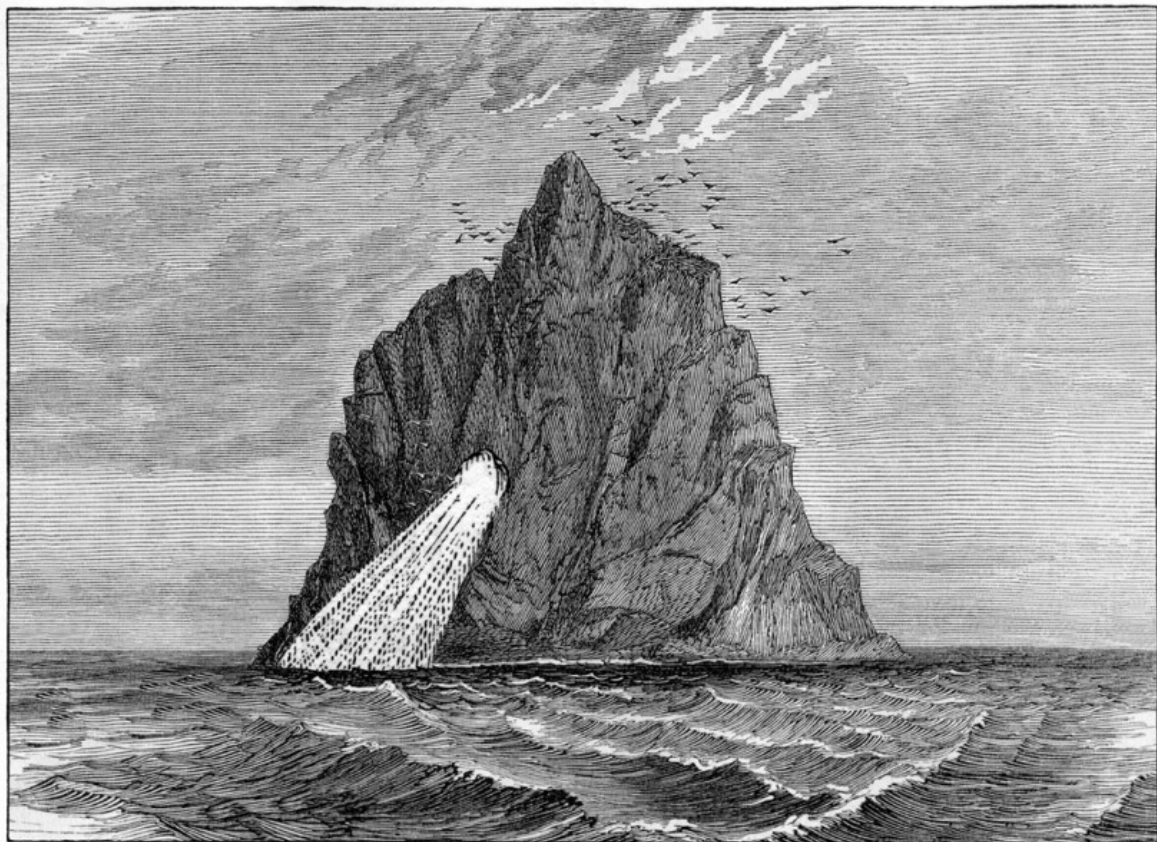


Figure 6: Salvatore Arancio, *Graham Island*, 2013. Photo-etching on paper, 43.5 x 37.5cm. Image courtesy of Federica Schiavo Gallery.

³⁴ "Island Sojourns." Pg278

³⁵ Ibid. Pg276

³⁶ Salvatore Arancio, "Statement," Contemporary Art Society, <http://www.contemporaryartsociety.org/artist-members/salvatore-arancio/>.

Having to journey *towards* an island automatically locates islands in a vague category of 'elsewhere'. Distance, of course, is relative. It is not just lengths or increments measured as a product of physical conditions, it is manufactured by perception too. Within the premise of island distance, there is an equal and invisible suggestion of nearness; for an individual to consider an island remote infers that they are at a fixed centre from which all measurements radiate. The nearness within distance, then, is one's body, one's position, one's gaze. In *In or On?* (2011), Swedish ethnologist Owe Ronström examines this idea by looking at orientational metaphors used to describe islands within languages of North Western Europe. As a method for systematically and coherently conceptualizing the world around us, he demonstrates how the "we-first" orientational metaphors – such as 'in', 'out', 'here', 'there', 'on', 'off' – have come to draw an underlying schema of islands as remote, distant, elsewhere or beyond.³⁷ He describes how these "we-first" orientational metaphors locate 'spaces that are "ours" as closer to us than other spaces'.³⁸ What becomes evident is the production of a spatial hierarchy; 'expressions with "in" highlight belonging and collective identity...expressions with "on" highlight individuality and agency'.³⁹ He continues:

Islanders regularly note the peculiar difference in perspective on distances that this [hierarchy] produces. To mainlanders it always seems longer (more inconvenient, more expensive) to travel out to the island, than for islanders to travel in to the mainland.⁴⁰

Elizabeth DeLoughrey seconds this one-sidedness. In her analysis of contemporary Caribbean literature, she rather wryly observes; 'not surprisingly, there are few if any historical testimonies from Pacific or Caribbean islanders bemoaning their isolation from Europe.'⁴¹

The combination of metaphorically positioning an island elsewhere, enacting a ritualized journey, and inscribing the island as a blank slate, has produced another enduring concept

³⁷ Owe Ronström, "In or On? Island Words, Island Worlds: li," *Island Studies Journal* 6, no. 2 (2011). Pg231

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid. Pg227

⁴⁰ Ibid. Pg231

⁴¹ DeLoughrey. Pg301

within the Western imagination: island time. Not only do islands inhabit alternative spatial locations, such as beyond or elsewhere, they inhabit alternative temporal locations too. The island time signature is considered anachronistic. Rather than the efficiency of weeks, days, minutes and seconds – as measured on the mainland – island time is ‘punctuated by seasons, tides and migrating birds’.⁴² Moreover, islands have evolved to become emblems of time itself. They offer us a primitive past and a possible future, as well as a third character – the ahistorical landscape.



Figure 7: (Detail) Tacita Dean, *The Sea, with a Ship; afterwards an island*, 1999. Blackboard drawings, three parts, 244 x 488cm each. Image courtesy of Some/Things Magazine

British artist Tacita Dean (Figure 7) manages to articulate this multi-temporal phenomenon. In an article about her desire to travel to one of the world’s more remote islands – Tristan da Cunha – Dean enlivens the premise of ‘island lure’. That is, the movement towards ‘remote’ and assumed empty places. She writes,

...what it is at the heart of this draw to the Earth’s edges – to the desert and to the sea, or to the ice at the bottom of the world, or the volcano risen out of the ocean. In these places, we are not bound by the rules of human time; we can be free of a history that cannot mark a surface in constant flux like that of the sea or the shifting

⁴² Hernán Díaz, "A Topical Paradise," *Cabinet* Summer 2010. Pg80

dunes of the desert, or one brutalized by weather or extremity. In these places, we can imagine millennia; we can imagine prehistory and can see the future.⁴³

Rather fittingly, in an interview with Dean, *Some/Things Magazine* editor Raina Lampkins-Fielder describes the artist as 'some sort of time traveller'.⁴⁴

Ronström's set of linguistic orientational metaphors bind an island's location in space to a location in time. The hierarchy – where 'in' is central, near and now, and 'out' is peripheral, distant and then – conflates space-time, producing the island as a landscape outside of or beyond the continental chronograph.⁴⁵ Latin-American author and academic Hernan Díaz reinforces this idea. In *A Topical Paradise* he casts the literary island as a kind of primitive or proto-ethnic landscape; without a history 'islands become the realm of pure present, duration without History – and in this sense, they are still Nature.'⁴⁶

If we reflect on the history of island pursuit, we might gain insight into how island time has come to be considered anachronous. By the sixteenth century, the biblical vision of an 'earth island' had begun to fade and European attention focused more on remote islands than its own continent.⁴⁷ As Gillis describes, the Western historiographical canon was considerably shaped by that which occurred offshore, more than its continental interiors:

Not only did islands loom large politically and economically, but they exerted a fascination that larger landmasses could not yet begin to match... Islands played a far larger role in the period 1500-1800 than at any other time before or since. They were crucial to economic and political development but no less significant culturally. Islands

⁴³ Tacita Dean, "Tristan Da Cunha," *Artforum International* 43, no. 10 (Summer 2005). Pg275

⁴⁴ Raina Lampkins-Fielder, "Tacita Dean / Backwards & Forwards in Time [with Interview by Raina Lampkins-Fielder]," *Some/Things Magazine* March 2011.

⁴⁵ Ronström. Pg231

⁴⁶ Díaz. Pg80

⁴⁷ John Roland Phillips quoted by Gillis, *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World*. Pg85

were not only the lands that Europe principally explored, claimed, and colonized, but those it imagined were fictionalised.⁴⁸

Although we can later challenge Gillis' assertion about the potential scale of influence of islands today, he is right to suggest that modern historical writing has been 'relentlessly terrestrial'.⁴⁹ It is important to consider that 'most of the world's great empires, Rome being an exception, were seaborne in nature...conquest moved faster by water than by land.'⁵⁰ Europe's hunt for islands in the Age of Discovery was enacted for different purposes to the spiritual quests that preceded it. And yet, the westward pursuit of property, endless wealth and eternal happiness, was built on the same fabricated tropes of island myth and mysticism.⁵¹

In this period islands became mercurial figures, appearing and disappearing, swiftly changing form, shape and location on the maps of magnates and mariners as the project of 'discovery' took hold. 'Europeans filled their maps with unknown islands, betting that they would surely turn up some day', and as legendary islands systematically evaded encounter, the urge to 'seed the empty sea with new ones' was in no way lessened.⁵² In *Phantom Islands of The Atlantic: the legends of seven islands that never were*, Donald Johnson says, 'it was when the geography of tradition gave way to the geography of observation [that] phantom islands reached their highest form of cartographical expression.'⁵³ The most powerful inscription of islands in the Age of Discovery, then, was as a location for potentiality; islands represented a state of becoming rather than arrival. The 'lure' of islands was perpetuated by displacement – first, in space, by way of relocating lost, new or undiscovered islands to an as-yet-unknown frontier. For example, '...even as the islands of the Atlantic were demythologized and colonized...explorers chased the legendary Isle of California for three centuries...before finally

⁴⁸ Gillis. Ibid.

⁴⁹ Donald A. Yerxa, "Seacoasts in History: An Interview with John R. Gillis," *Historically Speaking* 14, no. 2 (April 2013). Pg15

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Gillis, "Taking History Offshore: Atlantic Islands in European Minds, 1400-1800." Pg24

⁵² *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World*. Pg55

⁵³ Donald S. Johnson, *Phantom Islands of the Atlantic: The Legends of Seven Lands That Never Were* (New York, NY: Walker, 1996). Pg2

accepting the fact that it was part of the North American continent.⁵⁴ And then secondly, in time; 'Sailing to the ends of the earth, is in fact traveling in time.'⁵⁵

The maritime pursuit of paradisiacal islands would ultimately come to rest in the Pacific Ocean where, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the inflated myth of *terra australis incognita* evaporated as islands of the Pacific, Australia and New Zealand were encountered, mapped and circumnavigated. Imagined as a great counter-weight to Europe's own landmass, the Antipodes is an example of how medieval mythological geography provided the historical basis for imagining islands, firstly, as 'elsewhere', secondly, as a moralised landscape, and thirdly, as an embodiment of alternative time-scales.

In *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art*, Australian academic Ian McLean describes the compelling combination of geography and geosophy in the Antipodes; the 'mixing of reality with the imaginary was a potent alchemic brew which, for many, promised salvation and gold. In Oceania, Europeans fervently hoped, was a great austral land with untold riches. However, they discovered death, not gold. Ocean prevailed.'⁵⁶ The mythological geography of *terra australis* (Figure 8) not only loomed large in the minds of Europeans – quite literally, as its ballooned presence on sixteenth century maps describe a landmass engulfing nearly half the southern hemisphere – its island lure was heightened by material quests for gold, curiosity quests for knowledge and a seemingly impassable equatorial band. The very premise of a great southern land gave rise to what German academic Vanessa Agnew describes as 'heretical speculation about polygenesis'.⁵⁷ The islands of the Pacific were moralised *before* European contact. If a biblical conception of the world were true then the possibility of an upside-down, opposing land of peoples, simultaneous to Europe – 'men that

⁵⁴ Gillis, "Taking History Offshore: Atlantic Islands in European Minds, 1400-1800." Pg24

⁵⁵ Joseph-Marie Degerando quoted by Gillis. "Island Sojourns." Pg280

⁵⁶ McLean. Pg2

⁵⁷ Vanessa Agnew, "Pacific Island Encounters and the German Invention of Race," in *Islands in History and Representation*, ed. Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith (New York; London: Routledge, 2003). Pg83

haue they fete ayenst our fete’ – was blasphemous and fundamentally contradicted a linear Christian premise of ‘civilization’.⁵⁸



Figure 8: *Typus orbis terrarum*, circa 1690-99. Print on sheet, 19.7 x 28.1cm. From the collection of the National Library of Australia.

Gillis looks to the westward passage of Christopher Columbus to exemplify this type of temporal moralizing. In his attempt to gain the support of the Spanish monarchs, Columbus ‘did not promise them discovery of a new world but rather a recovery of access to the old world.’⁵⁹ The proliferation of islands across the western seas were seditious symbols for a fallen mankind and Columbus, who could imagine ‘no other destination but the far side of earth island’, embarked on his voyage of discovery as a method for reinstating an Old-World order.⁶⁰ As Gillis says,

⁵⁸ John Molony, *The Native-Born: The First White Australians* (Carlton South, VIC: Melbourne University Press, 2000). Pg22

⁵⁹ Gillis, *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World*. Pg56-57

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* Pg57

...Columbus was not only a space explorer; he was a time traveller. Going west had always been associated in pagan minds with going back to some more primordial past. In Christian geography west also came to stand for new beginnings and the chance to recover that which had been lost through the Fall and Flood... [Columbus] was on a sacred journey, one that would take him not only to the ends of the earth but to the end of time itself... The final days would be brought near when all the lost islands of the world were found and their peoples converted to Christianity.⁶¹

As Gillis and Agnew demonstrate, the Western preoccupation with moralizing islands – biblically, spatially, temporally and imaginatively – begins prior to any kind of physical encounter with sand or rock. Not only are islands symbols of transgression and heresy, they equally offer redemption. They have come to be oriented in both the past and the future, and as points of the beginning and end. As Edmond and Smith ask, in *Islands in History and Representation*, are ‘islands the detritus of crumbling continents or the seeds of new ones?’⁶² It seems the mutability of islands is fundamental to island journeying, and to their mythological lure.

CONTACT

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, once the violent material methods of European colonisation had begun to transpire, island figuration in the West was made even more complicated by the horrors, pleasures and realities of island encounter. The subject of island encounter is as far-ranging, diverse and specific as the islands (and islanders) encountered. But, it can be established that Europe’s ideological development is historically bound to the realities of island contact, proof that islands have long provided the West with an ontological security defined by difference.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith, eds., *Islands in History and Representation*, vol. 6 (New York; London: Routledge, 2003). Introduction. Pg1

Island encounter in the Age of Enlightenment not only materially benefitted Europe but gave birth to a proliferation of new fields of European thought: ethnography, anthropology, biology and socio-political theory.⁶³ As DeLoughrey summarises:

...European deforestation of the Canary and Caribbean islands created the first environmental conservation laws of Spain, Britain and France. It was primarily due to the island environments of Mauritius and the Galápagos that Darwin was able to theorise *The Origin of Species*; Wallace made similar evolutionary observations in the Malaysian archipelago; the Caribbean (and later the Pacific) islands were some of the first sites of European ethnography; and Atlantic, Indian Ocean and Pacific islands were the templates upon which Jean-Jacques Rousseau based his vision of the *homme naturel*. [Patrick] Nunn contends that oceanic islands were vital to Alfred Wegener's theory of continental drift as well as later discoveries about sea-floor spreading and plate tectonics.⁶⁴

If we consider the great variety of islands colonised by Europeans, bridging the far corners of the Indian, Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, we may be mistaken for thinking the processes of island encounter might also vary. Antonio Benitez-Rojo describes in his study of Caribbean literature, however, that there is an observable and recurrent pattern to European colonisation of islands in the Caribbean and the Pacific. These island colonies were manufactured, in both the European imagination and in practice, as 'repeating islands'; they were designed as a fractal spray of refashioned miniatures, evidenced by toponyms like New Britain, Little England, New Holland, New Zealand and New Ireland.⁶⁵ On the subject of Captain Cook's voyages to the island of Tonga in 1773, and Tierra del Fuego the following year, Agnew illustrates the same mentality. According to Agnew, Cook exemplified 'the way in which island encounters were mediated by a form of encounter practice that prioritised trade and hospitality as preconditions for the constitution of ethnographic knowledge –

⁶³ DeLoughrey. Pg303

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Antonio Benitez-Rojo quoted by DeLoughrey. "'The Litany of Islands, the Rosary of Archipelagoes': Caribbean and Pacific Archipelagraphy," *A Review of International English Literature* 32, no. 1 (January 2001). Pg25

collecting artefacts, conducting interviews, compiling vocabularies, making maps and conducting experiments.⁶⁶ Rather than an encounter with specific conditions, climates or cultures, the European approach towards island and islander encounter is dealt with thematically.⁶⁷

Australian artist Brook Andrew, examines this approach in his large-scale photographic montage series *Possessed* (2015) (Figure 9). Based on a collection of late 19th century colonial glass slide negatives, photographed on behalf of the Australian government in order to promote Australia's wilderness and landscape to a potential tourist market, Andrew questions the myopic and thematic approach in colonial documentation and visualisation of the Australian landscape. He interrupts, re-stages and defaces a deeply ritualised way of looking:

The horizon line must shift... for the horizon line represents patriarchy, dominance in the way of looking at other possibilities, diverse cultural readings, at women, at men, at the body, at human evolution, animal evolution; for me it is fundamental. The horizon line as an aspect of male conquest and dominance is problematic, so the first thing I think of is smashing – subverting - the horizon line.⁶⁸



Figure 9: Brook Andrew, *Possessed VIII*, 2015. Gelatin silver fibre gloss print, 127 x 234cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Tolarno Galleries

⁶⁶ Agnew. Pg86

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Grazia Gunn, "Brook Andrew: *Possessed*," (archive.brookandrew.com, 2015).

By looking deeper into the totalizing vision of colonial Europeans, we can shed light on some of the themes of island encounter. As a category of landscape, the island, the hill and the mountain belong to what Ronström describes as a prototypical geography you are 'on'.⁶⁹ As we learnt previously, this type of orientational metaphor preferences individuality and agency over belonging and collectivity, enlarging the subject over the object. In the case of an island, Ronström says, 'size and sight are crucial factors. You approach as from a distance to a clearly bounded piece of land, of a possible size to overview.'⁷⁰ In his analysis we see lingering evidence of the movement *towards* islands. Islands are the ones that are fixed in time and space and it is the colonizer, sea-farer or protagonist who is an agent of movement.

Ronström's visual and orientational emphasis – where, firstly, an island is looked *to* and, secondly, an island's totality can be seemingly taken in within a glance – is what Elizabeth McMahon describes as the 'panoramic gaze'.⁷¹ The term articulates a pattern of visual, spatial and psychological miniaturization foisted upon islands over the course of European colonisation, one that continues today. As a term, the 'panoramic gaze' resonates with Andrew's earlier statements, where the politics of 'looking' is bound to the politics of possession; it describes an attitude of proprietorship as central to its mechanism. The panoramic gaze, of specifically the colonial eye, typifies '...a trajectory from a larger and more dominant subject to a commodified object. It constructs the island, especially an island situated at the end of the world, as a miniaturized homeland.'⁷² Although we will soon come to recognize how islands, miniaturized or otherwise, are *not* where the European ultimately finds their home, McMahon is right to suggest the panoramic gaze generates an island as both an archetypal object-commodity and simulacrum of a small world. 'From the vantage point of tall sailing ships,' writes Gillis, 'islands could be understood at a glance...[they] ceased to be seen as parts of the world and became worlds of their own.'⁷³

⁶⁹ Ronström. Pg232

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Elizabeth McMahon, "The Gilded Cage: From Utopia to Monad in Australia's Island Imaginary," in *Islands in History and Representation*, ed. Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith (New York; London: Routledge, 2003). Pg197

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ John R. Gillis, "Taking History Offshore: Atlantic Islands in European Minds, 1400-1800," *ibid.* (London; New York). Pg27

A clear visual example of the ‘panoramic gaze’, the comprehensive overview generated by such a totalising vision, and methods of allegorical and visual miniaturisation are found within the 19th century decorative wallpaper *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* (1804-1805) (Figure 10). The panorama is a neoclassical depiction of European exploration in the Pacific. The image compresses both time and place, depicting an overview of decades of French and British exploration across regions as diverse as the West coast of North America, the Pacific Islands to Aotearoa New Zealand.⁷⁴ Australian curator and academic Vivienne Webb, describes the panorama as a ‘quasi travel experience’; the depiction of people, cultures and place are not geographically nor chronologically accurate, according to European encounters with the Pacific, but rather ‘the structuring rationale is aesthetic’.⁷⁵



Figure 10: (Scenes 1-12) Designed by Jean-Gabriel Charvet and manufactured by Joseph Dufour *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*, 1804-1805. 20 scenes in total, wallpaper – woodcut, gouache on canvas, 2020 x 1820cm. From the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales

In *Islands as Novelty Sites*, Maltese-Canadian academic Godfrey Baldacchino writes of the small-world appeal of islands; ‘mainlanders often harbor a subconscious obsession to frame and map an island cognitively, to “take it all in,” to go up to its highest point or walk around its shore, thus capturing its finite geography.’⁷⁶ The wish to anthropologically measure an island – that is, by using one’s own body or the human scale – is an observable phenomenon. American historian and geographer David Lowenthal describes it; ‘while the great world defies any hope of subjugation, title to an island – especially if small enough to engulf with

⁷⁴ Vivienne Webb, ‘Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique: a decorative composition in wallpaper’, "Lisa Reihana: In Pursuit of Venus," (Auckland, NZ: Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki). Pg22

⁷⁵ Ibid. Pg23

⁷⁶ Baldacchino. Pg165

the eye and encircle on foot – tempts us to wreak our unfettered will.⁷⁷ In *Cognition of Place: The Island Mind* James Ritchie, an academic tourist to the island of O’ahu, describes his confounding experience with a navigational system practiced there by the locals. Based on landmark directions – *mauka* (to the mountains) and *makai* (to the coast) – rather than cardinal points of north, south, east and west, he comes to comprehend the system as a psychological need to keep things contained.⁷⁸ He suggests one needs ‘...to go to the center of the island and from there to sing or shout or reflect that, however shattered it might seem to others, the island experience is, within itself, with all its conflicts, potentially whole.’⁷⁹ As Baldacchino astutely points out, mapping the island by foot, by eye or, as Ritchie suggests, by declaration, hastens our perceived ability to survey and control, to think we know the island more thoroughly and intimately.⁸⁰

When Lowenthal says ‘a small island asks to be inventoried,’ he not only conjures the obsessive record-keeping and imperial documentary practices of Cook’s island encounter, he raises the subject of scale. It has been witnessed, time and again, that the small island is by far the most alluring and potent. As Gillis describes, island smallness:

...is a function of the big-ness of mainlands...[We] do our best to reduce islands to human scale regardless of their actual physical size. And because it is surrounded by water, an island is like a framed picture, appearing to its viewer as small but at the same time all the more comprehensive.⁸¹

Down-sizing and miniaturization, then, is not just a device for island dreaming or island lure; ‘this unit of land which fits within the retina of the approaching eye is a token of desire.’⁸² It is essential to the fiction of both physical and metaphysical containment. Lowenthal describes it when saying, ‘It is not the native but the newcomer, like Rousseau, who feels impelled to

⁷⁷ David Lowenthal, "Islands, Lovers, and Others," *ibid.* Pg206

⁷⁸ James E. Ritchie, "Cognition of Place: The Island Mind," *Ethos* 5, no. 2 (July 1977). Pg187

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* Pg188

⁸⁰ Baldacchino. Pg165

⁸¹ John Gillis quoted by Ronström. Pg241

⁸² Edmond and Smith. Introduction. Pg2

inventory the island.⁸³ Scale and perceived visual, spatial and linguistic boundedness, work together to produce these particular conditions of containment. Distinct from an island's physical boundary, or the apparent 'hard-edged-ness' that Hay challenges in *A Phenomenology of Islands*, containment is a product of figuration. Much like the framed picture or view from the tall ships, containment offers the approaching eye (and body) an ability to grasp an island as 'a cohesive unit...where the miniature stands in lieu of the unimaginable whole.'⁸⁴ Again, we are presented with the concept of wholeness. The miniature world or the contained microcosm is used to describe the imaginative potential of an island. Wholeness renders an island 'available to ideal colonial fantasies and extreme colonial realities'.⁸⁵ As McMahon so vividly describes, 'it is a paradise of containment that so easily gives way to the nightmare of imprisonment.'⁸⁶

Island encounter has been no more richly portrayed, enlivened or deconstructed, than through the 'contact zone' of an island's shore or beach. On the subject of island literature in particular, Díaz writes: 'The trace of the first footprint on the clean slate of the shore initiates a chronology. With the arrival of the first seafarer from the mainland, days are counted, the past is remembered, and the future is anticipated.'⁸⁷ Again, Díaz frames the island anthropologically; as the first mark on the *tabulae rasae* and initiator of a new time-scale, the subject and their foot are made a dynamic agent against a static world. The 'first footprint' has, over the course of Western history, developed as a powerful hermeneutical idea. To return to the biblical conception of earth, the 'first footprint' makes reference to the First Man. In a Christian world view, islands themselves were not only symbols of banishment and migration but, 'Adam and Eve, and their progeny were permanent exiles with no hope of returning home.'⁸⁸ In their state of perpetual vagrancy they were forced to walk the earth until the Second Coming. Leaping forward into modern history, another 'first footprint' – upon the moon – presents a different kind of *tabulae rasae* encounter. The moon landing, unlike its nineteenth century colonial predecessors whose dreams of profitable and

⁸³ Lowenthal. Pg210

⁸⁴ McMahon. Pg198

⁸⁵ Edmond and Smith. Pg6

⁸⁶ McMahon. Pg201

⁸⁷ Díaz. Pg80

⁸⁸ Gillis, *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World*. Pg10

uninhabited islands were dashed on the rocks of real island (and islander) encounters, offered an uncomplicated embodiment of colonisation, male heroism and the pioneering quest. Armstrong's 'first footprint' was an impression on a new kind of clean shore: the 'empty' oceanic expanse of space; the past – the deeper we look into space the deeper we look back in time; and the future – as a triumph of human innovation and technological potential.



Figure 11: William Paget, "I stood like one thunderstruck", 1891. Illustration from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, 1891 edition. Image courtesy of Online Books of University of Pennsylvania

In Defoe's *Crusoe* there is another 'first footprint' (Figure 11), one that returns us to the island shore in particular:

It happened one day, about noon, going towards my boat, I was exceedingly surprised with the print of a man's naked foot on the shore, which was very plain to be seen in the sand. I stood like one thunderstruck, or as if I had seen an apparition... I went up the shore, and down the shore, but it was all one; I could see no other impression but that one. I went to it again to see if there were any more, and to observe if it might not be my fancy; but there was no room for that, for there was exactly the very print of a foot – toes, heel, and every part of a foot. How it came thither I knew not, nor could in the least imagine. But after innumerable fluttering thoughts, like a man perfectly confused and out of myself, I came home to my fortification, not feeling, as we say, the ground I went on, but terrified to the last degree...⁸⁹

The 'first footprint' of *Robinson Crusoe* was not Crusoe's own. Having spent the past twenty-four years living, glorifying and conceiving of himself as an 'uncorrupted and self-fashioning islander',⁹⁰ his revelation at the naked footprint is a threat on multiple fronts: physically – Crusoe is no longer alone; spatially – the seemingly solitary island is penetrable and therefore connected to elsewhere (despite Crusoe's own island arrival belying this same premise); and temporally – the linear progression of history, constructed and notated through Crusoe's journal, is suddenly fragmented by the presence of another.

It is no coincidence that Crusoe's first site of contact with a potential 'other' is the shore. As a threshold between inner and outer worlds, beaches and shores are liminal geographies rich and problematic with the potential for exchange. Australian historian Greg Denning describes the edge of an island as a kind of semi-permeable membrane; 'a double-edged space, in between: an exit space that is also an entry space; a space where edginess rules'.⁹¹ In a

⁸⁹ Daniel Defoe, *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe: Written by Himself*, Collector's Library ed. (London: Collector's Library, 2010). Pg192-193

⁹⁰ Lowenthal. Pg205

⁹¹ Godfrey Baldacchino, "The Lure of the Island: A Spatial Analysis of Power Relations," *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* 1 (2012). Pg59

metaphoric transformation of an island's actual edge, the beach or the shore – the perceived hard-edged-ness of an island – is challenged by Hay as 'a liberated zone; a site of possibility.'⁹² For Australian artist and academic Marie-Louise Anderson, the island edge represents a moment between 'exclusion and inclusion, discrimination and acceptance, the known and the unknown... [it is] the space between the past and the future, utopia and hell, reality and the imagination.'⁹³

With the idea that the island edge is a powerful site of exchange comes another distinct metaphorical combination; the geographic conditions of the island and the physicality of the human body are analogous. More than just a surveying eye or walking foot, islands have come to represent the perviousness of the mind, the individuality of the body, and, as a geographic form, it has managed to both infantilize its subjects and be the infantilized; 'we human beings "are born as islands". Before birth we float happily in the amniotic fluid, in the ocean of the maternal womb.'⁹⁴ Gillis borrows John Wilson Foster's term when describing an island's 'umbilical function'; islands, throughout history, have facilitated 'penance, purification, and multiple forms of secular as well as religious rebirth.'⁹⁵

The analogy between the body and the island – each sustained and threatened by incursion – has been actualized throughout recorded history in the use of islands as stations of quarantine, sites for the isolation and containment of disease. In terms of the modern European understanding of human consciousness there is also a suggestive congruence between islands and individuals. Islands have a marked individuality, an obstinate separateness that we like to think corresponds to our own.⁹⁶

⁹² Pete Hay, "A Phenomenology of Islands," *Island Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2006). Pg22

⁹³ Marie-Louise Anderson, "Norfolk Island: Pacific Periphery" (University of Tasmania, 2001). Pg18-19

⁹⁴ James Hamilton quoted by Grant McCall, "Nissology: A Proposal for Consideration," *Journal of The Pacific Society* 17, no. 2-3 (October 1994). Pg1

⁹⁵ Gillis, "Island Sojourns." Pg276

⁹⁶ Edmond and Smith. Introduction. Pg4

As Edmond and Smith describe above, the island successfully inhabits a kind of dualism – open and closed – lending itself to this type of imagining. The dialectic between internal and external ‘allows islands to be related more readily to the human psyche than other geographical configurations.’⁹⁷ By conflating psychology and geography, individuality and islandness, the search for an island becomes a search for the self.⁹⁸ ‘Beyond visionary dream and quotidian reality,’ Lowenthal writes, ‘islands are eidetic metaphors for identity – the island universe, the island planet, the island self: the I-land.’⁹⁹

SETTLEMENT

The translation of real island encounter, in the Age of Discovery, into the rhetoric of twenty-first century tourism or offshore geopolitics, has been heavily facilitated by island-centric literature of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Island literature, or the ‘island genre’ as Tasmanian academics Ralph Crane and Lisa Fletcher prefer it, is a sprawling subject of island studies unto itself.¹⁰⁰ The sheer volume of ‘Robinsonades’, island-set crime fiction or popular romance novels spawned by founding texts like *Robinson Crusoe*, produce a wide-ranging and complex theoretical scope too broad to summarise here. For the purpose of this study, however, aspects of literary island encounter are important to touch upon. This is because the island genre, which could be expanded to also include contemporary art, is responsible for reproducing and sustaining a panoramic gaze well into the twenty-first century. By coming to terms with the translation of real island encounter into an inscription of islands as a genre, we come to terms with the way in which the West has asserted power, dominance, control, and produced and preserved island metaphors that serve them through the creation of literature, film and contemporary art.

Returning our attention to *A Topical Paradise*, Díaz surveys literary works that shipwreck themselves upon uncharted islands, such as Defoe’s *Crusoe*, More’s *Utopia*, *Treasure Island* and *Gulliver’s Travels*. He looks to the island as a ‘possibility of another life, away from this

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Lowenthal. Pg202

⁹⁹ Ibid. Pg218

¹⁰⁰ Crane and Fletcher. Pg637

one.¹⁰¹ Having traced how islands are imagined, first, as desirable small worlds and, second, as 'elsewhere' (in both time and space) we might now consider island figuration beyond dreaming, lure or the first moments of contact. Once an island has been dreamt up, sought out, landed upon, discovered, encroached or invaded, an attempt to settle follows. By looking at just three of the myriad themes within island settlement – the male castaway, kinship and regeneration – we quickly discover that island settlement does, in fact, have very little to do with the realities of building 'another life'.

In the introduction to his novel *Concrete Island*, science-fiction author John Graham Ballard describes the complexities of island settlement beyond the first footfall. The protagonist has to deal with '...all the fascinating problems of survival, and the task of setting up, as Crusoe did, a working replica of bourgeois society and its ample comforts'.¹⁰² He continues, '...more seriously, there is the challenge of returning to our primitive natures, stripped of self-respect and the mental support systems with which civilization has equipped us.'¹⁰³ Ballard's description not only alludes to the replicative acts of settlement but claims an ideological position too; the island is an extension of the subject's mind and body:

...there is the need to dominate the island, and transform its synonymous terrain into an extension of our mind. The mysterious peak veiled by cloud, the deceptively calm lagoon, the rotting mangroves and the secret spring of pure water together become out-stations of the psyche, as they must have done for our primeval forebears, filled with lures and pitfalls of every kind.¹⁰⁴

Figures stranded, saved, washed up or wrecked upon literary islands tend to be either castaways, utopians, or sometimes even both. The castaway and the utopian stake out specific spatial, temporal and ideological positions in relation to an island's edge. The castaway is a figure who is 'thoroughly lost', geographically and ideologically.¹⁰⁵ Their vision

¹⁰¹ Díaz. Pg85

¹⁰² James Graham Ballard, *Concrete Island* (London, UK: Fourth Estate, 2011). Introduction.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Díaz. Pg80

rests on the oceanic horizon as a connection to the past, framing 'home' both elsewhere and as the ultimate destination; 'castaways try to rebuild that which they lost, to overcome the unsolvable contradiction of *beginning again*.'¹⁰⁶ In their eyes the island is a foreign landscape; 'they want to *go back*, either by physically returning to the mainland or by reinstating its tradition on the island.'¹⁰⁷ Utopians, on the other hand, look inwards and celebrate a new world order. Utopia is a product of human ingenuity and human innovation rather than a pleasurable happenstance or the acts of God that plague a castaway's island arrival. Utopia and utopians 'only aspire to widen the chasm separating them from the continent and are open to an experimental order.'¹⁰⁸ As Díaz says:

Castaways recommence, whereas utopians commence. Where the colonist seeks to reinstate the old order, the utopian breaks away from it. If the colonial strategy consists in unifying island and mainland (motherland, fatherland) by means of material and symbolic bridges, the utopian policy consists in dissolving any continental linkage or genealogy...¹⁰⁹

In *Empire Islands: Castaways, Cannibals and Fantasies of Conquest*, British academic Rebecca Weaver-Hightower points to a defining moment shared between centuries of castaway and utopian island-set narratives. Figures like Crusoe, Chuck Noland of *Castaway*, Robert Maitland of *Concrete Island*, even the groupthink characters of *Lord of the Flies* (Figure 12), Jack and Ralph, share a crucial moment of anagnorisis:

The castaway (a man, or later, a small group of people) first suffers through a night or two of dark despair at being cast away, and perhaps a day of rescuing provisions from the wrecked craft. But in an action that typically leads to acceptance of his fate... soon after landing on the island, the castaway ascends to a place of geographical elevation to survey the space. This is the monarch-of-all-I-survey moment. Though his immediate motive may be to ascertain if he is indeed stranded on an island rather

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. Pg84

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

than a continent, that moment also provides him a sense of ownership as he scans his new home and visually appropriates it... in that moment, as he marks the boundaries of the island with his gaze, he begins to symbolically incorporate the island.¹¹⁰



Figure 12: (Still) Harry Hook, *Lord of the Flies*, 1990. 90 minutes, Castlerock Entertainment Image courtesy of Castlerock Entertainment

Weaver-Hightower's passage raises a number of salient points. First, we recognise the familiar pattern and need to anthropologically measure the island – by foot and by eye. She also twins the geography of the island with the body of the human, challenging the castaway's story as benign.¹¹¹ That is, if a lost subject comes upon an island through an act of God – a storm, a shipwreck, a plane crash – they never truly sought to colonise the island in the first instance. This, she argues, has 'made imperial expansion and control seem unproblematic and natural, like the innate processes of the human body.'¹¹² DeLoughrey too reinforces this

¹¹⁰ Rebecca Weaver-Hightower, *Empire Islands: Castaways, Cannibals, and Fantasies of Conquest* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). Introduction (PgXVIII-XIX)

¹¹¹ Ibid. Introduction (PgXIV)

¹¹² Ibid. Introduction (PgIX)

premise; 'by naming these arrivants as castaways, the relationship between island inhabitants and continental imperialism is suppressed and mystified.'¹¹³

Weaver-Hightower also points out the gendered subject that tends to dominate this kind of literature. The male body, particularly the solitary male body 'beginning again' (Figure 13), is a powerful mechanism of historic inscription, as Hay reinforces:

One prominent metaphor based around the figure of the heroically resourceful castaway links the island trope to ideological discourses of radical individualism...[the] 'island' is an idea that becomes fixed as conservative, because... the super-individual who rises above society leads straight to history-is-wrought-by-a-few-great-men ideologies.¹¹⁴



Figure 13: (Still) Robert Zemeckis, *Cast Away*, 2000. 143 minutes, 20th Century Fox and DreamWorks Pictures. Image courtesy of 20th Century Fox and DreamWorks Pictures

¹¹³ DeLoughrey, ""The Litany of Islands, the Rosary of Archipelagos": Caribbean and Pacific Archipelagraphy." Pg21

¹¹⁴ Hay, "A Phenomenology of Islands." Pg27

This is most obvious in *Robinson Crusoe*, a novel that compresses centuries of linear development of European civilisation into just twenty-eight years of island inhabitation. But, it can also be found in more contemporary examples (Figure 14). Mark Wattney, the stranded astronaut of Ridley Scott's 2015 science-fiction film *The Martian*, not only entertains himself with the difficult problems of survival and *beginning again*, where icons of the past (potatoes intended for Thanksgiving) are literal seeds for his future survival. Against the backdrop of an inhospitable and seemingly empty island-planet, his fortuitous return to Earth and escape from imminent death also makes him a 'survival instructor' for future generations. As the film's title suggests, Wattney is a foreign body in a foreign landscape. His ability to deduce, calculate and rationalise means the prospect of homecoming is not a reward for good Christian faith (as it was for Crusoe) but an emblem of masculine heroics and the triumphant logic of Western scientific thought.



Figure 14: Ridley Scott, *The Martian*, 2015. Theatrical release poster. Scott Free Productions, Kinberg Genre and TSG Entertainment. Distributed by 20th Century Fox. Image courtesy of <https://www.foxmovies.com/>

The castaway figure, whether their island is Earth-bound or not, produces the island as a background for 'the enactment of a male and heroic tribute to colonialism'.¹¹⁵ British academic Dianne Loxley argues that the proliferation of island-adventure novels in the nineteenth century is 'central to the indoctrination of young British boys into the emerging ideologies of masculine British nationalism and colonialism'.¹¹⁶ And arguably, the narrative transformation into contemporary films like *The Martian*, *Castaway*, and television shows like *Lost* or *Survivor: Redemption Island*, demonstrates this enduring ideology in the Western psyche. More than just subjects of territory, sovereignty and imperial control, islands are both mirror and frame to a Western sense of self; 'this isolation from the world, this want of outward attraction, throw man back again upon himself...'¹¹⁷

The utopian subject within island literature is less theoretically fleshed out, perhaps unsurprisingly. Often those who seek the freedoms of utopia end up in the prisons of dystopia, thus producing a similar narrative trajectory to that of the castaway. The desire to 'return', to go 'home', is quickly snapped back into order once the subject is confronted by any number of moral, physical or psychological obstructions to settlement:

Under the palms, [one is] more or less guaranteed to encounter atavism, primitive reversion, cannibal appetites, and primordial blood lust. Neighbours, if any, tend to be unreliable, since islands are consistently the home to mutineers (Pitcairn, Cocos), wreckers (Anegada, Stroma), "savages" of one description or another (New Guinea, The Marquesas, Tierra del Fuego), and, of course, pirates, those great enemies of humanity...¹¹⁸

Perhaps what is clearer, then, is the utopian propensity of an island; it is not the subject who is utopian but the island itself. Gillis writes, 'It is no accident that *Utopia* is an island. Islands emerged [at the time of writing] as a privileged element of the new malleable geography that

¹¹⁵ Godfrey Baldacchino, "Editorial: The Island Lure," *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business* 9, no. 4 (2010). P374

¹¹⁶ DeLoughrey, "'The Litany of Islands, the Rosary of Archipelagoes': Caribbean and Pacific Archipelagraphy." Pg22

¹¹⁷ Lowenthal. Pg205

¹¹⁸ Graham Burnett, "On the Monstrosity of Islands," *Cabinet* Summer 2010. Pg90

could be reconstructed and reshaped to suit the aims of specific political projects.¹¹⁹ While the island utopias of earlier centuries were imagined as Edenic arcadias or lands of the Cockaigne, the political and social utopias from More onwards were 'man-made' islands, the product of human imagination and labour.¹²⁰ More's *Utopia*, after all, was originally a peninsula until King Utopos severed it from the mainland.¹²¹

In his article *On the Monstrosity of Islands*, American author and academic Graham Burnett manages to capture the utopian island contradiction. He asks:

What about those "happy isles"? Are there edenic islands? In principle, yes. But in practice they turn out to be uniformly as illusory as that dogged "no place" lying nascent in the etymology of *u-topia*.¹²²

And what about the promise of an earthier sort of paradise? Yes, great sex gets offered on some important islands (Aiaia, Tahiti, Capri, Hawaii, etc.), but then there's nearly always some serious mourning in the morning (seeing all your friends turned into pigs; contemplating the demise of "natural man"; reckoning with Tiberius in his madness; witnessing the murder of Captain Cook).¹²³ (Refer to Figure 15)

Here, Burnett argues for the futility of sex within the island genre. More significant, though, is the suggested futility of sex and the impossibility of regeneration. As that bit of earth that has 'broken faith with the terrestrial world',¹²⁴ the literary island has come to characterise both an experimental utopian order – where continuing regeneration doesn't appear to be a primary concern – and the genetic equivalent of a cul-de-sac – reinforced by concepts of primitivisation, endemism, cannibalism and incest. The solitary self who, 'delivered from all

¹¹⁹ Gillis, "Taking History Offshore: Atlantic Islands in European Minds, 1400-1800." Pg26

¹²⁰ Ibid. Pg25

¹²¹ Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. Paul Turner, Great Ideas (London: Penguin Books, 2009). Pg47

¹²² Burnett. Pg90

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

earthly passions the tumult of social life engenders', simply cannot settle the island if there is no possibility of life beyond himself.¹²⁵



Figure 15: John Webber, *The Death of Captain Cook*, 1784. Francesco Bartolozzi (engraver) and William Byrne (engraver). Engraving, 50.3 x 60.4cm. From the collection of the National Portrait Gallery

It is not just the solo male figure who is the subject of impossible regeneration. There are the limits of kinship, too, that create obstacles to more permanent forms of settlement; 'the decision to call an island uninhabited is always a cultural choice. It marks out what forms of life are felt as kin by the dominant speaker; it sweeps aside all other classes of life.'¹²⁶ In her essay *Island Bounds*, British critic and academic Gillian Beer says, 'reproduction, the possible and the impossible relations between different tribes, species and individuals, is fraught in fiction, in travel narratives and in nineteenth century natural history. Islands concentrate such

¹²⁵ Lowenthal. Pg205

¹²⁶ Gillian Beer, "Island Bounds," in *Islands in History and Representation*, ed. Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith (New York; London: Routledge, 2003). Pg40

questions with often tragic intensity.¹²⁷ It is a question of boundaries – geographic, genetic, moral, temporal – that underpins kinship and determines whether an island might be more meaningfully and purposefully settled.¹²⁸ These boundaries, manufactured or happenstance, means the protagonist and the reader explores the island and the ‘island bounds of the book but never can be its permanent inhabitants or establish there a founding population.’¹²⁹

To summarise the ideas presented here is to conclude that the island remains ideologically un-settled. Castaways and utopians, whether reinstating new or old-world orders, are fundamentally inhibited in their abilities to procreate, regenerate and settle, and thus frame the island as a temporary location. Furthermore, this temporariness builds a schema of the island as an experimental location. There is a traceable history of islands imagined and used as experimental sites. First, there is the narration of Europe’s island ‘discoveries’, where the landscape is treated as a curiosity or perceived of as an ‘isolated and contained laboratory.’¹³⁰ These real island experiences not only confounded and challenged the European biblical conception of the world, prompting a greater shift in European thought towards the sciences, the islands and islanders themselves were quite literally the subjects of study. The archipelagos of the Atlantic and Caribbean, ‘became the first spaces of colonial experimentation in terms of sugar production, deforestation, the importation of indentured and enslaved labour, and the establishment of the plantocracy.’¹³¹ Then there is the recreation of the island laboratory within island literature, such as the biological and pathological horrors of *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) or the sinister military ‘Operation Black Star’ foisted upon the Orkney island community of *Greenvoe* (1972).¹³² And finally, within a recent history, the French and US nuclear testing (Bikini Atoll) and toxic-waste dumping in the Pacific (Marshall Islands) demonstrates an enduring ideology towards islands as both the beginnings and endings of continental civilisation. These islands, these ‘museums

¹²⁷ Ibid. P39

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ DeLoughrey, ""The Litany of Islands, the Rosary of Archipelagoes": Caribbean and Pacific Archipelagraphy." Pg27

¹³¹ "Island Ecologies and Caribbean Literatures." Pg298

¹³² George Mackay Brown, *Greenvoe: A Novel* (London, UK: Hogarth Press, 1972).

of millennial toxicity' as DeLoughrey describes them, have long served as the 'philosophical and material foci of the fears and desires of continental arrivants.'¹³³

The desire to perceive the island as a bounded and therefore controllable space seems to link writing on islands across the sciences and humanities, connecting the most fantastic of island utopias with the most careful of scientific treatises. Yet this very desire repeatedly serves to highlight the aspect of contingency inherent in both literary and scientific experiment. Islands are not pure: they are subject to breaching and incursion, both natural and cultural.¹³⁴

As Edmond and Smith describe, perhaps what is most striking about these unfulfilled attempts to settle the island, is the fortunate amnesia surrounding the castaway's or utopian's arrival. Islands, it appears, are both deeply isolated and deeply susceptible to invasion.¹³⁵ It seems, rather paradoxically, the 'narrative of island isolation is constituted by these visitors.'¹³⁶

DEPARTURE

In *The Island Lure*, Baldacchino has traced a number of overlapping historic and theoretical influences that have shaped islands over the course of Western history – both the study and experience of real islands and the island genre. His words on the subject warrant transcription here, in full:

First, there is an enduring western tradition – dating back at least to the Odyssey – which has held islands in high esteem, assigning them a key role in the economic, political, and social dimensions of the Mediterranean and then Atlantic worlds, given the way that myth, icon and narratives of/from islands have functioned for mainland cultures... Second, building on the first, but starting at around the European age of

¹³³ DeLoughrey, "Island Ecologies and Caribbean Literatures." Pg303

¹³⁴ Edmond and Smith. Introduction. Pg5

¹³⁵ DeLoughrey, ""The Litany of Islands, the Rosary of Archipelagos": Caribbean and Pacific Archipelagraphy." Pg25

¹³⁶ "Island Ecologies and Caribbean Literatures." Pg301

discovery, is the construction of islands as outposts of aberrant exoticism, peopled by innocent and exuberant natives. Third, is the island as background for the enactment of a male and heroic paean to colonialism, the subject of Robinsonnades that extend up to the present... Fourth, is the development of the notion of going on vacation as a regular activity by the world's burgeoning middle classes: whether for relaxation, adventure or self-discovery, islands project themselves as ideal destinations. Fifth, is the realisation by many developing island states and territories that they can 'sell' their sea, sun and sand (and perhaps sex, but more hopefully their salt) to such visitors, by appealing to their constructed modern need for travel, and thus carve out for themselves an easy route to development. Other attractive, physical and psychological characteristics can be added to the mix – physical separation, jurisdictional specificity, cultural difference, 'getting away from it all', the possibility of claiming an understanding of the totality of the locale as trophy...¹³⁷

What Baldacchino describes not only maps an historical trajectory of island figuration up to present day but the way in which island tropes have been translated into new contexts. Literature, film, tourism and socio-political reform have reinvigorated these tropes within each new generation. Rather than a definitive history or ideological position, Baldacchino demonstrates the persistence of islands as tools, props, locations, backdrops, genres or devices for Western imagining; the way in which the West can come to know itself better.

Islands as imaginative and theoretical motifs, revived and re-imagined by each generation, are tied to a sequence of coming and going. In *Islands in History and Representation*, Smith claims: 'Island encounters constitute primarily a series of arrivals and departures.'¹³⁸ Departure, perhaps, is the most revealing. The act of island departure – whether it is through a well-timed *deus ex machina*, an act of sheer self-determination, or knowing the island was never intended as 'home' in the first instance – expresses a final assertion of power. The sequence of coming and going reinforces the dialectic between a dynamic subject and a static

¹³⁷ Baldacchino, "Editorial: The Island Lure." Pg374

¹³⁸ Vanessa Smith, "Pitcairn's 'Guilty Stock': The Island as Breeding Ground," in *Islands in History and Representation*, ed. Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith (New York; London: Routledge, 2003). Pg116

object; it is the agent of movement who determines the final purpose, function or use of the small island world.

Neither historic nor imaginary figures occupying islands concern themselves with the prospect of producing an island home. As proven earlier, island stories are marked by obstructions to notions of homecoming or settlement in any kind of permanent, regenerative or sustainable manner, and thus fix the island as a short-term location. Even amongst the wealth of popular romance novels that typically chart 'the protagonist's move from a sense of displacement or exile to a strong feeling of belonging', the concept of home remains displaced.¹³⁹ The desire for finding love and finding a home are twinned; 'the happy ending is reached when hero and heroine declare both their mutual love and their shared decision to make the island their home'.¹⁴⁰ A sense of home is thus produced, however, not by way of belonging to the landscape but to each other. From a concrete history of island invasion and colonisation: '...islands were folded into mainland-centered evolutionary narratives'; all that took place on colonial outposts or offshore empires, became 'mere prelude [and afterthought] to continental stories. Reduced to geographical appendages or thought of as belonging to prehistory, islands ceased to be primary destinations.'¹⁴¹ To the imagined histories and narratives of island occupation: 'Castaways come and go: the triumph of most island fiction is, after all is said and done, to leave the island. These sojourners sail back to Naples, or England, or Africa. They go home...'¹⁴² The island remains a landscape imagined and produced as a short-term location, book-ended by rituals of arrival and departure.

The importance of visualising island departure is articulated in an early-twentieth century image by Australian photographer Frank Hurley: [*Thirteen men on Elephant Island wave farewell to Sir Ernest Shackleton, Frank Worsley, Timothy McCarthy A.B., Tom Crean, Harry McNeish, the carpenter, and Vincent, the boatswain, as they leave for South Georgia, Monday, 24 April*] (1910-1962). Hurley is typically regarded as a documentary photographer but, as Australian historian Julian Thomas describes, within Hurley's work there is an 'element of

¹³⁹ Crane and Fletcher. Pg645

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. Pg646

¹⁴¹ Gillis, "Island Sojourns." Pg281

¹⁴² Beer. Pg42

showmanship: as a photographer and writer he was most interested in a dramatically telling image or story, and he had no qualms about altering his materials to heighten their effect.'¹⁴³



Figure 16: Frank Hurley, [*Thirteen men on Elephant Island wave farewell to Sir Ernest Shackleton, Frank Worsley, Timothy McCarthy A.B., Tom Crean, Harry McNeish, the carpenter, and Vincent, the boatswain, as they leave for South Georgia, Monday, 24 April*], 1910-1962. Film negative, 11.5 x 16cm. From the collection of the National Library of Australia

The image in question (Figure 16) has been published under a number of different titles or captions for a number of different contexts, across a fifty-year period: the arrival of Sir Ernest Shackleton – "'All safe! All well!' August 30, 1916. "We tried to cheer, but excitement had gripped our vocal chords"; the rescue of Sir Ernest Shackleton – "Suspense was over. The vessel, which proved to be the Chilean trawler "Yelcho", hove to and a boat was dropped for the shore. Ringing cheers greeted its approach"; and the departure of James Caird for South Georgia – "The departure from Elephant Island".¹⁴⁴ Hurley not only changed the meaning of

¹⁴³ Julian Thomas, "Showman: The Photography of Frank Hurley," (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1990). Pg1

¹⁴⁴ "'All safe! All well!' August 30, 1916. "We tried to cheer, but excitement had gripped our vocal chords", in Shackleton's *South*, 1919, facing Pg240; "Suspense was over. The vessel, which proved to be the Chilean trawler "Yelcho", hove to and a boat was dropped for the

the image through re-titling and re-contextualisation, he altered the image itself. Variations in clouds between Figure 16 and Figure 17, illustrate a composite darkroom technique where two negatives are combined to create a new image. Hurley's willingness to bend the meaning and construction of his images demonstrates how the photograph was adapted according to a narrative need, one that upholds the heroics of European exploration in the Antarctic. The same image, across a variety of contexts, is used to illustrate island arrival, island rescue and island departure.



Figure 17: Frank Hurley, *A boat was lowered for the shore, ringing cheers greeted its approach, a terrible chapter in our lives was drawing to a close*, 1910-1962. Film negative, 11.5 x 15.5cm. From the collection of the National Library of Australia

shore. Ringing cheers greeted its approach", in *Argonauts of the south*, 1925, facing Pg 279; "The departure from Elephant Island" in *Endurance: an epic of polar adventure* by Frank Arthur Worsley, London: Philip Allan & Co., 1931, facing Pg 95; from: Frank Hurley, *[Thirteen Men on Elephant Island Wave Farewell to Sir Ernest Shackleton, Frank Worsley, Timothy McCarthy A.B., Tom Crean, Harry Mcneish, the Carpenter, and Vincent, the Boatswain, as They Leave for South Georgia, Monday, 24 April 1916]*, From 1916 to 1952. National Library of Australia Collection ID: 1614852

It is not just the subject who willingly chooses departure. The island itself can assert its primordial powers through mechanisms of death: 'Few men who come to islands leave them; they grow grey where they alighted; the palm shades and the trade-winds fan them till they die, perhaps cherishing to the last the fancy of returning home.'¹⁴⁵ Díaz describes a similar conviction. That is, if islands can be both paradise and prison, 'it is because they are bordered by death on all sides.'¹⁴⁶ He continues, 'flagged by finitude, an island narrates an escape from death, yet death is precisely that which makes escaping from an island impossible.'¹⁴⁷ *Love for an Island*, written by West Indian author and activist Phyllis Shand Allfrey, vividly depicts death as an act of island reclamation whereby the island of Dominica pries itself from the possessive grip of male colonists. In her portrayal of their islomania, she says: 'Their passion drives them to perpetuation / they dig, they plant, they build and they aspire / to the eternal landmark; when they die / the forest covers up their set desire'.¹⁴⁸ The geography of the island is seen to resist the permanent 'footprint' of colonial desire. Allfrey inverts island time, that which tends to negatively cast an island as pre-modern, ahistorical or pure Nature, to become the ultimate judge of its own fate. 'Science and technology, the general means by which continental visitors conquer and suppress island landscapes,' writes Deloughrey, are made 'ineffective against the actively resistant tropical landscape.'¹⁴⁹ Edmond and Smith, too, describe island reclamation but as a broader concept of resistance:

Islands appear to hold out this prospect of something static, unmixed and singular. In fact, they have always been places of arrival and departure, the location of hybrid cultures, as storms, shipwrecks, unplanned landfalls, and incomplete or abandoned settlement produce ever-changing worlds. If the island has often been simplified and

¹⁴⁵ Robert Louis Stevenson quoted by Daniel Bedggood, "Regarding Islands: A Review of Rod Edmond and Vaness Smith (Ed.S) *Islands in History and Representation*," *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 31-32 (April 2004). Pg1

¹⁴⁶ Díaz. Pg85

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Phyllis Allfrey, "Love for an Island," *Caribbean Beat: 25th Anniversary*, no. 10 (Summer 1994). Accessed 13 September 2017

¹⁴⁹ DeLoughrey, ""The Litany of Islands, the Rosary of Archipelagos": Caribbean and Pacific Archipelagraphy." Pg32-33

mythologized by continental cultures nostalgia for some aboriginal condition, the island itself refuses this continental need or desire.¹⁵⁰

If the island is simply a landfall between oceanic states – that is, a moment of singularity or clarity amongst an otherwise illegible or chaotic expanse – then short-term island encounter can be understood as a catalyst. The island is a moment of or location for transformation. It is the last occasion our subjects, be they Cook or Crusoe, might be radically transformed: ‘I want to find out who I am when I’m there on the island. Don’t you know. If you don’t step outside yourself, you’ll never discover who you are.’¹⁵¹ Evidence of this idea has been physically manifested over the course of Western history. Not only have ‘centuries of quasi-monastic retreat’¹⁵² manufactured islands as transcendent and transformative locales, this logic has also been applied to island prisons and penal colonies:

...the purpose of some insular prisons was not merely punitive, it was also redemptive... In line with the pedagogy of Crusoe and Rousseau, men corrupted in the industrial cesspits of Europe would be redeemed by immersion in primeval purity. Tilling the soil on these remote and isolated islands would render criminals virtuous.¹⁵³

A contemporary translation of this idea is most obviously expressed in the pictorial and verbal fantasies of island tourism. In *The Island and the Islander*, Ronström decodes representations of ‘the island’ and ‘the islander’ in tourist brochures of Gotland, printed from 1975-2015. His analysis of images and language used to sell the island as a destination, draws on all threads of ‘islandness’ mapped thus far. Images of unpopulated interior landscapes present the island as empty, a *tabulae rasae*; coasts, shores and beaches also dominate, stressing the island edge as reminder of its remote and distinct location and calls upon the performative geography of the island encounter; language that positions the island as remote yet accessible (by water or air), transforms the banality of visitation into the specialized ritual of pilgrimage; and, with an emphasis on ‘difference’, ‘distinctiveness’ and ‘uniqueness’ the island becomes

¹⁵⁰ Edmond and Smith. Introduction. Pg12

¹⁵¹ Jose Saramago quoted by Gillis, "Island Sojourns." Pg284

¹⁵² David Lowenthal, "Islands, Lovers, and Others," *ibid.* Pg205

¹⁵³ *Ibid.* Pg215

an endemic location beyond the homogeneity of mainland life and order.¹⁵⁴ The figures who are found to populate the images of Gotland's tourist brochures are predominantly tourists themselves. If an islander should appear, they occupy either the role of the servant – the waiter, the driver, the pilot or the owner/operator of the tourism enterprise on sale; the role of the athlete, which Ronström asserts as a kind of primitivisation; or the artisan – another version of primitivisation, this time an emblem of continuing traditional practices and unusual cultural habits.¹⁵⁵

In 2016, American film director James Cameron was featured in a 100% Pure New Zealand online campaign, advertising the South Island to potential tourists (Figure 18). Cameron and his wife, Suzy Amis Cameron, were filmed over the course of four days, journeying through major landscape destinations such as the Tasman Glacier, Dart River Canyon and Blanket Bay.¹⁵⁶ The visual metaphors of the campaign replicate Ronström's findings: all landscapes are presented empty, unpopulated and 'pristine'; the only people featured are tourists – Cameron and his family; all tracking shots are stabilized and centered on Cameron's body which not only visually performs first-person perspective, rendering all other family members as mere appendages to his personal journey, but centers the male body as the dynamic subject of movement; and, Cameron is shown to record the landscape through photography – a reenactment of the panoramic gaze and imperial procedures of documentation we now recognize from a history of colonial island encounter. Ronström's brochures and Cameron's 'thrill of discovery',¹⁵⁷ demonstrate the enduring metaphoric use of islands as locations for transformation, particularly personal transformation. Not only do these campaigns clearly portray the desires and fantasies of the individual tourist – such as journeying, pilgrimage, curiosity, discovery and escape – the islands themselves appear to rely on deeply founded tropes in order to sell their sand, soil and services.

¹⁵⁴ Author's own notes. Owe Ronström, "The Island and the Islander" (paper presented at the Niss(i)ology and Utopia: back to the roots of Island Studies, Lesbos, GR, 23-17 May 2016 2016).

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ 100% Pure New Zealand, "James Cameron in 100% Pure New Zealand," (2016). Accessed 13 September 2017

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. 1:07secs



Figure 18: (Still) *James Cameron in 100% Pure New Zealand*, 2016. Online tourism campaign, 100% Pure New Zealand, 1min 36 secs. Image courtesy of Tourism New Zealand.

<https://www.newzealand.com/int/feature/james-cameron-new-zealand/>

If we return our thoughts to the subject of island departure we recognize the persistence of islands as tools and motifs in the mind of the West. Having looked at Europe's island encounters across the Indian, Pacific and Atlantic oceans, the moral principles within the first-person, island-set narrative, and the visual and linguistic emphasis on island tropes within tourism, we can conclude that the island departed is not the island known. Neither island nor islander are at the centre of island encounters marked by the arrival and departure:

One can read a system of heterotopology in the ideological construction of anticipated island landfall... the cast array of artistic and literary depictions of island topoi, shipwrecks, and contact with "Indians" which dominated the European imagination. Like orientalism, a system of islandism was constructed less through contact with others than through complex textual exchange between Europeans.¹⁵⁸

As DeLoughrey writes, it is not the object but the subject who is at the centre of these encounters. Islands are both a model and methodology for the West to comprehend itself; 'the image of the island was one of humanity's initial means of thinking about its place in the world and the cosmos.'¹⁵⁹ It appears as if the geography, today, is still 'simply too gripping;

¹⁵⁸ DeLoughrey, "'The Litany of Islands, the Rosary of Archipelagoes': Caribbean and Pacific Archipelagraphy." Pg32

¹⁵⁹ Gillis, "Island Sojourns." Pg275

the island image too powerful to discard; the opportunity to 'play God' on/for an island too tantalizing to resist.¹⁶⁰ The transformation from mythological geography to tourist destination, and its multiplicity of forms between, confirms Gillis' principal statement: 'Western culture not only thinks about islands, but thinks *with* them.'¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Godfrey Baldacchino, "Editorial: Islands - Objects of Representation," *Geografiska Annaler* 87, no. 4 (2005). Pg247

¹⁶¹ Gillis, *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World*. Introduction. Pg1

CHAPTER TWO – NOW HERE IS LAND

The sequence of island encounter, as outlined in Chapter One, is an observed framework for analysing island-bound historical, theoretical and creative literature. This same encounter is also visible in works of contemporary art. As this chapter will demonstrate through the example of *Nowhereisland*, the established tropes and sequences of island encounter can move beyond the linguistic realm and be re-enacted and revived within the visual, spatial and experiential realms of contemporary art. It is surprising to think that an island would be encountered in such a similar fashion, given that artists can choose from myriad forms, representations or concepts observed within the bounds of contemporary art. However, as *Nowhereisland* proves in its strict adherence to the sequence of dreaming to departure, there is an inherited legacy to island approach and good reason to analyse a work of contemporary art under a framework observed and transposed from literature.

NOWHEREISLAND

Nowhereisland was a 2012 artistic project by British artist Alex Hartley, an artwork that grew from the proposition: what if an Arctic island travelled south?¹⁶² The project has its roots in a 2004 Cape Farewell expedition Hartley made to the High Arctic region of Svalbard. There, he sought out, discovered, claimed, mapped and subsequently named an island that had been recently revealed by a retreating glacier. The original name endorsed by the Norwegian Polar Institute for this floating patch of moraine was Nyskjaeret; a translation from the Norwegian *ny* meaning 'new' and *skjer* meaning 'skerry' or 'islet' (Figure 19).¹⁶³ Seven years later Hartley returned to his discovered island. On September 20th 2011 he sailed Nyskjaeret across international waters whereupon it became the world's newest island nation – *Nowhereisland*.

During its year-long status as an island nation *Nowhereisland* journeyed over 4,000kms, visiting the ports and harbours of the south west coast of England. Always in line-of-sight, the island was also accompanied by an on-shore mobile Embassy. The campervan-cum-mobile-

¹⁶² Claire Doherty et al., "Nowhereisland in Review," (Situations, December 2012). Pg5

¹⁶³ Letter from the Norwegian Polar Institute. Dated 2 June 2006. Alex Hartley, *Nowhereisland* (London: Victoria Miro, 2015). Pg79

museum was publically accessible unlike the island itself. Here, people were invited to become citizens of *Nowhereisland* and contribute to the nation's online constitution. Over the course of the project *Nowhereisland* accrued 23,003 citizens, drawn from 135 countries worldwide. And, it accumulated nearly 2,700 constitutional submissions created and voted upon by its citizens. Under the Artists Taking the Lead project, funded by Arts Council England and produced by Situations (UK), *Nowhereisland* was commissioned for the 2012 London Cultural Olympiad. As a visiting island, 'in search of its people' – resting off the coast of England and with citizenship open to all – *Nowhereisland* epitomised the host-nation/visiting-nation dynamic of its Olympic setting.¹⁶⁴

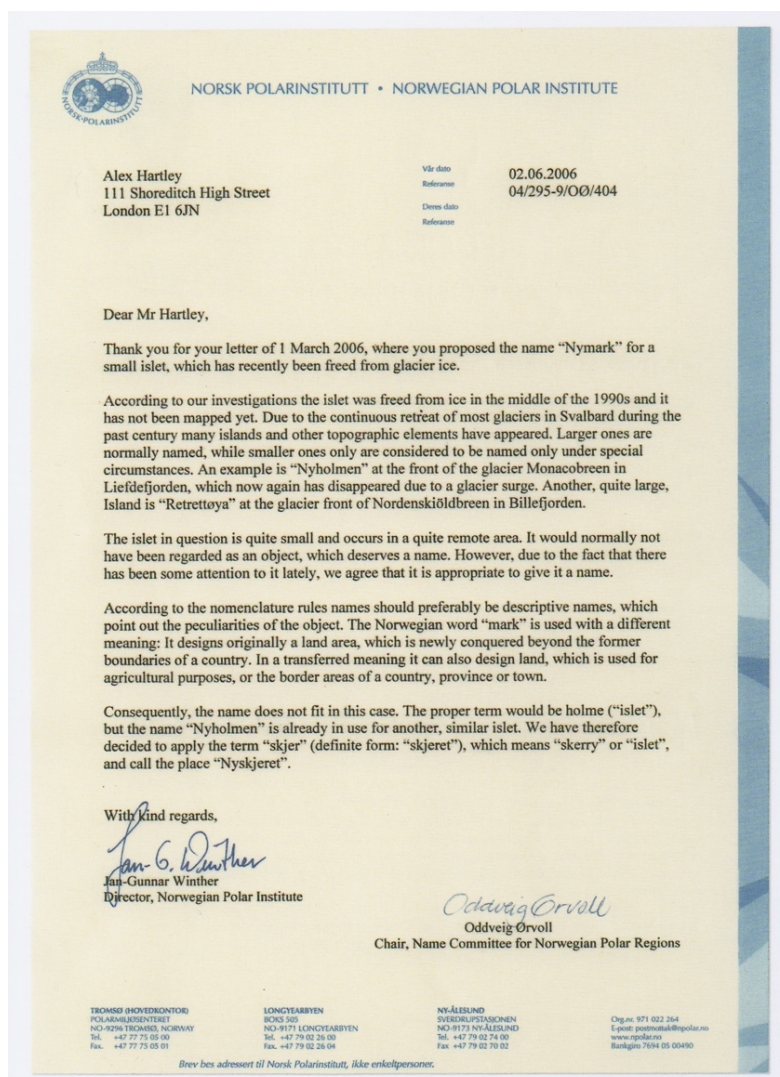


Figure 19: Naming of island confirmation letter, Norwegian Polar Institute, 2 June 2006. Image courtesy of *Nowhereisland*, 2015. London, Victoria Miro, p79

¹⁶⁴ Rachel Cooke, "Alex Hartley: The World Is Still Big - Review," *The Guardian* Sunday 27 November 2011.

Despite *Nowhereisland* being a well-funded,¹⁶⁵ highly-visible¹⁶⁶ public artwork, it drew almost no critical reception. One exception is *'Not for us what can be dreamed or imagined, described or spoken of': Alex Hartley's Nowhereisland and the 'Im-possible' of the Olympics*, a 2013 essay by British academic Marilena Zaroulia. Beyond this, however, the project was marked more by popular opinion than critical review. Early media coverage tracked the financial and organisational development of the project, not all of which was favourable. Much of this early tabloid scepticism was focused on the excesses of Arts Council England funding within an austerity-gripped Britain.¹⁶⁷ Then, as the work became more publically active and travelled from port to port along the Southwestern coast of England, this scepticism was replaced by narrative-driven publicity. Although there is a wealth of public material concerning the project, a lot of which is generated by producers or participants of the project, there remains a dearth of critical analysis from those outside or independent of its creation.¹⁶⁸

Nowhereisland deserves a critical response. It is a deeply conceptual, high profile, year-long artwork, shaped by collaboration on all fronts. Not only was the project produced by a team of specialists in international law, environmental and political campaigning, human migration,

¹⁶⁵ The 2012 'Nowhereisland in Review' Situations report describes the project having been awarded £520,000 from the Arts Council England, with an additional income and in-kind support to the value of £356,000 (Pg8). The project was supported by the University of the West of England, Bristol; Bloomberg; Nicky Wilson Jupiter Artland; the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the Royal Norwegian Embassy and Yellowbrick Tracking.

¹⁶⁶ As a nomadic and non-ticketed artwork, calculating the total audience participation and attendance is near-impossible. However, the 2012 'Nowhereisland in Review' report offers the following consolidated figures: 19,600 people saw the island off-shore, 10,000 people visited the Embassy, 10,953 people actively engaged in educational events and workshop sessions, 23,003 people became citizens, 144,034 people made unique visits to the *Nowhereisland* website over the course of the year. (Pg27) Similarly, the project inspired 82 independent creative responses, attracted and commissioned 52 esteemed thinkers to produce new written, audio and visual works, and forged 42 regional partnerships to deliver 161 engagement sessions (Pg6-7).

¹⁶⁷ Lee Moran, "Artist Gets £500,000 of Taxpayers' Money to Transport Vast Lump of Arctic Rock... And Take It on a Coastal Tour of Britain," *Daily Mail Australia* 22 September 2011.

¹⁶⁸ Criticality is fundamental to the *Nowhereisland* Resident Thinkers program. In this sense, there are 52 unique responses – audio, film, written and visual work – that address and investigate the fundamental concepts of the project. However, these residents were commissioned and, therefore, their perspective is part of the production of the work. These responses don't reflect a criticality against the project itself.

anthropology and psychology, it was made in collaboration with its audiences too.¹⁶⁹ The scope of the project is big: financially, spatially, temporally and metaphorically. It was designed to foster public engagement and stir critical thinking around significant social, environmental and political ideas, such as migration, citizenship in the twenty-first century, political inaction concerning climate change, political efficacy, and it was a prompt for its participants and audiences to think about how else they might live.

The difficulty in responding to *Nowhereisland* lies with its mercurial nature. It is not a work to be understood through traditional methods of analysis – such as garnering meaning from its formal qualities or the supremacy of visual engagement buried within the ‘I-like’ response. If we momentarily return to Grant Kester’s essay *Dialogic Aesthetics*, we recognise his call for a new methodology of critical assessment:

...Littoral works are criticized for being "unaesthetic" or are attacked for needlessly suppressing "visual gratification". Because the critic is unable to gain any sensory stimulation or fails to find the material in the work personally engaging it is dismissed as "failed" art... Ken Johnson of *Art in America* coined the term "post-retinal" [in application to these kinds of works] ...Although Johnson intended this term as a mild pejorative, I feel it is quite useful in capturing the ways in which many Littoral projects challenge the tendency of contemporary visual art to function primarily on the level of sensation.¹⁷⁰

Nowhereisland is an excellent example of Kester’s arguments. It moves between categories of artistic theory – from land art to relational aesthetics. It is a multi-faceted, multi-disciplinary work with variable meanings and outcomes produced by a variety of audiences; the project connects with different artistic genealogies at different stages of development. It might be read as a sculpture; the ‘floating island’ of *Nowhereisland* is a construction of real material from the Arctic. And, its mainland mobile Embassy features an archival collection of objects, photographs, documents and films.¹⁷¹ The work ‘unfolds over time’, making it a

¹⁶⁹ “Origins”, Embassy. "Nowhereisland," Situations, <http://nowhereisland.org/>

¹⁷⁰ Kester. Pg4

¹⁷¹ Doherty et al. Pg10

durational work.¹⁷² *Nowhereisland* unfolds over space too (as demonstrated in Figure 20); the nomadic island moves ‘across locations, towed by a tugboat, accruing different meanings in different contexts’.¹⁷³ Under the traditions of land art it might be considered an intervention; ‘a geological displacement of material’.¹⁷⁴ The work is also participatory. Its final form includes the words and images of others, where audiences ‘speak back’ through its open citizenry and constitution, as well as the more formalized Resident Thinkers program.¹⁷⁵ Hartley’s practice itself is seen to shift too – from photographic and sculptural work produced within a studio, to the realms of social engagement and public participation. This casts *Nowhereisland* as a post-studio public artwork. And finally, the project is utopian. *Nowhereisland* is ‘a conceptual nation involving thousands of people across the world shaping that nation’s values and principles online.’¹⁷⁶ Its open constitution jostles with real concerns about new or alternative social and political structures; it proposes a new shape for a nation-state in the twenty-first century.



Figure 20: *Nowhereisland* visiting Mevagissey, 2012. Image courtesy of the artist. <http://www.alexhartley.net/nowhereisland>

172 Ibid.

173 Ibid.

174 Ibid.

175 Ibid.

176 Ibid.

The fact that *Nowhereisland* traverses a number of disciplines and genealogies opens the project up to an alternative method of analysis. The work can be examined by way of its own narrative: the concept of island encounter. To look closely at the way in which the island is approached, encountered, departed, and hence used, is to make use of a narrative found within the work itself. The following assessment then is based on the concept of island approach, defined by a sequence from dreaming to departure. In using this methodology, we not only observe an enduring attitude towards islands and their history of use (real and imaginative), but also circumvent restrictive categories of art history and theory, and avoid the kind of criticism that Kester describes as limited to binaries of success or failure.

DREAMING

When Alex Hartley set out on the 2004 Cape Farewell Expedition, aboard the 150ft Dutch schooner *Noorderlicht*, his quest was to find and claim a new island.¹⁷⁷ Calling upon the customs of nineteenth century exploration, particularly of the Arctic, Hartley's quest was embedded in the traditions of island discovery – finding an unmarked territory and *tabulae rasae* suitable for claim and inscription of ideas. Passages of Hartley's diary, written during the expedition, enact the posture, language and rituals of early exploration of the region. He narrates his journey towards the seemingly apolitical landscape of the North, another geography steeped in mythological imagining. Figure 21, taken by British photographer David Bickerstaff aboard the *Noorderlicht*, visually captures this pursuit. Another crew member, British artist Tania Kovats, describes it:

Polar stories often seem to cross over each other, like the lines on a white chopping board. In the nineteenth century, the blank space on the map in the polar regions was literally empty space. This made for a more complex form of Western colonial expansion than in other parts of the globe. There were no peoples, lands or identified raw materials to conquer and claim in this frozen no-man's land; this was an aesthetic conquering, a quest for masculinity, heroism and identity. A quest that was tied to

¹⁷⁷ Alex Hartley, "2004 Expedition Blog - Day 11," Cape Farewell, <http://www.capefarewell.com/2004/2004blog/day-11.html>

nationalistic agendas and even scientific enquiries, but which was carried out in the abstract territory of the blank white space... There isn't a simple geographical or political definition of its territory, but we understand that the North Pole has a magnetism both real and in the imagination.¹⁷⁸



Figure 21: David Bickerstaff, *Nyskjaeret*, 2011. Image courtesy of the artist <https://www.flickr.com/photos/atomictv/sets/72157627731574633/>

For Hartley, the North is an alluring landscape in both its mythological properties and as a landscape under threat. It is the disappearing face of climate change. In his essay *The Archive of Ice*, Burnett looks to the Denver-based National Ice Core Laboratory – a centre for the largest repository of archived ancient ice on the planet – as an emblem of both human ingenuity and fault. On his experience of the centre he writes, ‘the visitor stands in this room (though not for very long, since it is *extremely* cold) in the presence of more than ten miles of deep time...’¹⁷⁹ Ice, and the north, it seems traps this temporal quality. Like Tania Kovats earlier description, we imagine millennia, prehistory and the future in the ‘millions upon

¹⁷⁸ Tania Kovats, “Nowhere”, *Nowhereisland*. Pg29

¹⁷⁹ Graham Burnett, "The Archive of Ice," *Cabinet*Fall 2015. Pg97

millions of little slivers of compressed snow – preserved slips of all the winters the earth has seen in the last five hundred thousand years.¹⁸⁰ Burnett continues:

A great deal of what we now think we know about the changing climate of our planet hails from these transparent bars of ancient water. And it is testimony to how rapidly that climate is changing that a number of the cores came from glaciers that no longer exist. The keepers of the archive of ice have, of necessity, gone to great lengths to ensure redundancy upon redundancy in their refrigeration capacity... since there is ice in this freezer that cannot now be replaced.¹⁸¹

Hartley's movement towards the north is propelled by this twin drive. Not only is it a quest for new territory and the utopian potential of a new nation, Hartley's untouched island can *only* appear on his horizon as the physical evidence of a changing climate. On the 15th of September 2004, under his diary entry titled *SEARCH*, he makes this lure evident:

I find myself monitoring the coastline, watching and checking it against the latest maps and charts: searching for the possibility of new land that might have been revealed from within a retreating glacier. In many places, the charts do not match what I am seeing. Massive glacial retreat has created a changed landscape.

Days are passing. We are over three-quarters of the way through our expedition and as yet there is no sign of the imagined island for which I am searching.¹⁸²

Hartley's island encounter isn't left to happenstance, he is seeking it out. Clare Doherty, Director of Situations, describes the 2004 Cape Farewell expedition as 'a deliberate act of colonisation.'¹⁸³ This sentiment is repeated on multiple occasions: the Embassy section of the *Nowhereisland* website, the 2012 Situations report 'Nowhereisland in Review' and Hartley's own 2015 publication *Now Here is Land*. Hartley not only sought out 'an uncharted island, somewhere no human had stood before', his desire to possess such a landscape was

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Hartley, *Nowhereisland*. Pg41

¹⁸³ Clare Doherty, Foreword. Ibid. Pg11

fundamental to the premise of his first expedition.¹⁸⁴ This pursuit, made visible as a driving curiosity for an unknown, unexplored, uncharted territory, is presented as an 'enduring creative impulse'.¹⁸⁵

To twin a creative drive with the pleasures of curiosity is problematic. In the past, it has eased the moral path of colonisation; the eighteenth and nineteenth century British exploration of Australia has been observed to be prompted by 'a rage for curiosity'.¹⁸⁶ 'Historically, curiosity has been a double-edged sword – both a vice and virtue, a mark of civilization and a tell-tale sign of ignorance,' writes Australian curator Lisa Slade.¹⁸⁷ The curiosity quest for knowledge has historically served as a positive proposition, mystifying the pursuit and possession of islands, countries, peoples, goods and resources all over the world. To conflate curiosity with creativity not only pardons Hartley's act, particularly as the sanctioned boundaries of contemporary art prove elastic and forgiving, but it is an attribute encouraged. His curiosity is the sign of a healthy inquisitiveness, core to his creative practice, and accepted as the heroic rationale for a pioneering quest into the unknown.

JOURNEY

The island encounter of *Nowhereisland* is marked by five distinct journeys: first, Hartley's 2004 Cape Farewell 'discovery' expedition; second, a retrieval expedition, in 2011, whereupon six tonnes of island excavation crossed international waters and was declared the world's newest nation – *Nowhereisland*; third, the nomadic movement of *Nowhereisland* around the ports and harbors of South-west England; fourth, the fragmentation and dissemination of *Nowhereisland* rock amongst its citizens, via post; and fifth, another act of dispersal whereby Hartley, and collaborator Jay Clement, launched rock and dust from the original Arctic island into the Earth's upper atmosphere. These unique journeys are each

¹⁸⁴ Doherty et al. Pg10

¹⁸⁵ "Art", Embassy, "Nowhereisland". Accessed 8 August 2016.

¹⁸⁶ Richard Anthony John Neville, *A Rage for Curiosity: Visualising Australia 1788 - 1830* (Sydney, NSW: State Library of New South Wales Press, 1997). Pg17

¹⁸⁷ Lisa Slade, "Curiouser and Curiouser", "Curious Colony: A Twenty First Century Wunderkammer," (Newcastle, NSW: Newcastle Region Art Gallery). Pg7

charged with a special set of qualities: isolation and remoteness, distance and transformation, nomadism and context, souvenir-ism and memory, and, finally, the poetics of pioneering.

Clearly, the concept of journeying is fundamental to the project. Not only in Hartley's movements north, towards the island; 'the purpose was to look for new land that had never been stood on, land that did not appear on any map, land that had newly appeared from the great grasp of a retreating glacier.'¹⁸⁸ But in the island's own movements south (Figure 22); 'a few hundred people have gathered on the cliff above Bowleaze Cove overlooking Weymouth to witness the arrival of *Nowhereisland*.'¹⁸⁹ Both movements, towards and away, characterise migration. And as we shall further recognise, the concept of migration was most important to the project once the island had reached British shores.



Figure 22: *Nowhereisland* being towed to Weymouth, UK, 2012. Image courtesy of the artist. <http://www.alexhartley.net/nowhereisland>

A baptismal transformation occurred when the rocky moraine of Nyskjaeret journeyed through international waters, a liminal location unto itself. As the island crossed the threshold

¹⁸⁸ Tania Kovats, "Searching", Hartley, *Nowhereisland*. Pg61

¹⁸⁹ Hartley. Ibid. Pg119

it was untethered from the specifics of location – Svalbard and the reigning Kingdom of Norway – and transformed into a non-place, the utopian artwork of *Nowhereisland*:

Nowhereisland could not be named until it had left territorial waters. It was taken out to a location 80.14.10 N and 10.30.11 E on the 20th September 2011. In this place where there was no land between it and the North Pole, *Nowhereisland* was born and named; its Declaration made. The time, location and date were inscribed onto a rock which was dropped overboard to mark the spot. Most creation myths start in the water. *Nowhereisland* was born in cold salt water out of sight or claim of the rest of the world – nowhere.¹⁹⁰

In line with the established tropes of island time, *Nowhereisland* was not only physically displaced by its removal from the High Arctic, but temporally too. According to Kovats description above, *Nowhereisland* was 'born' from a moment of human inscription; that is, the artist's first mark (or claim). All that is imagined of the nameless island, prior to Hartley's arrival, is an ahistoric landscape; duration without History, the island becomes pure Nature.¹⁹¹ The very premise of utopia, being both out of time and out of place, doubles down on the island as a non-place. The island is set-apart, begun again from the moment of inscription. And utopia, too, has its own form of imprint. As Philip Hoare describes, utopia is the 'punctuation mark in our progress.'¹⁹²

On the subject of Svalbard, British geographer Tim Cresswell considers the concept of migratory rocks from a geographic perspective. 'In the natural world,' he writes, 'a rock out of place is referred to as an 'erratic'.'¹⁹³ It comes from the Latin *errare*, meaning an error. He continues, 'it also means *wanderer* – a nomad with no fixed course... The rocks of Svalbard (the marble, the coal, the bricks, the Royal Doulton pots...) are also erratics, but moved by us – by humans busy journeying and connecting the world.'¹⁹⁴ The migratory rocks, the *erratics*

¹⁹⁰ Kovats. "International Waters", *ibid.* Pg97

¹⁹¹ Díaz. Pg80

¹⁹² Philip Hoare. Extract from *The Power of Islands*. Hartley, *Nowhereisland*. Pg113

¹⁹³ Tim Cresswell, "Nowhereisland: A Project by Alex Hartley," *ArtReview*, no. 56 (January-February 2012). Pg93

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.* Pg93

of *Nowhereisland*, are also the result of human endeavour and labour. Although Hartley inverts the concept of island visitation by bringing the island to the continent, the tropes of island visitation remain. Islands and their inhabitants, as DeLoughrey writes, 'are paradoxically positioned as "contained" and "isolated", yet belie the consistent visitation by colonials, shipwreck, anthropology, and tourism – in fact, the narrative of island isolation depends upon these visitors.'¹⁹⁵

The island of *Nowhereisland* is not only susceptible to continental 'discovery' and visitation, as described by DeLoughrey, the island itself is the visitor. This idea has a long historical pedigree, explained by Alfred W. Crosby in *Ecological Imperialism* as the concept of 'portmanteau biota'.¹⁹⁶ By tracing the movement of plants, animals, and even diseases, across the globe, we trace patterns of imperialism and colonisation; a migration usually to the benefit of those transporting it. Crosby explains:

Europeans crossed the waters to the Canaries, as to the Azores and Madeiras, with a scaled-down simplified version of the biota of Western Europe... This portmanteau biota was crucial to their successes in these island groups and to their successes – and failures – later and elsewhere. Where it "worked", where enough of its members prospered and propagated to create versions of Europe, however incomplete or distorted, Europeans themselves prospered and propagated.

Nowhereisland, as a piece of 'portmanteau biota', flourished too. Despite its foreign-ness and contained remoteness, particularly as there was no public access to the floating emblem throughout its year-long migration; *Nowhereisland* is purposefully brought to mainland England as an *erratic*. Not only is it a scaled-down version of Nyskjaeret, like 'simplified biota' of the Arctic, it is also a scaled-down vision of an ideal nation. As a migratory rock, the island belies its imposed conceptual beginnings – a location no one had previously visited, mapped

¹⁹⁵ DeLoughrey, ""The Litany of Islands, the Rosary of Archipelagoes": Caribbean and Pacific Archipelagraphy." Pg26

¹⁹⁶ Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Pg89

or known. And, was made cosmopolitan; it was a landscape reliant on visitation and marked by mobility and connectedness.¹⁹⁷

CONTACT

On the 20th September 2004, Hartley's expedition journal documents the moment he sets eyes on his yet-to-be-named, prospective island; '...scanning the coastline with binoculars... I climb the mast and from this vantage it is clear that the land formation has sea behind it and is an island. I realise that this is it – this is new land.'¹⁹⁸ In his 'scanning' we recognise McMahon's 'panoramic gaze'; the search for a unit of land which fits within the retina of the approaching eye. Similarly, if we recall Gillis' words – from the vantage point of tall ships islands can be understood at a glance – we recognise a totalizing vision and process of miniaturisation that has dogged islands throughout the centuries. Within the same journal entry, Hartley also describes his own first foot-fall:

A party of seven is formed and sets out toward the island in the Zodiac landing craft. The strangeness of the northern light and the lack of any human touchstone make it impossible to judge scale or distance. The island is much larger than I had first thought and has steep low cliffs between two and three metres high. I wonder if we will be able to beach the boat and make landfall. However, as we round the southern tip, on the side furthest from the Noorderlicht, I am able to step ashore on a rocky black strip of frost-shattered moraine. I am the first human to ever set foot on this island.¹⁹⁹

To temporarily put aside what happens once Hartley makes contact with the island, we will first consider the literary form of the journal. Despite his own expedition occurring in the twenty-first century, Hartley chooses to enact a documentary process characterized by nineteenth century exploration. Certainly, his own records are later translated into an online form – the Cape Farewell expedition blog – but both the journal and blog inhabit the language, posture and, most importantly, diarized compartmentalisation of time as seen in Arctic

¹⁹⁷ Cresswell, "The mobilities of Svalbard". Hartley, *Nowhereisland*. Pg35

¹⁹⁸ Hartley. *Ibid*. Pg65

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*.

expedition journals of the nineteenth century. Hartley's journal describes a persistent nostalgia for first-person, singular narration of history. It demonstrates the dominance of literature – both island-set narratives and records of real islands, a particularly salient choice given Hartley is a visual artist. It also establishes that 'history, at first, is personal.'²⁰⁰ The journal is an important genre to 'narrating isolation'; it is through the 'subjective story, the island enters objective History.'²⁰¹ As Díaz describes, the narration of the island's up-to-that-point 'silent space', turns it into 'an object of language, thus capturing it in a web that supposes a community, a tradition, and an institutional order.'²⁰² The striation of time is another defining feature of the expedition journal, not only as a method of 'beginning again' – where the narration of History and the calendar are imagined to start from the first moment of inscription – but as a method of conceptually inverting island time. From the slow and cyclical seasons, changing tides and migrating birds, to the imported days and weeks of continental visitation, the journal forces an island's 'isolated temporality into the segmentation of a calendar.'²⁰³

Returning now to Hartley's first moment of contact, we see further evidence of historic re-enactment (see Figure 23). Hartley fulfils a desire to anthropologically measure the small and un-named island. Under a journal entry titled *CLAIM*, he writes: 'We plot the island, and record its features. I walk the perimeter.'²⁰⁴ His blog entry, written on the same day, expands on this action:

Our new island was surrounded by a beach on all sides, and could be circumnavigated on foot in roughly ten minutes. The geography of its interior was marvellously varied, with towering mountains (some higher than twenty feet). There were valleys and even a small frozen lake (a member of our group unkindly likened this to a pond, but little notice was taken of his comments).

²⁰⁰ Díaz. Pg80

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ Hartley, *Nowhereisland*. Pg71

We surveyed the island taking longitude and latitude readings for all features and extremities. A cairn was built and in the age-old style, a claim note was placed inside a tin-can and this in turn was inserted into the cairn. The note stated in both English and Norwegian notice of our claim on the newly revealed land. Upon our return to the mainland our new island will be charted and I will submit it for inclusion in all subsequent maps. The land will be named and registered. The name has not yet been finalised, but I feel the most obvious *Alex HartleyLand* may cause some ill feelings amongst my fellow crew members.²⁰⁵



Figure 23: Duncan Campbell, "Landmark Moment: Artist claims sovereignty over new Arctic island", *The Guardian*, 2004. Newspaper clipping. Image courtesy of the artist <http://nowhereisland.org/>

²⁰⁵ Hartley, "2004 Expedition Blog - Day 11". Accessed 4 April 2016

Much like the pattern of journaling where the smooth extension of time is segmented – like the ‘sea is subjected to the grid of the map’²⁰⁶ – the totality of the island, as it is imagined from afar, is quickly fragmented into knowable parts. Cook’s practice of island encounter, to measure and deal with the island methodically, is replicated by Hartley and his crew. Add to that his playful replication of a tin-can claim – a designation of discovery, ownership and possession – and we recognise Hartley’s island destination is as much thematic as it is real. Certainly, Hartley is more tongue-in-cheek than his forebears, as evidenced in his choices of using the expedition journal or performing the empirical rituals of ‘claiming’ and ‘naming’. Despite using the same tools, Hartley distances himself from his artistic and historical precedents, such as Robert Smithson’s *Floating Island to Travel Around Manhattan Island* (1970), by describing *Nowhereisland* as a ‘visiting’ nation.²⁰⁷ And, as the work is enlivened by its new-found citizens, as described in the following SETTLEMENT section, *Nowhereisland* proves to be less an object than a subject of desire.

SETTLEMENT

Prior to *Nowhereisland*’s arrival at Weymouth, UK, Hartley idles over the potential use of his recently-discovered island. Rather tongue-in-cheek he writes, ‘Nothing has yet been ruled out; annexation, independence, tax haven, wild life sanctuary, short let holiday homes or time shares’, calling upon a number of very real use of islands as continental outliers in the twenty-first century.²⁰⁸ The concept of island settlement, however, is more pronounced once the Arctic rocks of Nyskjaeret are transformed into the utopian artwork of *Nowhereisland*.

The *Nowhereisland* Declaration is the nation’s founding document. Aboard the *Noorderlicht* and declared on behalf of its soon-to-be-citizens of the South, the Declaration was read aloud by Hartley, signed by all members of the crew, dated, and signalled with a flare as *Nowhereisland* left the territorial waters of Norway.²⁰⁹ The intentions of settlement are clearly stated:

²⁰⁶ Díaz. Pg80

²⁰⁷ “Introduction”, Embassy “Nowhereisland”.

²⁰⁸ Hartley, “2004 Expedition Blog - Day 11”. Accessed 4 April 2016

²⁰⁹ *Nowhereisland*. Pg95

Nowhereisland seeks to redefine what a nation can be. Nowhereisland embodies the global potential of a new borderless nation, which offers citizenship to all; a space in which all are welcome and in which all have the right to be heard. Nowhereisland's constitution is and will be cumulative and consensual, open to all citizens and subject to change during the nation's lifetime.²¹⁰

Here, the utopianism of *Nowhereisland* is most clearly expressed. In the Whitechapel Gallery compendium, *Utopias*, British academic Richard Noble offers us a provisional definition on the utopian artwork. He says it must produce two fundamental actions. First, the paradoxical push/pull of utopia. That is, the utopian work must offer us an imaginary future-scape where 'the problems that beset our current condition are transcended or resolved.'²¹¹ Within this wishful landscape, we feel the sobering discrepancy between what we don't have and what we wish we did. As German philosopher Ernst Bloch describes it, utopian imagining is an expression of 'the darkness so near.'²¹² The other action Noble points to is its tendency towards the political. Without a political dimension, the utopian artwork quickly transpires into escapism, or worse still, folly.

British sociologist, Ruth Levitas, furthers these initial ideas. In *The Concept of Utopia* she places desire at the heart of utopian strategy. She argues beyond the gluttonous excess of compensatory utopias, for example *The Land of the Cokaygne* or *The English Utopia*, where idealised societies deal with the 'scarcity gap' between wants and satisfactions.²¹³ She also suggests the revolutionary streaks of critical utopias – those that seek to critique the status quo, such as More's *Utopia* or *News from Nowhere* – are mere reaction, built from the failures of the societies that invent them. Rather, if there is a binding definition to the various utopian blueprints and models devised over the course of Western literature, it is that utopia is an education of desire.²¹⁴ In distinction from merely a hopeful or wishful landscape, Levitas

²¹⁰ Hartley, A. et al. "The Declaration", Citizenship, "Nowhereisland". Accessed 4 April 2016

²¹¹ Richard Noble, ed. *Utopias*, Documents of Contemporary Art (London; Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, 2009). Introduction. Pg12

²¹² Ernest Bloch quoted by Richard Noble. Ibid.

²¹³ Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Oxfordshire, UK: Peter Lang, 2011). Pg185

²¹⁴ Ibid. Pg123

explains utopia is not just a question of ‘what may I hope?’, but a question of ‘what may I dream?’.²¹⁵ She explains:

Utopia expresses and explores what is desired; under certain conditions it also contains the hope that these desires may be met in reality, rather than merely in fantasy. The essential element in utopia is not hope, but desire – the desire for a better way of being.²¹⁶

Nowhereisland is the combination of these ideas. It subscribes to Noble’s suggestion of possibility, beyond the ‘darkness so near’:

Nowhereisland began in a place far from the noise of the urban centres of the Western world. Far (it would seem) from the passport controls and security checks of our journeys across national boundaries. Far from the riots and protests of our streets. Far from the ringing of our phones, the buzzing of our cash points, the tapping of our keyboards... [It is] not simply an imagined place - a nowhere or 'utopia' - but a tool for imagining our world 'as if things were different' and an urgent call to action.²¹⁷

Moreover, *Nowhereisland* is political. With its open citizenship, and communal democratic constitutional method, the project offers ‘Nowherians’ a moment to consider what citizenry might mean – to consider the future of citizenry and its guiding principles. Open citizenship, available through *Nowhereisland*’s mobile embassy (pictured in Figure 24) and online, provides basic access to the content of the project. *Nowhereisland* is inert and unfinished if not enlivened by its citizens. On a political level, however, open citizenship offers symbolic reprieve from the large-scale bureaucratic processing of human lives. And, it satisfies a deeply human need to belong. Although the project is bound, in many ways, to the conservative processes and traditions of nation-building, its open constitution rather ironically contradicts the real-world political rhetoric surrounding nationalism and nationhood. It offers a symbolic antidote to the current, heightened state of border security and border control.

²¹⁵ Ibid. Pg220

²¹⁶ Ibid. Pg221

²¹⁷ “Intro”, Embassy. "Nowhereisland". Accessed 4 April 2016



Figure 24: *Nowhereisland* travelling Embassy, 2012. Image courtesy of the artist. <http://www.alexhartley.net/nowhereisland>

Nowhereisland's open citizenship is described as a type of 'insurgent citizenry', reminiscent of the Occupy movement.²¹⁸ Differences of race, gender, education, property, and class are swept aside in the name of alleviating common social problems, particularly where the politics of the day have failed. As a political model, *Nowhereisland* also reflects a 21st century method of organisation. In stark contrast to almost all other recognized nation-states, no forms of assessment or suitability are required, an internet connection being the only exception (see Figure 25). With citizens drawn from 135 different countries, the rhizomatic model of citizenship makes being Nowherian akin to being a global citizen.²¹⁹

And finally, *Nowhereisland* proves to be an education in desire, best expressed by its constitution. Of 2,678 propositions, ordered most popular to least, the *Nowhereisland* constitution naturally convalesces around six major subjects: citizenship, nationhood, migration and hospitality, art, environment and behavior. At 427 up-votes, the number one

²¹⁸ "Citizenship", Embassy, *ibid.* Accessed 4 April 2016

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*



Figure 25: *Nowhereisland* certificate of citizenship, 2012. Paper, 15.8 x 21cm. Image courtesy of Belinda Howden

constitutional rule is: 'Every Nowherian has the right to be silent'.²²⁰ Closely followed by: 'Every Nowherian has the right to be heard'.²²¹ It contains the glut of paradisiacal dreaming:

²²⁰ Nowhereisland, "The Nowhereisland Constitution," (Situations, 2012). Accessed 4 April 2016

²²¹ Ibid.

‘There should be a free and constant supply of Ben and Jerry’s ice cream for all citizens’; ‘Weekends will be three days long’; and, ‘The only deity acceptable to worship will be Jennifer Garner’.²²² It contains threads of utopian revolution, too. At least eight propositions share the sentiment that no politicians or political parties are allowed on the island; war is forbidden; guns are unanimously banned. The notion of universal free healthcare is resounding whereas the subject of education brings more polarizing views. The trappings of nationhood also present trickier terrain; when one citizen proposes ‘We shall worship no flag’, the next states, not only should *Nowhereisland* have a flag but, that ‘flag should be designed by Rolf Harris.’²²³

In paraphrasing Frank E. Manuel, Levitas writes: ‘we are told that creating a utopian world...is psychologically a regressive phenomenon for an individual, an attempt to return to the womb.’²²⁴ If we recall McCall’s words, we remember that the island, too, floats in an amniotic waterscape. Despite the public not being allowed to physically access *Nowhereisland*, the best description of how the island was conceptually and physically imagined as the birthplace of a new and utopian nation is found in Hartley’s journal. In an entry titled *TOW LINE*, dated 2 September 2012, Hartley describes the manner in which *Nowhereisland* was physically brought to the South, to the citizens for which the work was made, and how the conceptual nation is a product of human invention and intervention:

The island and tug dance slowly and awkwardly into moorings, the tug leading, persuading and deciding... The island is a shy thing, often seemingly reluctant to get too close, always pulling back and wanting to maintain a remoteness... *Nowhereisland* always had to be led, umbilically connected to the tug via the tow line.²²⁵

DEPARTURE

The way in which *Nowhereisland* came to an end is deeply significant. Once constitutional submissions had closed and citizens had long-finished voting, the floating emblem of

²²² *Ibid.*

²²³ *Ibid.*

²²⁴ Frank E Manuel quoted by Levitas. Pg183

²²⁵ Hartley, *Nowhereisland*. Pg137

Nowhereisland – that excavated rocky patch of moraine, dragged south by tug boat – was dismantled and disseminated to each and every Nowherian. Dispersed across the globe, a small chunk of the Arctic island now sits on the mantelpiece or hangs on the walls of its 23,003 citizens (Figure 26). This fetishizing act is most telling. Not only does it shift *Nowhereisland* – the place and the artwork – wholly into a utopian and imaginative realm, it enacts the island trope of short-term experiment. Nyskjaeret is no longer a physical place we can visit. There is no longer potential to revisit the island’s possible histories or instruct the creation of new ones. Nyskjaeret is now an object, a physically and metaphorically transposed one no less.

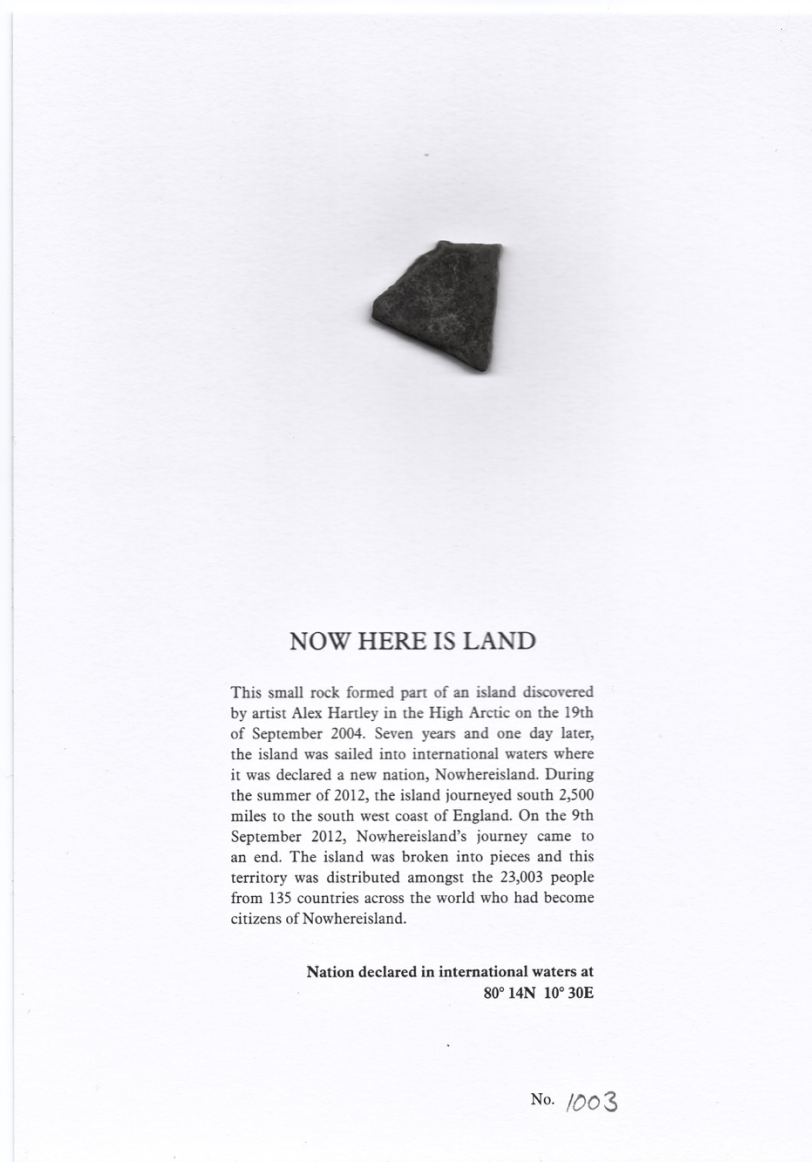


Figure 26: *Nowhereisland, NOW HERE IS LAND*, 2012. Paper, arctic rock, 14.8 x 21cm. Image courtesy of Belinda Howden

Without the potential for island homecoming, island return, or narration from the island looking out, the island is looked *to*. It is locked in the sights of the utopian panoramic gaze; the all-encompassing vision of those that look to the landscape – or the utopian non-landscape, as the case may be – and perceive it as property. The island, dismantled and dispersed, is made into a souvenir, another layer of metaphorical transformation or emblematic production of ‘portmanteau biota’.

On the subject of dispersal, Cresswell suggests *Nowhereisland* performs ‘spatial magic not unlike voodoo’.²²⁶ He refers to two distinct spatial principles to explain his claim:

One is the principle of contiguity. This is the idea that things that are close to each other can affect each other. Intangible properties... flow between them due to their spatial proximity. When one part is removed and carried away, these properties may remain with it... Something like this belief is apparent in the mundane way we use souvenirs. We bring that place with us and it appears to us in our living room or kitchen as part of everyday life. Postcards on the fridge, the tea towel with the map of Crete, a plastic model of the Eiffel Tower. All of these are little bits of elsewhere.²²⁷

The second spatial principle is ‘mimetic sympathy.’²²⁸ This is where a similar spatial arrangement can ‘act over a distance to affect the space being mimicked. In a voodoo doll this is reflected in the way the doll is made to look like the person being affected from a distance.’²²⁹ The combination of these two – contiguity and mimesis – occur within *Nowhereisland*; first, because *Nowhereisland* looks like Nyskjaeret, in its scaled down replication, and second, it ‘was made from the very stuff of Nyskjaeret.’²³⁰

In 2016, I presented a version of this *Nowhereisland* case study at the 15th ISISA Islands of the World Conference, as an example of how islands infiltrate the imagination and practices of contemporary artists, much like island-set literature. A response that took me off-guard, was

²²⁶ Cresswell, “The mobilities of Svalbard”. Ibid. Pg33

²²⁷ Cresswell. Pg90

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Cresswell, “The mobilities of Svalbard”. Hartley, *Nowhereisland*. Pg33

²³⁰ Cresswell, “The mobilities of Svalbard”. Ibid.

the suggestion that *Nowhereisland* was a parody; had I considered that Alex Hartley just had a sense of humour?²³¹ At the time, I had studied the detail so closely I thought, momentarily, I had lost sight of the greater arc of his project. Perhaps now though, with some perspective, I can respond. *Nowhereisland* is not just parody, despite Hartley's playful and often tongue-in-cheek re-enactments of colonial traditions, language and practices. If we return to the subject of scale – the number of team members working on the project and those aboard the expeditions; the amount of money the project attracted; the number of corporate, commercial and private partnerships; the time involved to not only produce the work but the duration of the artwork itself – *Nowhereisland* is too involved and too purposeful, with too many contributors, to be anything but a deeply politicised artwork. To have analysed *Nowhereisland* through an alternative framework – the island encounter – we can move beyond the binary of success or failure, or reading the work as simply a parody. Instead, we see the way in which Hartley and *Nowhereisland* subscribed to histories and genealogies of artistic and island-set historical narratives. The island of *Nowhereisland* – as a metaphor, utopia, and real location – re-enacts and re-invigorates a tradition of island approach long established and favoured by the Western imagination.

²³¹ Audience feedback to author's own conference paper. Belinda Howden, "Short-Term Experiment and Other Adventures in Desire: The Island in Contemporary Art," in *Niss(i)ology and Utopia: back to the roots of Island Studies* (Lesbos, GR23 - 27 May 2016).

CHAPTER THREE – ASH ISLAND AND ITS TRANSFORMATIONS

We have now considered how an island is encountered within contemporary art, in adherence to the mapped sequence of arrival to departure. This has proven that despite contemporary art, artists, curators or creative producers having a wealth of visual, spatial and temporal tools at their disposal, there is a legacy to island encounter – inherited from literature – that informs the perceived ‘natural’ state of the island and its uses. In the case of *Nowhereisland*, Hartley willingly engages in a number of island tropes and tools of island figuration: the journal, the expedition, the processes of claiming and naming, and the dispersal of the island as ‘portmanteau biota’ amongst its citizens. Hartley also demonstrates a nostalgia towards these techniques in their stylized use. Although *Nowhereisland* doesn’t strictly replicate and romanticise British colonisation, particularly as Hartley’s tongue-in-cheek approach describes a type of self-consciousness, it does maintain a power dynamic between islands and mainlands. *Nowhereisland*’s sequence of arrival and departure reinforces the island as a short-term location, ideal for experimentation. In this case, the boundaries of citizenship and nationhood in the twenty-first century, dreaming about the future and political efficacy are tested. The island of *Nowhereisland*, then, is reduced to a tool. It is a device for mainlanders to reflect upon and educate their own desires, to know themselves more intimately through the mechanism of difference, and it is a motif for thinking and dreaming.

This chapter focuses on an exhibition I curated – *Ash Island and its Transformations* – as my first practice-based research into island tropes. Having mapped island encounter and witnessed its strict recreation in *Nowhereisland*, I wanted to investigate how else an island might be curatorially and artistically approached. The results, as demonstrated in this chapter, were both conservative and distinct. The phantasmagoric island of Ash Island appears to trap conservative curatorial and artistic tendencies towards the conceptualisation of ‘place’, but also proves to be a landscape resistant to such inscription.

Ash Island and its Transformations was an exhibition held at The Lock-Up, Newcastle NSW, in September 2014. The focus was Ash Island (now Kooragang) of the Hunter River, NSW (Figure 27). It involved commissioning four contemporary artists – Nicola Hensel, Cherie Johnson,

Shan Turner-Carroll and Emma van Leest – to create new work in response to the natural, historic and cultural significance of Ash Island. More specifically, it marked a 150-year anniversary since the first edition of the natural history publication *Australian Lepidoptera and their Transformations*. This publication was produced by the Scott family – father, Alexander Walker Scott and his two daughters, Harriet and Helena Scott – who spent time living on Ash Island, documenting, collecting and illustrating the native moths and butterflies of the island, in the mid-nineteenth century.



Figure 27: A view of the Ash Island Welcome Boardwalk. Kooragang, NSW, 2014. Image courtesy of Belinda Howden

The exhibition invited the four artists to engage with the narratives around the sisters' lives, their natural history illustration and artistic practice, the publication, as well as shifts in Ash Island's natural and cultural significance. *Ash Island and its Transformations* was devised as a poetic, post-colonial response to an island and its histories. By examining the island site and its layered histories, through the lens of contemporary art, the exhibition explored: colonial narratives of occupation and place, an artist's relationship to the island landscape, an alternative curatorial methodology to social history exhibition practices and invited the addition of new cultural material to an existing history inspired by the island. To begin to

understand the contemporary work and curatorial decisions of *Ash Island and its Transformations*, we must first look at the colonial context of the Scotts, and the period in which they produced the publication and occupied Ash Island.

A MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY ASH ISLAND

‘We are all bird mad, shell mad and insect mad’, exclaimed Alexander Walker Scott in a letter addressed to his brothers.²³² Although he wrote to them from London where he busied himself with a future in law, his entomological interests were piqued by his brothers’ life in the colony of New South Wales. His madness, the ‘rage for curiosity’ as Australian historian Richard Neville describes it, gripped Alexander Walker Scott. It not only prompted him to sail across the world, significantly changing the course of his future and fortune, it sustained a lifelong scientific pursuit and fascination with Australian natural history. In 1829 Walker Scott procured a 2,560-acre land grant on Ash Island of the Hunter River, NSW. And for almost twenty years his wife and daughters, the Scott sisters, resided on the island with him. There they spent their days collecting, drawing and documenting the native Lepidoptera, producing a legacy that would later esteem Harriet and Helena Scott as two of Australia’s preeminent nineteenth century natural history illustrators.

Over the two decades of their island occupation, Ash Island was a locus of activity in terms of collecting, drawing and producing, as well as a site for education and exchange. Given Walker Scott’s status amongst the colonial elite, the Scott’s often had members of the scientific community visit their home – most prominently, the Ramseys, the Macleay family, Conrad Martens and Ludwig Leichhardt. These visits influenced the work of the sisters both ideologically and pictorially, evidenced not only by the increasing sense of duty they placed upon the skill of their work but also through stylistic shifts such as the inclusion of background landscapes reminiscent of Martens’ work. Their island home was an economically and philosophically strategic site, one that prompted the sisters to take on a professional role within their practice and produce illustrations in service to the colony.

²³² Marion Ord, *Historical Drawings of Moths and Butterflies: Harriet and Helena Scott* (Roseville, NSW: Craftsman House, 1988). Pg9

To consider the work of the Scott sisters as visual art, rather than a purely scientific practice, we must first look at the historical context within which they lived and worked. The first wave of Australian colonial art is known to be dominated by the idea of the anomaly; to the colonist's eye the Australian landscape was both particular and peculiar.²³³ The feverish acts of collecting and documenting natural history were, in part, a response to the alien and distinctly un-British landscape. As a result, the earliest artworks of the colony have since come to be weighted with ideas of naivety, an inability to 'see' or visually represent the uniqueness of Australian flora, fauna, landscapes or light (see Figure 28 and 29).²³⁴ The misshapen kangaroos, distorted gum trees, heavily stylized portraits of Aboriginal figures that register a mere tone above caricature, typify the visual work of these first artists. But, their fascination with the 'curious and nondescript' was more than just a reaction to an alien landscape.²³⁵ It was an impulse disguised under the more noble pursuits of philosophical or scientific inquiry – the exploitation of resources. To focus on the anomalies of Australia, its plants and people, or as subconscious exorcisms of the horrors of first contact, overlooks the entrepreneurial aspects of natural history collecting and illustration. The 'rage for curiosity' evidenced in early colonial art and illustration meant 'plants were picked, animals were shot, parts of people were pickled, and a commerce was begun.'²³⁶

The Scott sisters lived and produced during a period that can be broadly described as the second wave. Their work was imbued with the same attitudes as those who came before them; collecting, illustrating, documenting and the distribution of knowledge were absolutely essential to the philosophical and physical practices of making art in the colony. At the tender ages of sixteen and fourteen, Ash Island offered Harriet and Helena a unique and secluded arcadia, away from the social demands and mores of Sydney. They collected, prepared, dried and documented hundreds of plant and insect specimens native to the island, acting as assistants to their father's entomological pursuits.²³⁷ They added to his cabinet of 'curiosities', collected for and collaborated with leading colonial artists and scientists, as well as hosted

²³³ Neville. Pg8-9

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Ibid. Pg9

²³⁶ Ibid. Pg17

²³⁷ Marion Ord, *Historical Drawings of Native Flowers: From the Collections of the Mitchell Library / Harriet and Helena Scott* (Roseville, NSW: Craftsman House, 1988). Pg16

other naturalists in the colony.²³⁸ The Ash Island days proved idyllic for the Scott family. And, as evidenced by Harriet and Helena's collective professional contributions to the early colony of NSW, the insular nature and isolation of the island granted the sisters a freedom to develop and indulge their talents at their own pace.²³⁹

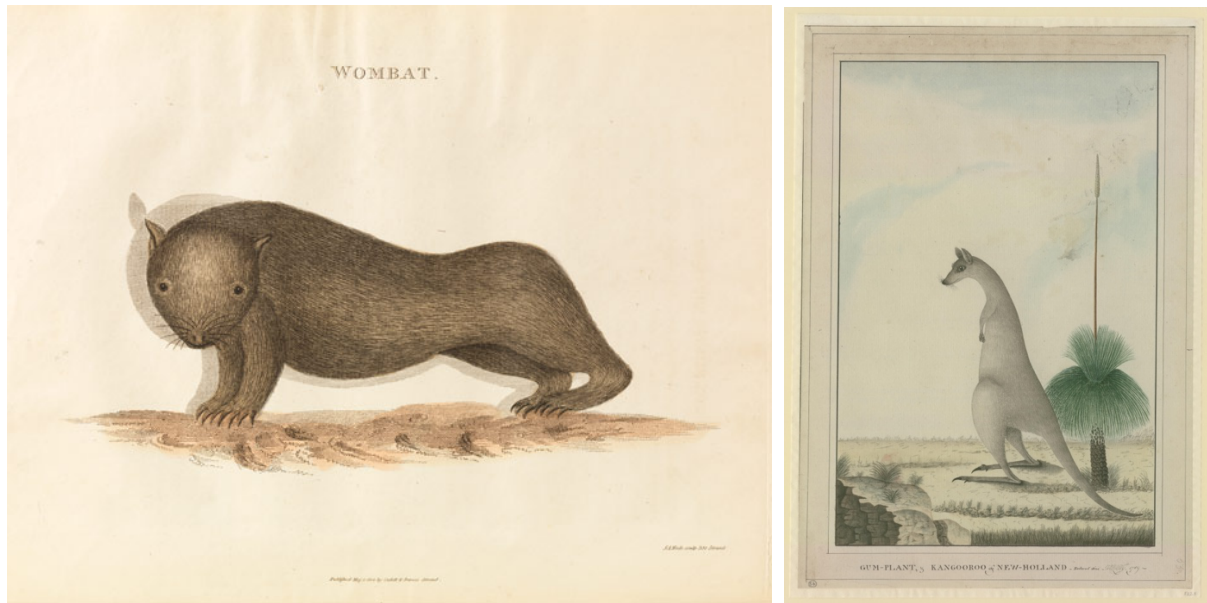


Figure 28: (Left) *Wombat*, A plate from David Collins, 'An account of the English colony in New South Wales', 1804. Etching 2nd Edition, London. From the collection of Museums Victoria. **Figure 29:** (Right) George Raper, *Gum-plant and Kangaroo of New Holland*, 1789. Drawing, colour wash, 46.5 x 32.4cm. From the collection of the Natural History Museum

The sisters inherited the values of the previous generation of artists, most pointedly the ideological mission of colonisation. It was important to the sisters, even in their teenage years, that the work they produce be devoted to the production of knowledge within the colony. In a letter to their childhood friend Edward Ramsey, who would later become the first Australian-born curator of the Australian Museum, Harriet bears the unusual weight of nationhood. On the subject of the Entomological Society of New South Wales she writes, 'I would do anything to help the Society on. In a young country like this I think such undertakings do a world of good.'²⁴⁰ For the previous generation of colonial artists, the processes of collecting, documenting and recording the unique Australian condition was a search for new

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ "The Scott Sisters; Art Treasures of the 19th Century Revealed," *Australian Natural History* 22, no. 5 (Winter 1987). Pg196

²⁴⁰ *Historical Drawings of Moths and Butterflies: Harriet and Helena Scott*. Pg27

resources. It was a tool of exploitation or political propaganda, where 'splendid emblems of the land [spoke of] the future of the colony'.²⁴¹ In the case of Scotts, however, natural history illustration was a device of early nationalism. Their curiosity for science was linked to a quest for *truth* rather than the reproduction of previous generations' rage for collecting, where drawing and exporting Australia's anomalies became a practice 'whose rampant commercialism often drew complaints'.²⁴² The long hours spent observing and drawing the species the sisters lived amongst were weighted with the quest for accuracy. Their work, as they imagined it, was central to the construction of a national identity. The production of a new kind of knowledge propelled by 'seeing'; and, an ability to faithfully represent the Australian landscape, was unlike the artists who came before them.

Although the treatment of subject matter differed to the first wave of colonial artists, the fact that their father and the sisters themselves were put to the task of illustrating *naturalia* was no coincidence. The practice of natural history illustration, as a woman's skill, emerged from an eighteenth century European tradition – the 'ornamental education'.²⁴³ With a focus on needlework, drawing, recitation, Romance languages and music, an ornamental education was both morally predetermined and class-based; young women were equipped with a set of accomplishments appropriate to an aristocratic class.²⁴⁴ Within a European context the 'innocent occupations' of botany, horticulture or *en plein air* drawing and painting were considered safe subjects, appropriately confined to the private and contemplative domestic realm.²⁴⁵ Under the unique circumstances of the Australian colony, however, the skills and subjects of the ornamental education were pushed into the more industrious and public sphere of natural science. The challenges of the New World forced early colonial women's work into new depths of production, both private and public.²⁴⁶

²⁴¹ Ibid. Pg36

²⁴² Neville. Pg20

²⁴³ Caroline Jordan, *Picturesque Pursuits: Colonial Women Artists and the Amateur Tradition* (Carlton, VIC: Melbourne University Publishing, 2005). Pg12

²⁴⁴ Ibid. Pg13

²⁴⁵ Ibid. Pg14

²⁴⁶ "The Public Amateur and the Private Professional: A Re-Evaluation of the Categories of Public and Private in Colonial Women Artists' Work," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 1, no. 2 (2000). Pg42

THE PRIVATE PROFESSIONALS

The public amateur and the private professional: a re-evaluation of the categories of public and private in colonial women artists' work, written by Australian art historian Caroline Jordan, carefully traces the presence of female artists and authors in the early stages of Australia's colonies. By offering a renewed understanding of the significant material contributions women made to this history, Jordan reassesses the strict boundaries that tend to exclude such contributions. Her alternative, and more inclusive, understanding of how women artists and authors effectively straddled both the private and public realms reveals a world of production previously unrecognised. Jordan argues that the Victorian, middle-class ideology of 'separate spheres' – an idea championed by art critic John Ruskin – forced the private and public spheres into contrived understandings of productivity, economy, pleasure and vocation; these separate spheres were also gendered.²⁴⁷ However, the Australian setting challenged these reductive divisions:

The ideal political, economic and social separation of a masculine public sphere associated with an impersonal labour market and a feminine private sphere associated with leisure and domesticity may have been attained in the new middle-class suburbs of London in the late eighteenth century. It was not necessarily matched, however, in the organization of home and family in the small, agrarian-based communities typical of the colonies.²⁴⁸

The female artists and authors of the early colony are what Jordan describes as public amateur; a condition upon entry into the public sphere was that women 'continued to represent the private [domestic] sphere within it'.²⁴⁹ Or, the private professional; work done by women 'should be understood as a form of private work, that was set up to support and enable the functioning of the male public world.'²⁵⁰ The greater point Jordan draws out is that the central location of production for all female artists and authors of the early colonies is the

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Stephanie Coontz quoted by *ibid.* Pg48

²⁴⁹ Ibid. Pg43

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

home; whether a public amateur or private professional, the household or home remains faithfully central.²⁵¹ She continues:

...the corporate nature of colonial life with its typical intersection of the private and public is focused around the institution of the household... The household was not only the centre of economic production but also of 'social service, education, socialization, work training and religious instruction', and hence was inseparable from the 'public' colonial economy.²⁵²

For the Scott sisters – whose education, scientific-artistic intent and ideological purpose neatly classifies them as private professionals – their island home is absolutely essential to their artistic practice. Drawing Lepidoptera 'from the life', as the full publication title describes, is an essential difference to the work of their artistic forebears.²⁵³ The first wave of colonial artists and officials '...were not necessarily careful observers, and much of what they wrote was hearsay and gossip rather than insight and perception. They often copied each other's drawings.'²⁵⁴ These natural history illustrators not only worked from the furs and skins of official collections, rather than live specimens, the 'real work' of scientific illustration often involved enlisting European artists who had never set foot on Australian soil.²⁵⁵ The outcome was discoloured, disproportionate or simply inaccurate images; portrayals that fed the mythic curiousness of the Antipodes. The sisters' illustrations however – the subject choice, the detail, the observational accuracy, the execution of life cycles, habitats and anatomical parts important to science, all of which is visible in Figure 30 – hinged upon the hundreds of hours and days spent occupying their island residence and living amongst their subjects. Their home, Ash Island, was at the centre of their practice in terms of content and as site of production.

²⁵¹ Ibid. Pg42

²⁵² Ibid. Pg49

²⁵³ The full publication title is: "Australian Lepidoptera and their Transformations, drawn from the life by Harriet and Helena Scott; with descriptions general and systematic, by A. W. Scott."

²⁵⁴ Neville. Pg24

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

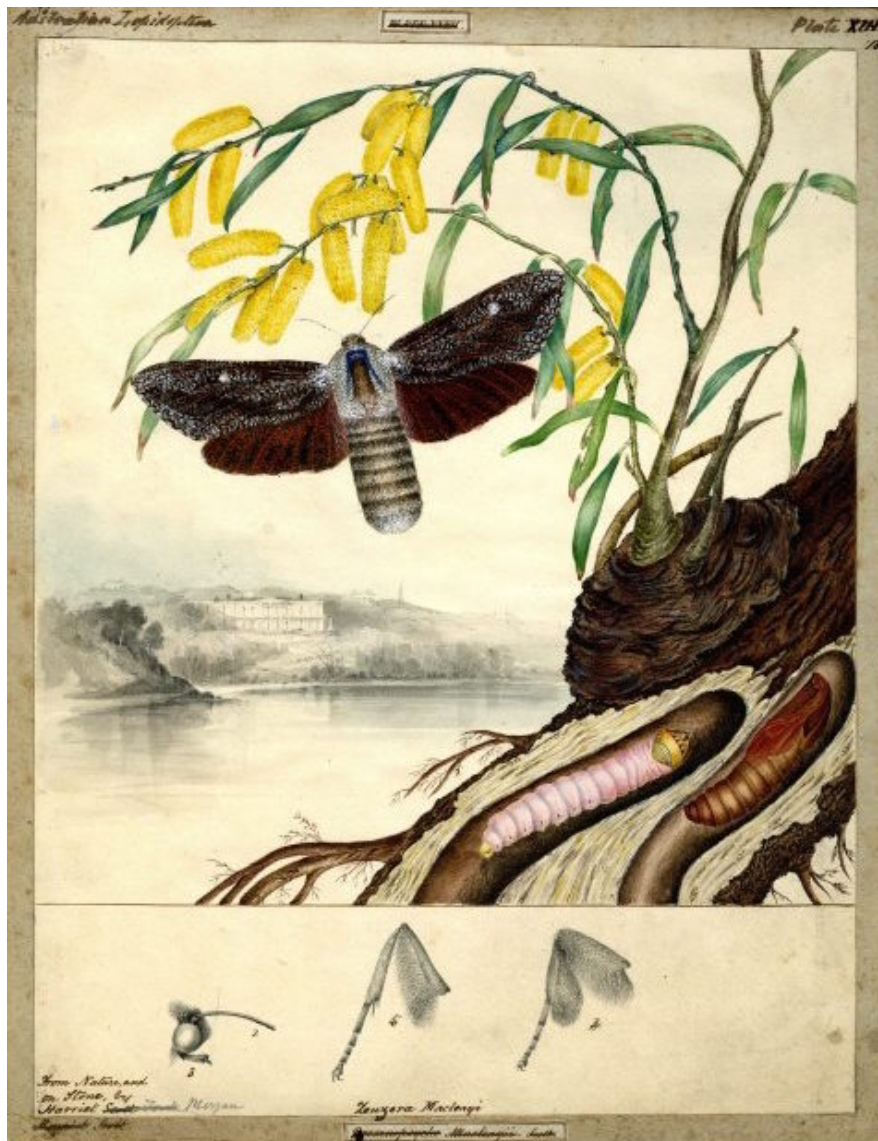


Figure 30: Harriet Scott, *Zeuzera macleayi*, 1840-1860. Watercolour and ink, dimensions unavailable. From the collection of the Australian Museum

If we consider the institution of the household upon Ash Island, we reveal another inherited practice typical of natural history illustration in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe – the ‘family firm’.²⁵⁶ The circumstances of the Australian colony furthered what might be considered a dynastic mode of production. It was Walker Scott who trained his daughters’ eyes in scientific observation and their hands in natural history illustration. This kind of intergenerational training was common amongst families of the early colony, where ‘the whole family [was] conscripted into the ‘family firm’ by the masculine entrepreneur...’²⁵⁷ In a

²⁵⁶ Jordan, *Picturesque Pursuits: Colonial Women Artists and the Amateur Tradition*. Pg138

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

letter dated October 1862, Helena Scott writes of the 'freedoms' their father grants, in particular attributing their names to their illustrations: 'Oh! You cannot think how thankful I am that my dear father allows me to place my name to the drawings! It makes me feel twice as much pleasure while painting them.'²⁵⁸ Despite his liberal attitude towards their labour and skill, the sisters are not credited as individuals but as contributors to *his* scientific work. With the exception of the renderings of butterflies, which only Harriet drew, it is difficult to tell the sisters' hand apart. Their work, once published and circulating the public realm, is 'accompanied by the male's authoritative [voice]...', as was standard for the time.²⁵⁹

The sisters coveted an ambitious life beyond the restrictions of their gender. Yet, they remained bound by the cultural constraints of femininity in the nineteenth century:

...in some way or other and if I were only a man I might do it, but as I am a woman I can't try, for I hold it wrong for women to hunt after notoriety ... clearly I ought to have been Harry Scott instead of Hattie Scott.²⁶⁰

It must be noted however, it is likely due to their gender that they managed to produce such a unique and exceptional cultural legacy. This is evidenced in three ways. First, within their role as private professionals the privacy of their artistic practice conversely benefitted them. The long hours spent among the Casuarinas and first-hand observation of Ash island produced a work of exceptional intimacy. This intimacy, reflected in their scientific acuity – they observed their subjects under microscopes in order to fully render the most miniscule detail such as tufts of hair on caterpillars and the lace wings of butterflies – entered them, and more importantly their names, into a public sphere otherwise inaccessible to women. The second advantage can be described as the 'feminine power of minute observation'.²⁶¹ The 'power of

²⁵⁸ Letter from Helena Scott to Edward Ramsay, 22 October 1862. Correspondence and miscellaneous papers. Mitchell Library, MSS 563

²⁵⁹ Jordan, "The Public Amateur and the Private Professional: A Re-Evaluation of the Categories of Public and Private in Colonial Women Artists' Work." Pg48

²⁶⁰ Letter from Hattie Scott to Edward Ramsay, 19 November 1865. Correspondence and miscellaneous papers, Mitchell Library, MSS 563

²⁶¹ Jordan, "The Public Amateur and the Private Professional: A Re-Evaluation of the Categories of Public and Private in Colonial Women Artists' Work." Pg46

entering into minute details' was considered an acceptable and encouraged mode of female expression.²⁶² By documenting previously unrecorded species of moths and butterflies, they twinned the scientific triumph of discovery with domesticity and daily observations of life. And third, the island setting was a private sphere. Living in a peripheral location like Ash Island, away from the custom and cultural bounds of larger, metropolitan centres or colonies, the sisters' pursued their unfettered ambitions and desires. Although they worked under the restrictions of the 'family firm', the island granted them an independence from normal social conventions and pressures, 'shielded from curious eyes and insensitive questions.'²⁶³

AUSTRALIAN LEPIDOPTERA AND THEIR TRANSFORMATIONS

In 1851, eminent English botanist William Swainson visited Ash Island and the Scott family. There he was shown the original plates for the publication *Australian Lepidoptera and their Transformations, drawn from the Life by Harriet and Helena Scott; with Descriptions General and Systematic, by A. W. Scott* (Figure 31). In his excitement and anticipation, Swainson prematurely reviewed the work in the Sydney Morning Herald, in August of the same year. Harriet and Helena were only 21 and 19, respectively, and Swainson's review marked the first time they had received public recognition for their work. It was the beginning of their professional practice as freelance natural history illustrators and collectors.

The first version of the book, as seen by Swainson, featured 52 plates showcasing 118 drawings of the native moths and butterflies. Accompanying each fastidiously hand drawn and coloured specie was an equally detailed scientific observational description written by Alexander Walker Scott. The editorial decision to print the volume at royal quarto enabled the sisters to not only generously transcribe the native Lepidoptera *from life* but to scale. Swainson was enthralled by the accuracy and artistry of the plates, describing their work as "equal to any I have ever seen by modern artists."²⁶⁴

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ord, *Historical Drawings of Moths and Butterflies: Harriet and Helena Scott*. Pg15

²⁶⁴ William Swainson, "Review: Australian Lepidoptera and Their Transformations, Drawn from the Life by Harriet and Helena Scott; with Descriptions General and Systematic, by A. W. Scott," *Sydney Morning Herald* 30 August 1851. Accessed May 2014

I cannot but hope that the Australian public will reap honour to themselves by patronising what is to them a national work. And thus, not only confer a great and lasting benefit to science but manifest to our countrymen at home that we have both native talent, and the wealth and disposition to foster and uphold it.²⁶⁵

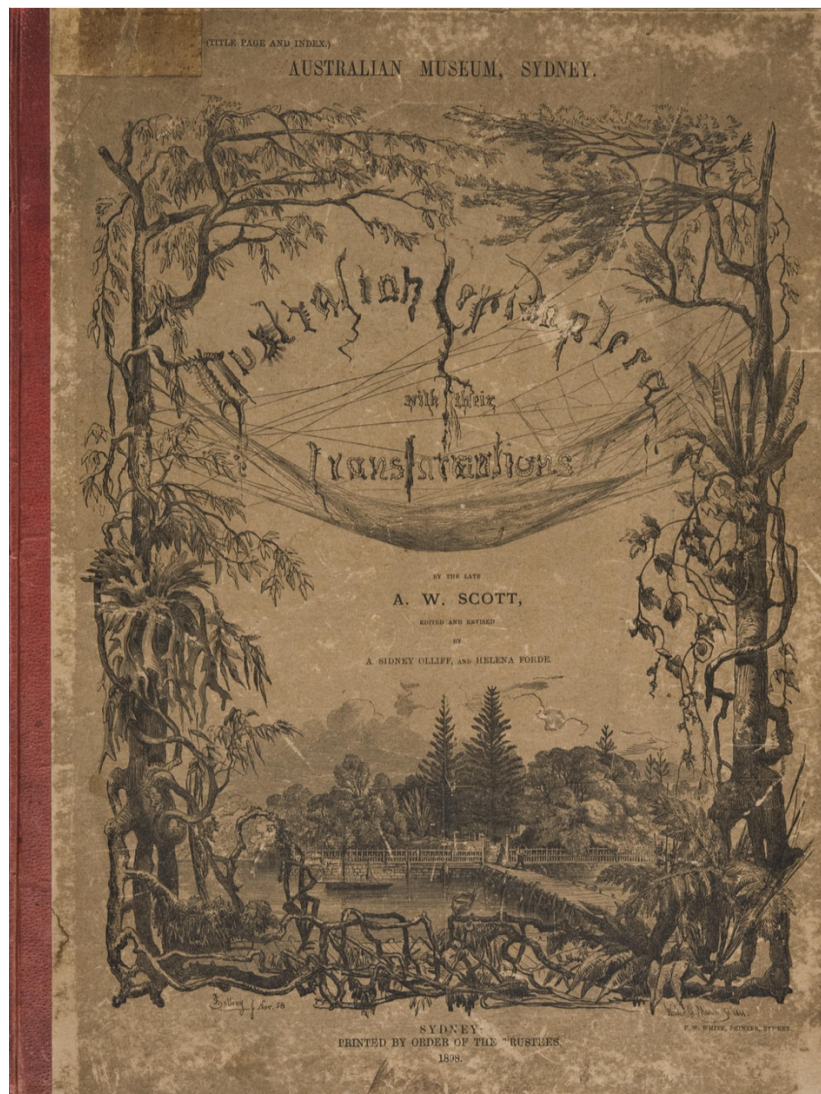


Figure 31: *Australian Lepidoptera and their Transformations*, 1864. Publication cover, Volume 2, London: John van Voorst, 1890-1898. Image courtesy of the Biodiversity Heritage Library

The nationalism embedded in the sisters' own practice is reflected by Swainson's description. His elevation of their work, not only an object of national significance but one that holds up against the 'real work' of European artists, demonstrates this important shift. The sisters do

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

inherit the traditions and modes of eighteenth century Europe but they are predominantly educated by the landscape in which they live; their gender is a boon to their creative output; the island setting offers them seclusion but also scientific advantage; the combination of which affords them fresh eyes and an ability to represent the Australian condition under a new, nationalistic light.

NATIONALISM, REGIONALISM, ISLANDISM

Three major ideas, evident in the work of the Scott sisters, prompted the curatorial and artistic response of *Ash Island and its Transformations*: nationalism, regionalism and islandism. These ideas were fundamental to the original curatorial intent of the exhibition; the combination of which, it was hoped, might generate a kind of call-and-response across time (history) and space (geography) through the common language of art. The Scotts' desire to capture, record and generate 'truthful' documents of the endemic species of Australia was equally a document of proof; the specificity of Australia was worth careful reconsideration. *Ash Island and its Transformations* employed this same idea. The specificity of the island despite no longer being an island was worth reconsideration; it was important to look closely at how Ash Island, and the surrounding community's relationship to it, had changed over the course of history. The exhibition was crafted as an attempt to revise and respond to the colonisation of the island, not through more common channels of literature, academia or social history but by way of visual art. The 150-year anniversary of the Scotts publication was therefore a timely opportunity. It was an occasion to reconsider the multiple histories connected to the island, to draw out the overlooked and the wilfully forgotten narratives of the island, and to forge new relationships to the landscape for a community connected to it today.

In terms of nationalism, the sisters' intentions were clear. They were obviously interested in producing public contributions to the early colony that exercised ideas of nationhood. Using their skills in natural history illustration, the sisters harboured a self-consciousness indicative of their nationalistic tendencies; 'I tremble to think of the awful responsibility I am putting

upon my paintbrush'.²⁶⁶ It is not the sisters themselves, though, that captured my interest as a curator. It was the ideas bound up in their images; their work is the visual relic of a combination of politics, place and time. Also, it was the information omitted, that which falls beyond the paper's edge, that captivated me. Who else occupied the island? And, how was it significant to them?

The majority of the Scott sisters' historical material – the original Lepidoptera collections, the publication, the sisters' original plates, diaries and letters – is stored with either the Australian Museum, in Sydney, or the David Scott Mitchell Library, an arm of the State Library of NSW. The intimacy and accuracy of the sisters' documentation of Ash Island not only produced a lasting record that holds currency even today – it is used by the Kooragang Wetland Rehabilitation Project in regenerating the area with native species – their work elevated the importance of a regional site that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. And, if we return to Caroline Jordan's words, we recognise that Ash Island was the central location and source of inspiration for the production of their work. A major focus of *Ash Island and its Transformations* was to draw the narrative of the sisters back to the region from which it emerged. The exhibition was not conceived as a straight-forward social history exhibition, reminiscent of what has been seen at the Australian Museum. Rather, it was an opportunity to respond to a regional legacy within a regional centre, communicating with a regional audience. This purposeful commitment to the regional centre, as a productive and important cultural location, returns the focus to the site from which these narratives emerged.

The last focus of *Ash Island and its Transformations* was the island itself. Beyond the history of the Scotts, Ash Island has undergone a number of dramatic physical and functional changes. The first, as Figure 32 illustrates, the islands of the Hunter River had a history of Aboriginal occupation. For thousands of years prior to European settlement, the Worimi people, originating from the north of the Hunter River, and the Awabakal from the South, made use of the area as a meeting point. Being an estuary, the Ash Island was not only part of a fertile hunting, fishing and breeding ground, it was also culturally significant – where fresh

²⁶⁶ Letter from Hattie Scott to Edward Ramsay, 9 November 1865. Correspondence and miscellaneous papers, Mitchell Library, MSS 563

and salt water met.²⁶⁷ The estuary included floodplain rainforests, salt marshes, woodlands and wetland mangroves, and supported a large surrounding Aboriginal population, with conservative estimates at approximately 4000 adult men.²⁶⁸



Figure 32: (Left) Richard Browne, *Coola-Benn, Native Chief of Ashe Island Hunters River, New South Wales, 1820*. Watercolour, 31 x 22cm. (Right) Richard Browne, *Cobbawn Wogi, Native Chief of Ashe Island Hunters River, New South Wales, 1820*. Watercolour 30 x 22cm. From the collection of the Newcastle Art Gallery

The second change, is the fact Ash Island is no longer an island. Located at the mouth of the Hunter River Estuary it was once part of a cluster of islands – Moscheto, Dempsey, Walsh, Spectacle, Spit and Goat islands. The amalgamation of island and mudflats began in the 1960s under the Industrial Islands Scheme, a direct result of the growth of heavy industries in the Newcastle region. Concerns about pollution and environmental degradation led to the Coffey Inquiry in the 1970s and with multiple changes to the native ecology and ecosystem, particularly shifts from brackish water to freshwater and to brackish once again, the inquiry highlighted the importance of retaining a natural habitat in the Hunter estuary. And finally, in

²⁶⁷ Personal communication with artist Cherie Johnson. 11 May 2014

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

1983 the Kooragang Nature Reserve was formed, encompassing the northeast parts of Kooragang Island. A decade later the Kooragang Wetland Rehabilitation Project was launched. The project has since been working to restore and rehabilitate Ash Island to a former ecological state, prior to European settlement.

Ash Island and its Transformations is a response to an island lost. The shifts in form and use of Ash Island, reflect shifts in cultural opinion and attitude towards 'place' and 'landscape'. For many years I, myself, would drive past the island on my way in and out of Newcastle. It intrigued me, its sign posted narrow concrete bridge – 'Ash Island'. But, it remained peripheral. It was relegated to a visit for another time, when you were neither in a rush to escape nor in a rush to return. The island, too, is unceremonious. One can even go so far as to say it is distinctly un-visual, a curious choice for an art exhibition. The mangroves do however capture one's imagination; they are ghostly emblems of filtration, forgetting and liminality. As an ecosystem defined by mechanics of purification – filtering the water and hardy-ing the land's edge against the river – they are peculiarly redemptive; a source of washed-up forgotten material, capturing the passing offerings of bones, decaying matter or human detritus. They are, as artist Cherie Johnson describes, kidneys of the estuary charged with the powerful potential of cleansing and beginning anew.²⁶⁹ Perhaps this is why, despite Ash Island's dramatic erasure, that the island presence persists. It is this redemptive character that allows for constant reinvention.

CONTEXT

The idea of using contemporary art as a way of 'speaking back' to the past, was sparked by an exhibition I saw in 2010: *Curious Colony: A twenty first century Wunderkammer*. Hosted by Newcastle Art Gallery, the exhibition was a contemporary response to Governor Macquarie's chest, one of Australia's earliest and most significant examples of natural history collecting. *Curious Colony* was the first time I had encountered historical revisionism within a contemporary art setting. Objects of historical significance and newly commissioned works by contemporary artists sat alongside each other, collapsing the traditions of chronology and

²⁶⁹ Cherie Johnson, (paper presented at the The Scott Sisters and the Art of Ash Island, Australian Museum. Sydney, NSW, 25 May 2017).

historical pedigree more commonly seen in social history or art history exhibitions. For example, Joan Ross's *When I grow up I want to be a forger* (2010) used Joseph Lycett's 1824 etching *The Sugar Loaf Mountain, near Newcastle* to restage the first moments of European contact (Figure 33). The work animates the visual encounter of colonisation; the loud crash of a grounded tall ship dominates the shore, the figures, the landscape and the pictorial space.²⁷⁰ Works like these, particularly viewing them as someone who lives in the region they are based upon, appeared to open up the colonial narratives held so deeply immovable by historians, and art historians alike.



Figure 33: (Still) Joan Ross, *When I grow up I want to be a forger*, 2010. 6mins 6secs. Image courtesy of the artist and Gallery Barry Keldoulis. <http://joanross.com.au/>

Ash Island and its Transformations differed in many ways to the premise of *Curious Colony*; most significantly it did not include any historical material or objects. The exhibition featured only contemporary works responding to the combination of historical narrative, historical object and physical site. Due to its regional gallery setting, *Curious Colony* was significantly larger than *Ash Island and its Transformations* not only with the number of artists and

²⁷⁰ Margaret Farmer, "Review: Curious Colony: A Twenty First Century Wunderkammer," *Artlink* (December 2010). Accessed May 2017

commissioned works, but in terms of curatorial scope as well. The premise was considerably wider than *Ash Island and its Transformations* which, in hindsight, was an important curatorial lesson to learn; the curatorial premise must be liberal enough for artists to flourish under. In relation to an exhibition she curated in 2016 – *Magic Object* – Lisa Slade neatly expresses the importance of this idea:

You have to have a theme that's generous enough that you can drive anything through it. *Magic Object* and the *Wunderkammer* premise worked for that... Artists aren't the cyphers for a curatorial vision; it's the other way around.²⁷¹

The curatorial decisions of *Ash Island and its Transformations* were couched in two different contexts: first, the exhibition was produced under the research requirements of a PhD; and second, it needed to satisfy the institutional imperatives of the host gallery. This combination produced a number of curatorial methodologies that proved equally as conservative as they were distinct.

METHODOLOGY

The primary method for engaging the artists in the narrative of Ash Island, and by extension ideas of regionalism, colonialism and islandism, was a research dossier. This ten-page document was produced in preparation for the first meeting between myself and the artists. The tone of the document was historical and intended as a neutral yet comprehensive guide. It mapped: a Scott family history, how the Scotts came to live in Australia particularly Ash Island, the pre- and post-colonial occupations and use of the island, and the island's changes in physical form over time. It also covered more practical aspects of the exhibition process such as an exhibition précis and schedule, making it a comprehensive reference document that spanned all aspects of exhibition development. A list of further reading and support material supplemented the dossier, prompting the artists to look at related artworks in the Newcastle Art Gallery collection, the Lepidoptera collections and archival material held in the

²⁷¹ Steph Harmon, "2016 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art: Colour, Wonder, Materialism and Magic," *The Guardian* 6 Mar 2016. Accessed 24 April

collections of the Australian Museum and Mitchell Library, and the printed material produced by the Kooragang Wetlands Rehabilitation Program.

Whilst utmost care was taken to produce a neutral and inclusive guide, the dossier itself was, in hindsight, contradictory. The broad historical overview was intended as a prompt; the artists were encouraged to follow a thread within the island's history that fascinated them most. Built into the structure of the project and dossier was an expectation that they were to produce work in discussion with the curator yet the 'form and outcomes of the project [were] non-prescriptive.'²⁷² The contradiction, however, lay with the tone of the dossier. As a document compiled and written under a PhD research framework, it satisfied the outcomes-based methodologies of research where quantifiable results and products are championed. The translation of this document into an exhibition context however, meant the dossier was shaped more by historical and literary research rather than other forms of knowledge, such as visual, tacit, oral or intergenerational. In pursuit of historical neutrality, an idea that at the time satisfied a more careful research approach, the fleshier, and ultimately more important, ideas of regionalism, colonialism, islandism and environmentalism were not as foregrounded.

As described above, the research dossier was presented to the artists upon our first and only group meeting. Part of this meeting involved a site visit whereupon we walked together to relevant sites of the island. These included the Welcome Boardwalk – a walk set amongst the mangroves, the Schoolmasters House, and Scotts Point. From a curatorial perspective, it was important that the artists undertake the site visit as a group, not only to establish the relationship between the historic and physical subject but to encourage the possibility of discussion or exchange between the artists themselves (Figure 34). The walk proved formative for Emma van Leest in particular, as she expresses in her residency blog *Emma in Newcastle*. Key to van Leest's experience of the island and the creation of her work, *Between the Shadows and Forgetting* (2014), was walking through the mangroves and listening to fellow artist Cherie Johnson share her knowledge connected to plant and bird life, Indigenous food sources and the movements of early Indigenous populations across the region.²⁷³ In this

²⁷² Belinda Howden, "Kooragang (Ash) Island Project," (The Lock-Up, 2014).

²⁷³ "Kooragang (Ash Island)", Emma van Leest to Emma in Newcastle, 2014, <http://emmainnewcastle.blogspot.com.au/>. Accessed 9 May 2017

sense the site visit proved generative, more so than the dossier. Although not all artists responded so directly to the experience as van Leest did, visiting the island was an important curatorial step in locating 'place'. Not only were the artists prompted to consider the island's layered histories against its physical environs, it began a process of thinking and making in relationship to the site that they each continued on their own terms across the remainder of the project.



Figure 34: The artists walk along the Welcome Boardwalk as part of our first group meeting and site visit, Kooragang, NSW, 2014. Image courtesy of Belinda Howden

Ash Island and its Transformations was hosted by The Lock-Up, a contemporary art space in Newcastle. The curatorial decision to approach The Lock-Up was based on an existing working relationship I had developed there, over a period of five years (2009 – 2014). *Ash Island and its Transformations* was programmed to re-open the gallery, helping it transition from a submission-based artistic program into a curator-driven, invitation-based program. The curatorial scope of *Ash Island and its Transformations*, its historical and cultural relevance to the regional centre of Newcastle, was bound to the vision of this programming transition and re-launch. The Lock-Up's reimagined image aligned perfectly with the sentiments of the project:

As a part of its programming strategy [The Lock-Up] has identified a need for key annual projects that give a voice to local history and identity... The Kooragang 'Ash' Island project addresses [The Lock-Up's] placement within Newcastle's cultural landscape, providing an access point into contemporary art practice for new audiences through local history... It will go far to reinvigorate the role of [The Lock-Up] as a creative hub and cultural asset for NSW.²⁷⁴

Ash Island and its Transformations was the first large-scale, publically-funded exhibition for which I was the sole curator. On a personal level, the exhibition was an attempt to satisfy a standard typically seen in state or regional galleries, as proof to myself that I could devise, research, coordinate and execute an exhibition of a particular quality. Taking my cue from large-scale, conceptual exhibitions, like *Curious Colony*, *Ash Island and its Transformations* was modelled on a familiar exhibition format, language, delivery of artistic content and public programming typical of regional or state galleries. It is fair to suggest that institutional language and positioning influenced my thinking, and thus shaped the curatorial decisions. The result was an exhibition form that was ultimately somewhat conservative. The curatorial conventions *Ash Island and its Transformations* adhered to were: the proposition of art as a device for historical revision, which by that stage was already a well-rehearsed curatorial concept;²⁷⁵ the ambitious proposition of commissioning new work; a standardized presentation and installation of artworks, such as didactic panels introducing the curatorial concept or sequestering each artist's work to one location within the gallery; championing conceptual continuity over commercial outcomes; the introduction of supplementary public programs to draw in new audiences; and, the measurement of success by way of attendance figures, audience diversity and public outreach.

Yet despite its conventional framing, *Ash Island and its Transformations* was not entirely conservative. The exhibition differed from standard social history exhibitions in its ability to

²⁷⁴ The Lock-Up, "2014 New Projects Application," ed. Trade & Investment Arts NSW (2013). Pg7-9

²⁷⁵ Jennifer Barrett and Jacqueline Millner, *Australian Artists in the Contemporary Museum* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014).

bring poetry to a historical subject matter. The strength of examining a subject through contemporary art lies with its unorthodoxy – the idea that we can re-examine the ‘truth’ of history under the lens of interpretation.²⁷⁶ The decision *not* to include historical material or objects was deliberate, aimed to amplify the interpretative process. Rather than present visual material in didactic terms — as in the 2013 touring exhibition *Beauty from Nature: Art of the Scott Sisters* at Maitland Region Art Gallery²⁷⁷ — it was important to free the artists from the narrow vision of historic detail, perhaps then they might unearth a different kind of truth. The faceted narrative of the Scotts, the rich cultural material produced by the sisters, the occupations and incarnations of Ash Island, and its resilience and erasure, were instead offered to the artists as raw materials to respond to and work with. Unlike other forms of curating, commissioning artwork is a dynamic, process-based practice. It is open to change over the course of the exhibition development, and the results depend upon relationships between the subject, curatorial imperatives and resources available. Each artist of *Ash Island and its Transformations* brought to the process a combination of personality, a history of practice, skill and resources, as well as life experiences and politics at the time of making. It was through their processes of interpretation, and the generation of something yet to be historicized, that a necessary divergence from the strictures of curatorial planning occurred.

ASH ISLAND AND ITS TRANSFORMATIONS

Nicola Hensel has visually documented the natural world and her place within it for the past forty years. She has done so using a diversity of mediums: pencil, pen, ink, charcoal, collage, wall drawings and installation. With a visual practice based on ‘closely observed, executed and seasonally inspired drawing’, Hensel’s work most closely resembles the visual practice of the Scott sisters in terms of subject matter and pursuit of observational accuracy through

²⁷⁶ Ibid. Pg1

²⁷⁷ *Beauty from Nature: The Art of the Scott Sisters* was an exhibition featuring more than 50 watercolours, rarely-seen notebooks, handwritten manuscripts, sketches and letters from the Australian Museum collection. It was an excellent occasion for returning some of the original material to the region but, as an exhibition toured by the Australian Museum, the art work was couched in historical terms, particularly the didactic panels and inclusion of archival material.

drawing.²⁷⁸ A practice built upon documenting domestic and daily life – her garden, home, children, and artistic interventions into the domestic sphere – Hensel’s work blurs the distinctions between public and private. The integration of art and life means little division is made between work, art, practice or pleasure. Similar to the sisters, her studio is her home and she produces from the domestic sphere outwards. It was easy to envisage Hensel connecting with the sisters’ work through their shared visual practice, particularly rendering and recording from life. It was also imagined that Hensel would connect with the gendered aspects of the sisters’ lives, the relationship between the very personal, contemplative act of drawing and more public aspects of being a professional artist.

Hensel created two distinct bodies of work for *Ash Island and its Transformations*. The first, a fifteen-piece series of detailed ink drawings, no larger than A4, called *Ash Island Series* (2014) (Figure 35). And, as a counter response to the highly detailed and small-scaled works, a four-metre long *en plein air* charcoal drawing titled *Mangrove* (2014). For the *Ash Island Series* Hensel baked varying sized pieces of paper in tea, coffee and mangrove mud, making the flora of the island her subject. Hensel swiftly discovered the focus of her series; ‘for the first time I was doing drawings about drawing’.²⁷⁹ Amongst the inked images of trees, flowers, roots and tidal lines, Hensel used motifs and markings from optical instruments, star maps and surveying, as emblems of deep observational focus and various empirical methods for recording a landscape. In this sense, the *Ash Island Series* was the most direct reference to the illustrative methodologies used by the sisters, where both Hensel and the Sisters shared long, private hours on the island sitting amongst their subjects (Figure 36). The impulse of nationalism or scientific pursuit embedded in the work of the Scott’s is replaced in Hensel’s by a reverence for the natural world and a deeply personal, embodied relationship to the processes of drawing:

...there is nothing quite like the space between my eye, the paper, and the object or place or person that I’m drawing... For me, it’s kind of like a zingy geometry... When I saw the Scott sisters’ drawings I recognised that geometry. It had that intense focus

²⁷⁸ Nicola Hensel, "Artist Statement," (Unpublished 2014).

²⁷⁹ Isaac Turier and Lumina Visual, "Ash Island and Its Transformations - Nicola Hensel," (The Lock-Up, September 2014). Accessed 8 May 2017. 0:42 seconds

and that intense love of the natural form. And, that is where that feeling of kinship came from; being in that same physical space.²⁸⁰



Figure 35: (Left) Nicola Hensel, *Ash Island #14*, 2014. Paper, pencil, coffee, 39 x 29cm. (Right) Nicola Hensel, *Ash Island #5*, 2014. Paper, ink coffee, 30 x 21cm. Images courtesy of Harry Sideris.

Mangrove and the *Ash Island Series* are an echo of the sisters' work. As a visual record, they capture a transient subject, describing a specificity in terms of time, place, season and weather. Hensel's works champion the endurance of the hand and eye. And, although her work is distinct from the scientific accuracy of natural history illustration, it remains as testament to the continuing currency and agency of drawing.²⁸¹ The 'kinship' between her own work and that of two women artists of the mid-nineteenth century, all occupying the same geographic region, describes a continuity. Hensel has added a new layer to the visual record of the island, one crafted in relation to her own intergenerational legacy:

²⁸⁰ Ibid. Accessed 8 May 2017. 1:40 seconds

²⁸¹ For example, the 2012 contemporary art survey *dOCUMENTA (13)* championed a number of artists using drawing as a medium: Tacita Dean, Vu Giang Huong, Anna Boghiguan. Drawing is described as an act of thinking; 'drawing, writing, and diagrammatic thinking; it is speculative, manifests a preliminary moment, a passage, and acts as a memory aid.' <http://d13.documenta.de/#welcome/> Accessed 8 May 2017

Thinking and working like this has given me a bittersweet pleasure, feeling like I've taken my place in a line of women – been, gone, going, coming...not afraid of hard work and dealing in beauty. I think of my grandmother, Maggie Longworth, and my mum growing up around family orange orchards on the edge of the swamps that overlook Ash Island; and my own clever Maggie [Hensel's daughter] making intricate patterns in her own art.²⁸²



Figure 36: Nicola Hensel (pictured) producing the large-scale en plein air drawing *Mangrove*, Kooragang, NSW, 2014. Ash Island. Image courtesy of Belinda Howden

Shan Turner-Carroll is an Australian-Burmese artist. At the time of *Ash Island and its Transformations*, he was documenting his family members and their property in Lovedale, forty minutes north-west of Newcastle. In looking at the photographic images and sculptural constructions of his *Crown* (2012) and *Primal Crown* (2012) series, it was the velvety darkness of his images, their visual romanticism, and the investigations into site and 'place' that made his work relevant to the premise of *Ash Island and its Transformations*. His practice involves

²⁸² Hensel.

a make-shift use of found materials – his own body, the bush, scavenged materials, the landscape he lives amongst, his friends and family members – to produce ritualistic sculptural forms, perform home-made rites of passage and create narrative-based imagery that investigates the relationship between nature and the body.

Turner-Carroll produced a photographic series and sculptural installation titled *Hattie and Nellie* (2014). The title cites the nom de plumes of the two sisters, the sign-off on their personal letters and correspondence, and indicates Turner-Carroll's interest in the inner, personal lives of the two women. Rather than focusing on historic accuracy, or even re-presenting and revising existing historic material around their personal life, Turner-Carroll narratively approached the sisters' lives on the island. He imagined their relationship to the island, the influence of isolation and containment on the development of their gender and sexuality, and looked at the inner drive and un-characteristic ambitions they displayed for women of their time.²⁸³ The photographic portraits of *Hattie and Nellie* feature two of the artist's friends dressed in Victorian-style costume, ones fabricated from scavenged material – a combination of sticks, leaves, seeds, bark and flowers from his own property in Lovedale and mangrove mud from the island. Even Turner-Carroll's costuming choices – the hairstyles and dress forms – were an estimation; a gesture of what two colonial women from the mid-nineteenth century might wear. The *Hattie and Nellie* series was shot on the island over a series of evenings, taken during the golden hours of twilight. As such, they hold a dream-like quality. Part-way between fact and fiction, light and dark, past and present, his images render the island as a liminal location, more phantasmagoric than geographic.

The central image of the series, *Hattie and Nellie #1* (2014), features a ritualistic burning set amongst the landscape of Ash Island (Figure 37). In a highly-constructed, tableaux vivant style, the two women turn their backs, fleeing from the site, having just set alight a large-scale reproduction of Edward Charles Close's 1828 watercolour *Dwellings and Windmill, Newcastle, NSW*. Painted from the vantage of the Hunter River, the watercolour is one of the earliest landscape depictions of Ash Island. Turner-Carroll describes the burning image as a wilful

²⁸³ Shan Turner-Carroll, "Artist Statement," (Unpublished 2014).

‘dissolution of a colonial mindset’.²⁸⁴ In his rendering of history, the sisters use the redemptive powers of fire, freeing them from not only the previous generations’ ‘ways of seeing’ but from their own colonially-driven methods of documenting the landscape.



Figure 37: Shan Turner-Carroll, *Hattie and Nellie #1*, 2014. Pigment ink on cotton rag, 120 x 270cm. Image courtesy of the artist

Cherie Johnson is a Gamillaroi and Weilwun woman who is both an artist and educator. Her practice comes from this dual role. She takes a self-proclaimed didactic approach to her work, using elements of traditional techniques – such as weaving and possum skin cloaks – to produce contemporary investigations into identity. Her practice is open to visual shifts but remains embedded in its politic; she is interested in how the past shapes the present, the social and political function of visual art and indigenous women’s cultural techniques, and the importance of passing knowledge on to the next generation. It is the didacticism of her work that is most intriguing; it pushes for communication and yet retains a private political significance. It was hoped Johnson would approach the exhibition premise from any number

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

of angles, not just as an indigenous woman, but as a regional artist, archivist and educator. It was imagined she might produce a record of the island bound to a history beyond the Scotts.



Figure 38: (Installation view) Cherie Johnson, *Within*, 2014. Recycled electric cabling, soundscape. Variable dimensions, 15min 26secs. Image courtesy of Harry Sideris

Johnson produced a two-part installation titled *Within* (2014), displayed in The Lock-Up's Exercise Yard. It combined twenty sculptural fish-trap and dilly-bag-like woven vessels, and a sound scape featuring two Aboriginal women – Aunty Sandra Griffen and Aunty Glenda Simon – who visited and lived on the island as children (Figure 38). The vessels were fabricated using scavenged, recycled industrial materials, specifically electrical cabling, plastic tubing, copper wire and telecommunication cables. In reference to the environmental changes Ash Island had suffered, particularly the landfill used to amalgamate the islands, the vessels combined traditional women's weaving practices with an unconventional material as conduit between past and present. The vessels not only referred to the sustainable fishing and farming practices once used by Aboriginal people in the area, they spanned a spectrum of open to closed – from tightly woven seed pods to loose and open eel-traps – in acknowledgment of

not only the range of forms using the traditional skill of weaving but also the careful balance between revealing and protecting intergenerational cultural knowledge.²⁸⁵

Johnson interviewed Aunty Sandra Griffen and Aunty Glenda Simon on a number of different occasions, tracing the aunties' memories and childhood recollections of Ash Island:

Aunty Glenda, in particular, she lived on the island as a young girl for about six years... I'd interviewed her a number of times over the telephone and she actually agreed to come to the island. So, it was the first time in 35 years... that she'd been back to the island and that's where we had our interview.²⁸⁶

The individual soundscapes combined snippets of interviews with recordings taken from the island, illustrated in Figure 39, evoking an organic tempo to the aunties memories and an aural connection to the site. The soundscapes were projected from The Lock-Up's Men's Holding Cells into the Exercise Yard, echoing across and amongst the hanging vessels, where the conversations of the two women overlapped, faded in and out, almost in dialogue with each other and the vessels. It was important to Johnson that the interview process be as conversational as possible, that the Aunties 'share what they wanted and nothing more', reiterating the importance of revealing yet protecting cultural knowledge.²⁸⁷ The recollections of the two Aboriginal women's childhood, and their descriptions of the birdlife, fish-life and their daily activities, bring forward the idea of aboriginal presence on the land as a recent, not ancient, history. They present an alternative history to occupation of the island, one that connects with a narrative far deeper and more enduring than the Scotts. Much like the contemporary materials Johnson used to craft the traditional woven forms, the soundscape offers a present moment of insight as a reflection on the past. And, the soundscape is an archival act in the face of colonial history obsessed with documentation. The relationship to site is not relegated to the past or held static in time. The aunties and their recollections are living proof of an enduring presence:

²⁸⁵ Isaac Turier and Lumina Visual, "Ash Island and Its Transformations - Cherie Johnson," (The Lock-Up, September 2014). Accessed 5 May 2017. 0:50 seconds

²⁸⁶ Ibid. 2:04 seconds

²⁸⁷ Ibid. 3:22 seconds

These aunties, when they talk about their time on the island, it's a living memory. These are people who are in their 50s and 60s talking about living on the island, having Aboriginal practice today. Some people think that Aboriginal people and traditions and customs are a thing of the past, it's not. It's alive and well today. And, it is still very, very current.²⁸⁸



Figure 39: Cherie Johnson (far right) interviews Aunty Sandra Griffen on the west bank of Kooragang, NSW. 2014. Image courtesy of Belinda Howden

Melbourne-based artist Emma van Leest was the only non-local artist selected for the project. She was invited to participate in the project through two residencies at The Lock-Up, offering an outsider's perspective on the site and story. As a paper-cutter, Emma's work is highly detailed, illustrative and ornate; she creates fantastical montages drawn from a variety of sources such as garden magazines, medieval illustrations, Baroque landscape painting and Mughal and Persian miniatures.²⁸⁹ Van Leest has a practice of working with historical subjects, such as the Batavia mutiny and shipwreck off the coast of Geraldton as portrayed in *Large*

²⁸⁸ Ibid. 4:16 seconds

²⁸⁹ Statement, Emma van Leest, "Emma Van Leest," <http://www.emmavanleest.com/home/statement/>. Accessed 15 April 2017

Infanta (2014), or the British invasion of India as her 2008 *Sanskriti Series* depicts. She applies a deft hand to recasting the icons and images of her subjects into new narratives. The amalgamation of native flora and fauna, colonial silhouettes and naval ships in works like *Untitled I (Muttonbird)*, (2011) *Untitled II (Muttonbird)* (2011) and the *Arcadia* (2011) series, create detailed and beautiful imagery that belies the darker subjects of European colonisation (see Figures 40 and 41). In the case of *Ash Island and its Transformations*, van Leest's transformation of the Scott's visual language and iconography would not only draw a line between the feminine traditions of natural history illustration and the handcraft of paper-cutting, but reveal the nationalism and processes of colonisation hidden amongst the images of their Lepidoptera.



Figure 40: (Left) Emma van Leest, *Untitled I (Muttonbird)*, 2011. Archival paper, 27 x 43cm.
Figure 41: (Right) Emma van Leest, *Untitled II (Muttonbird)*, 2011. Archival paper, 27 x 46cm.
Images courtesy of the artist

Van Leest produced a large-scale paper-cut installation – *Between the Shadows and Forgetting*. The work replicated the artists' first walk through the mangroves, taken as a group, by drawing out the layers of history and occupation of the island quite literally through

a layered passage of papercutting. With a path carved through the centre of the work, van Leest transformed her work from a traditionally two-dimensional practice into a three-dimensional form. By inviting the viewer in, to walk through the layers of flickering shadows, she not only re-enacted her first impressions of the island for the audience to experience themselves, but unearthed a narrative stratum trapped beneath the mud:

I wanted the viewer to have to look, in the way that you have to look when you're at Ash Island. You have to look, and look again, to see the layers and to see what's in the layers... to see the imprints or the impressions...the remnants of occupation.²⁹⁰

Van Leest's layers are a medley of imagery: lace-making, colonial silhouettes, colonial homes and architecture, mangrove pneumatophores, Ginkgo (the maidenhair tree), the flora and fauna of the island, as well as references to the snake and birdlife illustrated by the sisters themselves. Her amalgamation of colonial, natural and referential imagery is a fantastical, imagined hybrid tying the threads of history together. The passageway of *Between the Shadows and Forgetting* replicates the eerie, and at times claustrophobic, repetitions of the mangroves van Leest felt when she visited the island (Figure 42). Even though the remnants of history might be cleansed through the redemptive powers of the tidal landscape, her work is an imagined excavation of the past; as she describes, although 'things can disappear, they don't fully leave.'²⁹¹

It was important the project include a non-local artist in the exhibition dialogue and van Leest's work, in particular, offered a complementary perspective. The intention behind inviting her to handle a narrative of local significance and site was two-fold. Not only was it an occasion to draw an alternative perspective into the dialogue of the exhibition, it was also an occasion to draw a deeply regional story into a broader, national dialogue. Being asked to respond to her first and second impressions of the landscape, was a request in-sync with van Leest's already established approach to image-making. In the past, her practice had handled a subject she was separate from, either by time or distance, dealing with it in an imagined

²⁹⁰ Isaac Turier and Lumina Visual, "Ash Island and Its Transformations - Emma Van Leest," (The Lock-Up, September 2014). Accessed 9 May 2017. 0:40 seconds

²⁹¹ Ibid. 1:10 seconds

space.²⁹² Although she rarely visits the places that appear in her work, *Between the Shadows and Forgetting* is ‘told in remnants and shadows, for the viewer to get glimpses and suggestions in the way you do when walking on Ash Island today’.²⁹³ It references the loose threads of history, the open-ended shifts in form, use and cultural relationship to the landscape:

We mark the land; the land marks us. We are inextricably linked. There are layers of occupation, of interaction, that are left on the land, if you know how and where to look. The land tells stories. It conceals and reveals them. It reminds us of who we were, what we did, and what the land did to us.²⁹⁴



Figure 42: Emma van Leest installing her large-scale paper-cut *Between the Shadows and Forgetting*, The Lock-Up, Newcastle, NSW, 2014. Image courtesy of Belinda Howden

²⁹² “Statement: *Between the Shadows and Forgetting*”, van Leest Title of Weblog. Accessed 9 May 2017

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁴ “Imprints, occupations, and drawing a very long bow”, *ibid.*

The residency proved particularly important to the development of van Leest's work. As described, her final paper-cut installation replicated the first walk through the mangroves, taken as a group during our first meeting. In her residency blog, van Leest describes that the conversations between the artists were formative not only in the development of her own work but they also fulfilled an important curatorial idea – that the artists might conceptually prompt each through dialogue and discussion:

One of the highlights of the walk [we did] around the Ash Island area was having the insights of local artist Cherie Johnson... Cherie was able to explain to us how various plants were cultivated, adapted and used for weaving and eating, how fish traps were set and what sort of wildlife would have lived on the island in the time of the Scott sisters. She pointed out a sea eagle that was flying up and down the river and explained that the sea eagle is the totem animal for the area... Cherie also provided information, from contemporary sources, which indicated that at the time of the arrival of the second wave of settlers in the area in the mid-1820s there were at least 4,000 adult indigenous men, indicating a sizeable indigenous population. It raised questions for us. What happened to these people? Where did they go?... It was interesting for me to have Cherie's perspective. In my work for the last couple of years, I have considered the role of the 'colonisers' and what the process meant for them, to have a hands-on, on-this-spot glimpse of what it meant to the people at the receiving end, and of course the land, was incredibly illuminating.²⁹⁵

THE FILM

In retrospect, *Ash Island and its Transformations* can be understood as a process-based exhibition. A curatorial decision that potentially reflects this fact was choosing to document the exhibition through film rather than catalogue (Figure 43). There were a number of reasons for choosing this form. First, was the expense of publishing and long-lead times involved with producing a catalogue. Given the curatorial premise of all new and commissioned artwork, the ability to draw together a cohesive overview – typical of exhibition catalogues – would

²⁹⁵ "Kooragang (Ash Island)", *ibid.*

have proven particularly difficult. Second, as part of the curatorial strategy I wanted to promote the exhibition beyond the region. One solution to combat the potential parochialism of the project was to introduce an online presence, and the film satisfied this aim. Third, was my curatorial interest in alternative methods of documentation. Distinct from more commercial outputs, like a published catalogue, I wanted to produce a document that reflected the poetic intentions of each artist, rather than present the authoritative voice of the curator.



Figure 43: Isaac Turier (left) of Blackbox Pictures filming artist Nicola Hensel on Kooragang, NSW, 2014. Image courtesy of Belinda Howden

The film was designed to function as an archival resource for the artists. This was an important part of pursuing this method of documentation, particularly in choosing *not* to record the exhibition through more traditional, and certainly academic, literary methods. The film was intended to have longevity for the artists beyond the lifespan of the exhibition, particularly as a reference against any processes and practices they might choose to continue in the future. The decision to focus on a ‘talking heads’ style of interview, where the artists spoke on behalf of their own work rather than having it digested through a curatorial framework and language, indicates this priority. This idea proved successful, not only in its wide

accessibility and ‘shareability’, extending the reach and longevity of the exhibition, but also more specifically in its use as a resource outside the contemporary art context. For example, Johnson used her film for professional means as an artist but also as an educator in the development of secondary-level education curriculum.²⁹⁶



Figure 44: Isaac Turier (right) producing the *Ash Island and its Transformations* film, Kooragang, NSW, 2014. Image courtesy of Belinda Howden

The initial structure of the film was to interview the artists, speaking about their work and the development of their ideas, back-grounded by the final exhibition. At the advice of Director and Cinematographer, Isaac Turier, this was expanded to include studio and home visits during the development period of the exhibition, documenting each artist’s work in progress (Figure 44). This suggestion transformed the film into a much richer record. Rather than a focus on results, the artists are captured in progress. This meant the film was also an exercise in visual documentation. It depicted a visual process (the artists working) as well as a visual result (the final exhibition). Images of the site and the exhibition are cut together, creating a link between Ash Island – the place – and *Ash Island and its Transformations*. With this

²⁹⁶ Email correspondence with Cherie Johnson. 28 October 2014

purpose the gaze of the film was successful in articulating some of the more elusive elements of the exhibition: process-lead research, an artist's method in approaching concepts of 'place' and site, the development of an artist's practice and voice over time, and the dialogic focus of the exhibition, where the artists are in dialogue with each other and their practices are in dialogue with the past.

In the *Ash Island and its Transformations* suite of films, the landscape and the artistic response to the landscape are conflated. In this sense, the film creates a bridge across time and space; it creates a dialogue between geography and geosophy. It returns the curatorial gaze of *Ash Island and its Transformations* to the island, demonstrating how a landscape might inspire and prompt artists working today to generate new stories and narratives of place.

CONCLUSION

Ash Island and its Transformations addressed a number of curatorial and exhibition-making questions regarding the conceptualisation of 'place'. It was devised as a poetic, post-colonial response to an island, specifically a response to its cultural, environmental and social histories. *Ash Island and its Transformations* achieved this under particular aspects of the project. What might be described as a situational mnemonic, the exhibition prompted both the retrieval and generation of new memories tied to a location or geographic site – the most compelling example being Johnson's interviews with Aunty Sandra Griffen and Aunty Glenda Simon, conducted on Ash Island. As a project, it also answered one of its initial claims – that the exhibition would contribute a new layer of cultural material to an existing history inspired by the island. All four artists followed a narrative thread within the research material presented to them, as well as their first-hand experience of the island itself, and transformed these elements into contemporary art that addressed issues of colonisation, environmentalism, regionalism, historical revisionism, the importance of dialogue between artistic practices and maintaining intergenerational knowledge.

Ash Island and its Transformations also raised a number of curatorial concerns. As described in greater detail in Chapter Five, the exhibition demonstrated the conservatism and risks associated with a curatorial conceptualisation of 'place'. The project was produced, firstly,

under a scholarly research tradition, a framework that reinforces a hierarchy of literary knowledge over oral, tacit or embodied knowledge. And secondly, the project unconsciously replicated a number of curatorial choices visible within regional and state institutions. The combination of these choices left a number of deeper curatorial research questions unanswered: what is the purpose of curating 'place', and, what knowledge do we gain through curating research?

A major research discovery of *Ash Island and its Transformations* was in identifying the unwillingness of Ash Island, as a physical site and artistic motif, to bend to an imposed curatorial will. As a landscape, even a phantasmagoric one, the island didn't fit a number of tropes made visible in Chapter One or within the case study *Nowhereisland*. For example, Ash Island's narrative history was complicated by real, living memories connected to the site. And, as described further in Chapter Four, the island didn't subscribe to more dominant physical or metaphysical attributes of 'islandness'.²⁹⁷ In its unwillingness, Ash island maintained a specificity; the island continually asserted itself and its figuration in terms of its geography, social or cultural history. This was an important research discovery for two reasons. First, it highlighted the invisible curatorial will or narrative that was being projected onto the island landscape. In recognising this invisibility, issues of curating or conceptualising 'place' came to the fore. The curatorial decisions were recognised as an inherited set of ideas, transplanted onto or coming from outside of the lived experiences of 'place', history or meaning. And second, *Ash Island and its Transformations* left a number of concepts unexplored: notions of 'islandness', island lure, island tropes and the island metaphor as a curatorial or artistic device. This prompted a new exhibition project – *The Island Could be Heard by Night* – partially in response to some of these lingering or overlooked ideas.

²⁹⁷ Belinda Howden and Deb Mansfield, "The Island Could Be Heard by Night," (The Lock-Up, 2015). Pg23

CHAPTER FOUR – THE ISLAND COULD BE HEARD BY NIGHT

The Island Could be Heard by Night was an exhibition project immediately following *Ash Island and its Transformations*. Knowing this, *The Island Could be Heard by Night* can be read as a project partially created from the lingering research ideas unaddressed or overlooked in *Ash Island and its Transformations*. Having reflected on the conventions of *Ash Island and its Transformations* – that is, the conventions of historical revisionism combined with the chosen style of curatorial execution (an exhibition that replicated the standards and practices visible in regional and state institutions) – I felt I had chosen formal curatorial methods that resulted in a polished and well-executed exhibition but one that ultimately didn't exhume some of the richer subject matter concerning island tropes. The research focus I brought to *The Island Could be Heard by Night*, then, looked more closely at islands as metaphorical or creative devices, and at the artistic or literary willingness to mythologise the landform.

The Island Could be Heard by Night was a collaborative exhibition project between myself and artist Deb Mansfield. The focus was Nobbys, an ex-island, now headland to Nobbys Beach of Newcastle, NSW. Similar to Ash Island, Nobbys is a compelling example of an island lost. Its disappearance was due to large-scale environmental intervention and processes of European colonisation during the mid-nineteenth century. With a shared fascination for the cultural and figurative potential of islands, Mansfield and I explored the lost landscape of Nobbys as a mythologised site; we investigated the history, physicality and cultural attitudes towards the site, framing Nobbys as a phantasmagoric island. Again, the exhibition was staged at The Lock-Up of Newcastle, NSW, a decision based on professional rapport as well as continuity between the two projects. In addition to the public gallery exhibition, we produced an online publication featuring all works from the exhibition as well as a self-conducted and self-edited interview staged in the lead up to the exhibition opening – 'A Conversation Between Two Islophiles'. Across the two spaces of display – the gallery and the online publication – the project dealt with the island tropes of Nobbys, looking specifically at the mechanics of island-myth, historical revisionism and fiction as an interrogative tool.

Deb Mansfield has a broad practice in photography and installation, but at the time of *The Island Could be Heard by Night*, her work was primarily executed in the medium of photo-

tapestries. The initial concept of the exhibition was for Mansfield to produce a new body of photo-tapestries in response to the phantasmagoric island of Nobbys. In turn, I was to produce a body of writing in response to Mansfield's new work. An integral element to Mansfield's practice is outsourcing artistic labour, as was the case with producing the machine-woven photo-tapestries. In the early stages of the project, however, Mansfield's supplier ceased production of small-scale digital-loom weaving, forcing Mansfield to re-stage existing works made in previous years. This was achieved, quite literally, by way of re-framing – through commissioning new resin frames. And, metaphorically – by way of re-titling works. As Figures 45 and 46 demonstrate, *Are you sure you can't hear that?* (2015) – presented as part of *The Island Could be Heard by Night* (Figure 45) – was a revision of an existing photo-tapestry *The sea is going down*, made in 2014 (Figure 46).

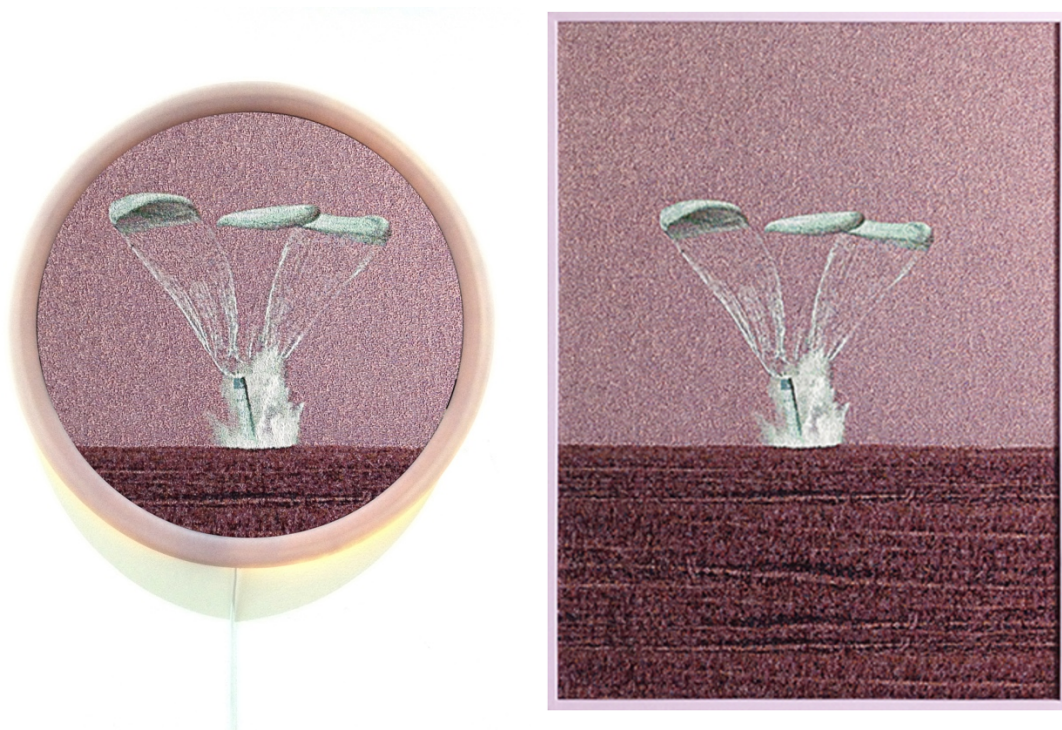


Figure 45: (Installation view) Deb Mansfield, *Are you sure you can't hear that?*, 2015. Hand-woven photo-tapestry (while at sea), resin frame and cleat, lighting, electrical cord, 60cm diameter. Image courtesy of the artist. **Figure 46:** Deb Mansfield, *The sea is going down*, 2014. Photo-tapestry, 89 x 66cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

The change in Mansfield's ability to produce new work saw only one original photo-tapestry completed for the exhibition – *Emotional distress and distaste for Newcastle (the explosion has never been any different)* (2015). The remaining six photo-tapestries were existing works

re-framed and re-titled from previous exhibitions and, as such, significantly shifted the purpose and outcome of the exhibition. Rather than responding to a new series of photo-tapestries, I wrote a suite of creative fiction in response to the history of Nobbys and my own research, thus far, on the trappings and tropes of island metaphor. Four of the five stories written for the project – *Hear What?* (2015), *The island could be heard by night* (2015), *Centralists and Peripheralists* (2015) and *The island is a document of desire* (2015) – were installed as a narrated surround-soundscape in the largest of The Lock-Up’s Women Cells (Figure 47). The fifth piece of fiction – *Increasingly scaled-down containment* (2015) – was installed as vinyl wall-text in the Exercise Yard ante-room.



Figure 47: (Installation view) Belinda Howden, *Hear What?*, *Centralists and Peripheralists*, *The island could be heard by night* and *The island is a document of desire*, 2015. 5.1 surround-soundscape of narrated fiction on loop, 13min 15secs. Image courtesy of the artist

In response to these changes, this chapter places an emphasis on the analysis of my own work rather than Mansfield’s – or the combination of the two – with exception to *Emotional distress and distaste for Newcastle (the explosion has never been any different)* (Figure 48). This photo-tapestry, in particular, was produced under the conditions and subject concerns of the project and is therefore considered in relation to the collaborative dynamics and

curatorial imperatives of the exhibition. Beyond this however, the creative fiction most acutely dealt with the subject of Nobby's as a phantasmagoric island. By choosing to focus on the creative fiction of *The Island Could be Heard by Night* there is an occasion to reflect on creative writing as a methodology for thinking about and investigating island tropes, as well as considering how literary island metaphors might translate into a gallery or exhibition context.



Figure 48: Deb Mansfield, *Emotional distress and distaste for Newcastle (the explosion has never been any different)*, 2015. Hand-woven photo tapestry (while at sea), resin frame and cleat, lighting, electrical cord, 60cm diameter. Image courtesy of the artist

This chapter introduces the collaborative elements of *The Island Could be Heard by Night*, where decision-making processes and knowledge-sharing has informed the shape of the project or proven generative. Returning to the idea that *The Island Could be Heard by Night* was crafted as a response – in part – to the strict curatorial framework of *Ash Island and its Transformations*, the collaborative elements of *The Island Could be Heard by Night* present an alternative curatorial methodology. This methodology encourages a more experimental approach towards both the island subject and the exhibition format. The elements of

collaboration are exercised through shared curatorial decisions – specifically in regard to marketing, producing and editing the self-conducted interview ‘A Conversation Between Two Islophiles’ – as well as introducing the premise and presence of fiction within a gallery context. Whilst this chapter offers an overview of these collaborative elements, Chapter Five further contextualizes them in relation to broader theories of curatorial practice, and makes comparisons in curatorial approach between the two projects – *Ash Island and its Transformations* and *The Island Could be Heard by Night*.

ISLAND HIERARCHY

In ‘A Conversation Between Two Islophiles’, the self-conducted interview from *The Island Could be Heard by Night* publication, Mansfield and I touch on the premise of island hierarchy. In our discussion, I express my frustration with Ash Island. As a landscape, I found it unwilling to conform to more typical or dominant ideas of ‘islandness’. The problem, I theorised, lay partially with the fact that Ash Island was a tidal landscape dominated by mangroves; ‘they make the landscape less about island-ness and more about filtration and cleansing.’²⁹⁸ In reference to her 2004 photographic emulsion *Mangrove Wall – Institute of Modern Art (Brisbane)*, Mansfield describes her own experience of working with mangroves and littoral zones (Figure 49). As a landscape, she describes, mangroves don’t hold ‘the myth... so heavily associated with the island’.²⁹⁹

The discussion reveals a shared assumption: the measure of island myth can be directly related to the frequency of island visitation. As part of making *Mangrove Wall*, Mansfield states: ‘I physically went [to the mangroves] all the time. I mean, *all* the time. [With Nobbys] I don’t feel like I have to go [there]...which is wild!’³⁰⁰ Reminiscent of Gillis’ words – that islomania occurs more in absence than presence – we agree; the most desirable island is evocative enough not to require continuous physical visitation. The island as a stand-alone object, and with a clear hard-edged-ness and boundary (unlike the littoral gradation of

²⁹⁸ Ibid. Pg23

²⁹⁹ Ibid. Pg22

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

mangroves), is more easily viewed in the mind's eye and more easily inhabited by the imagination. Mansfield continues:

Do you think the pointier or taller or bigger the island the less we feel inclined to visit it in the real? And we are more content to work with its myth. I love that idea of island hierarchy.³⁰¹

Mansfield poses the question in regard to an island's flatness, but inadvertently poses the possibility of an ideal island form. Between height, scale, pointy-ness (as Mansfield suggests), and geology, she forms the image of an island that best holds the projections and desires of those who look to it. There is an ideal shape for capturing desire. In the case of Ash Island, flatness wasn't the issue; it was the governing nature of the mangroves. In the case of Nobbys, we find a compelling description of island lure, where changes in the island's form and function over the course of history prove it to be an object of continuing cultural fascination and fixation.



Figure 49: Deb Mansfield, *Mangrove Wall – Institute of Modern Art (Brisbane)*, 2004. Photographic liquid emulsion, approx. 600 x 200cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

³⁰¹ Ibid. Pg23

LOSING AN ISLAND

Mansfield articulates her ideal island: rocky, tall, triangular-ish with a scale appropriate to capturing the imagination. Nobbys, which today forms part of Newcastle's coastline and is mouth to Newcastle Harbour and the Hunter River, appears to be that island. It is rocky. Its stratigraphy features layers of conglomerate, sandstone, shale, coal and tuff. It is tall. On his 1801 survey of Coal Harbour, 'Ensign Francis Barrallier estimated the island to be 203 feet (62 metres). Rigby and Fryer (2010) estimated the original height of Nobbys was actually less than this, at about 142 feet (43 metres).³⁰² Today it stands at only 98 feet (30 meters) but visually rises up from sea-level on all sides: the river on the west, the concrete arc of the break wall from southwest to northeast, the sands of Nobbys beach to the south and the unending east of the Pacific Ocean.



Figure 50: Frederick Terry, *The Nobbies from Newcastle*, 1853. Steel engraving, 21.0 x 26.9cm. From the collection of the Newcastle Art Gallery. Image courtesy of the University of Newcastle Cultural Collections.

³⁰² Roslyn Kerr, "In Search of Nobbys' Tunnels," (Coal River Working Party, University of Newcastle NSW, 2011). Pg8

Historically speaking, Nobbys was once an ideal shape too; ‘Barrallier’s chart of 1801 shows that in plain view, Nobbys Island was triangular in shape with a large wave-cut rock platform extending and tapering southwestwards into the river’.³⁰³ Frederick Terry’s 1853 steel engraving *The Nobbies from Newcastle*, illustrates this early form (Figure 50). The combination of shape, location and distinct geography, caused the island to be both a victim to and icon of prevailing European attitudes of the time. This is evidenced by a history of radical human and environmental intervention.

Nobbys was an icon for the Awabakal community (people of the Awaba or Lake Macquarie), who lived in the area for thousands of years prior to its ‘discovery’ by Shortland in 1797.³⁰⁴ ‘The area around the mouth of the river was known as Mu-lu-bin-ba, place of an edible type of fern...[and the] Coquun was one of the names given to the river that was later to be renamed the Hunter.’³⁰⁵ Accurate attribution of the Dreaming of Nobbys is difficult to point to, so too is an exact recitation of the story.³⁰⁶ Information that is publically accessible, however, relays the mythology of the site, its educational purpose for teaching cultural and social rules, and explains the existence of geological phenomena throughout the region. According to the Dreaming, Nobbys is a prison, even today, to a Kangaroo who once transgressed Wallaby clan law:

One day a large male kangaroo attacked a female wallaby. This was against the law. He was banished from the kangaroo group forever. After a long chase by the wallabies the Kangaroo reached Muloobinba, the place of sea ferns, now called Newcastle... The wallabies thought that he had drowned. But the kangaroo had swum to Nobbys Island

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ The spelling of these terms change across records, as they are spelt phonetically.

³⁰⁵ Glenn Albrecht, "Rediscovering the Coquun: Towards an Environmental History of the Hunter River" (paper presented at the River Forum 2000, Wyndham Estate, Hunter River, NSW, 2000). Pg1

³⁰⁶ Not only can multiple versions of the dreaming be read across a number of public records, the Kangaroo that Lives Inside Nobbys is men’s business and requires consultation with a male elder from the local Awabakal community.

and entered the tall rocky outcrop, making sure that he was out of sight of everyone.³⁰⁷

...The Kangaroo is still there hiding and at times he trembles and shakes in frustration at his confinement and the perpetual fear of being caught by the Wallaby clan. The Dreaming Story is thought to relate to the earthquakes that regularly affect Newcastle and the lower Hunter (Maynard, pers. Comm. 2000). What remains of Nobbys is now covered in the introduced weed, Bitou Bush, and the history of this former island is not well known even in Newcastle.³⁰⁸

The final statement – that few people are aware of Nobbys' island status – is because today Nobbys is no longer an island. The successful attempts made by the early settlers of Newcastle's colony fundamentally changed the shape of Nobbys and the Newcastle coastline, eradicating its island form by permanently folding it into the shape of the mainland landscape.

The first mention of Nobbys on public record is in 1770, made by Captain James Cook, who observed it as a 'small round rock or island'.³⁰⁹ It was another thirty-one years before Barrallier charted the mouth of the River, producing an aerial survey of Coal Island, as it was named at the time due to its two visible coal seams. The first pictorial views of the island were produced by colonial artist Richard Browne: an 1807 watercolour painted from the vantage of Prospect Hill (now The Hill) looking north, and a subsequent etching, from 1812, titled *Newcastle in New South Wales with a distant view of Port Stephen, taken from Prospect Hill* (Figure 51). These images clearly describe the distinct wave-shape of the island, its original height, unique position at the mouth of the Harbour and proximity to the nearby headland of Signal Hill (today Fort Scratchley).

³⁰⁷ NSW Education Standards Authority, "The Kangaroo That Lives inside Nobbys," <https://ab-ed.nesa.nsw.edu.au/go/7-10/science/units/story-2/units/introducing-our-changing-earth-/activities-and-worksheets/the-kangaroo-that-lives-inside-nobbys>. Accessed 16 June 2017

³⁰⁸ Albrecht. Pg6

³⁰⁹ Captain James Cook quoted by John Fryer and Russell Rigby, "Reshaping Nobbys," in *Presentation to Newcastle Port Corporation and Land and Property Management Authority* (Newcastle, NSW: Hunter Living Histories, 2011). Pg1

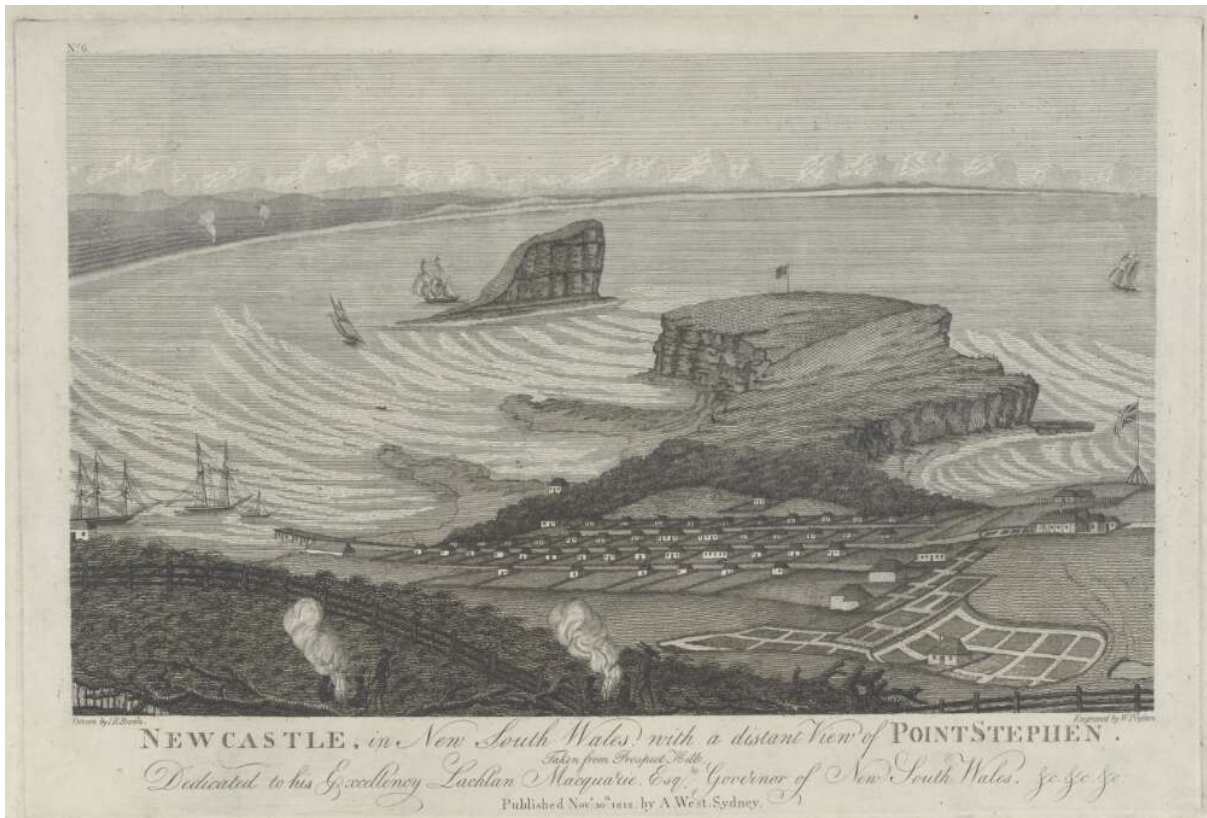


Figure 51: Richard Browne, *Newcastle, in New South Wales, with a distant view of Point Stephen, taken from Prospect Hill*, published by A. West, November 30, 1812. Engraving, 27.5 x 40.5cm. Engraved by Walter Preston. From the collection of the National Library of Australia

The island's position proved quickly to be a hindrance. As early as 1801 Barrallier writes:

You can see from my map what a fearsome passage one has to traverse in order to reach this beautiful river. The roaring of the waves, crashing one upon the other and breaking with a terrible noise on the steep rocks of the island, and raging as they roll onto the sands of the opposite shore, would make the most intrepid sailor tremble.³¹⁰

As Newcastle's harbour became more industrious the island continuously proved itself troublesome. It managed to capture the attitudes of the day, binding its fate to the changing needs of the colony. A guardian to the river's mouth, Nobbys, '...like the mythical monsters of Greek mythology, Scylla and Charybdis, [was] always ready to bring the unwary ship and

³¹⁰ Ensign Francis Barrallier writes to Governor King on 24 June 1801. The University of Newcastle, "The Quest for Macquarie Pier," (Newcastle, NSW: The University of Newcastle, 4 August 2010). Accessed 1 June 2017. Pg5

its crew to its death on the Stockton oyster bank...'³¹¹ The consistent destruction of colonial assets prompted Captain James Wallis to seek a solution in the form of a causeway, linking mainland to island (Figure 52). Construction of Macquarie Pier began with the ceremonial laying of the Foundation Stone on 5th August 1818, at 4pm, laid by Governor Lachlan Macquarie, 'the artificers and Labourers were served with an allowance of Spirits to drink success to the undertaking — which they did with 3 hearty cheers.'³¹² The pier, despite taking nearly thirty years of hard convict labour to complete, is responsible for the appearance of Newcastle's coastline today. It was the beginning of a sequence of irreversible changes for both Nobbys and the Newcastle headland where a combination of forces – human intervention, and the accumulation of wind and wave action over time – produced an entirely new landscape.

Further changes to Nobbys continued across the slow progress of Macquarie's Pier with the quarrying of the island for coal and building material necessary for reinforcing the pier; the 'nibbling' at Nobbys as geologist Roslyn Kerr describes in her report *In Search of Nobbys' Tunnels*.³¹³ The quarry was excavated from the island's southern side and 'substantially altered the shape of Nobbys so that it had an irregular, hacked out appearance'.³¹⁴ This remains today as a large depression in an otherwise rotund form. By 1853, a government survey was conducted into the best position, height and means of erection of a lighthouse at the mouth of the harbour. This began the process of tunneling deep into the body of Nobbys. Convict-cut excavations were made for the purpose of blasting the top off the island, by way of gunpowder and explosives, in an effort to reduce the height of the island from its original 142 feet (43 metres) to approximately 30 feet (9 metres) above sea level.

Some colonial Goth, whose antipathy to interesting natural scenery seems to be a sort of inherent or original sin, has proposed to level Nobbys Island together, on the plea of its having been repeatedly found guilty of taking wind out of the sails of vessels

³¹¹ Ibid. Pg7-8

³¹² Ibid. Pg13

³¹³ Kerr. Pg9

³¹⁴ Ibid. Pg10

entering the harbor – a sort of misdemeanor, amounting, I presume, to petty larceny on the part of the island.³¹⁵

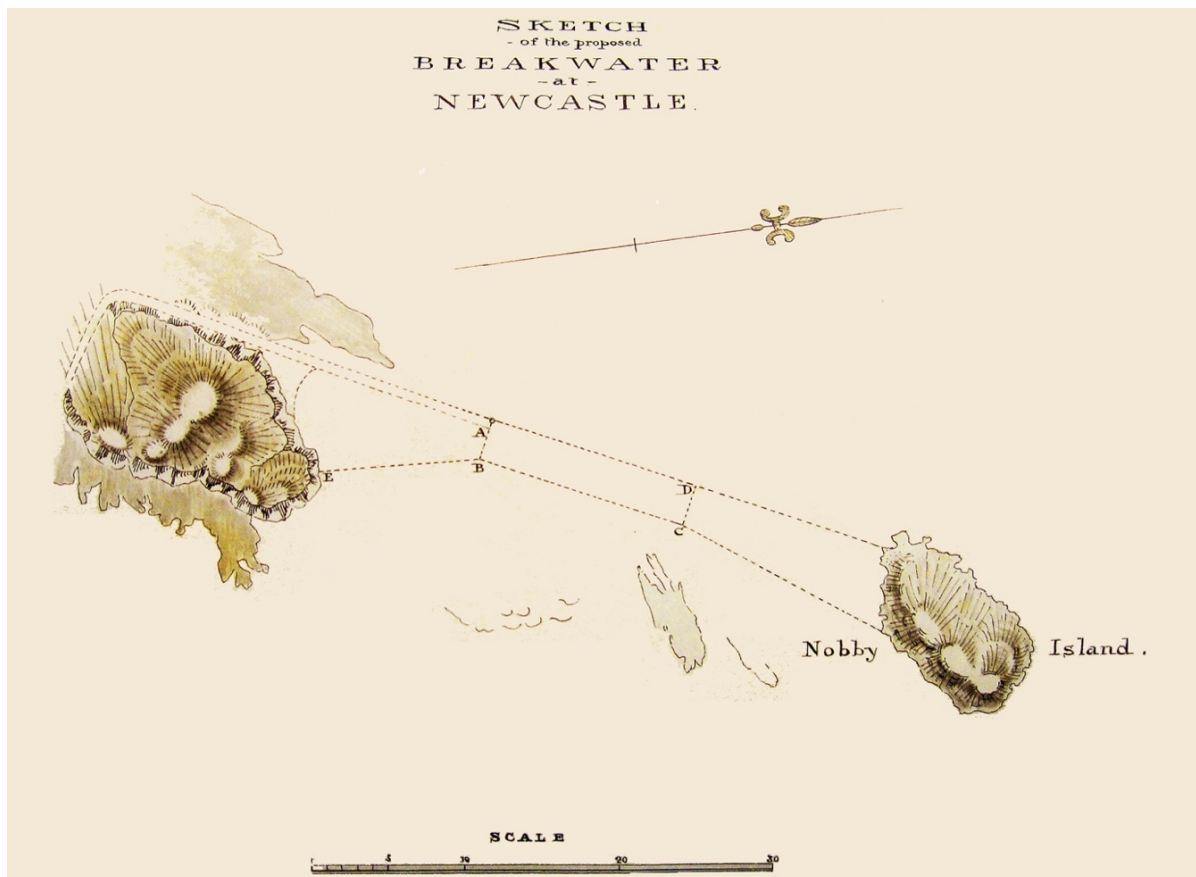


Figure 52: Sir Thomas Mitchell, *Sketch of the Proposed Breakwater at Newcastle*, 1833. Dimensions unavailable. From the collection of the NSW Parliamentary Library. Image courtesy of Deborah Brown

Confused by the idea that the island might be levelled completely, a petition was sent to the Governor General signed by forty-nine concerned citizens whose livelihoods depended on the port – masters of ships, traders and general Newcastle inhabitants. Nobbys' was the focus of Newcastle's first environmental action by local protestors,³¹⁶ furthering evidence that the island was not only an icon of and for the Newcastle colony but it was a lightning rod for public opinion, resistance and attention. As a site, it managed to trap the local psyche.

³¹⁵ John Dunmore Land quoted by Albrecht. Pg6

³¹⁶ Personal communication with University of Newcastle Cultural Collections archivist Gianni d'Gravio. September 2014

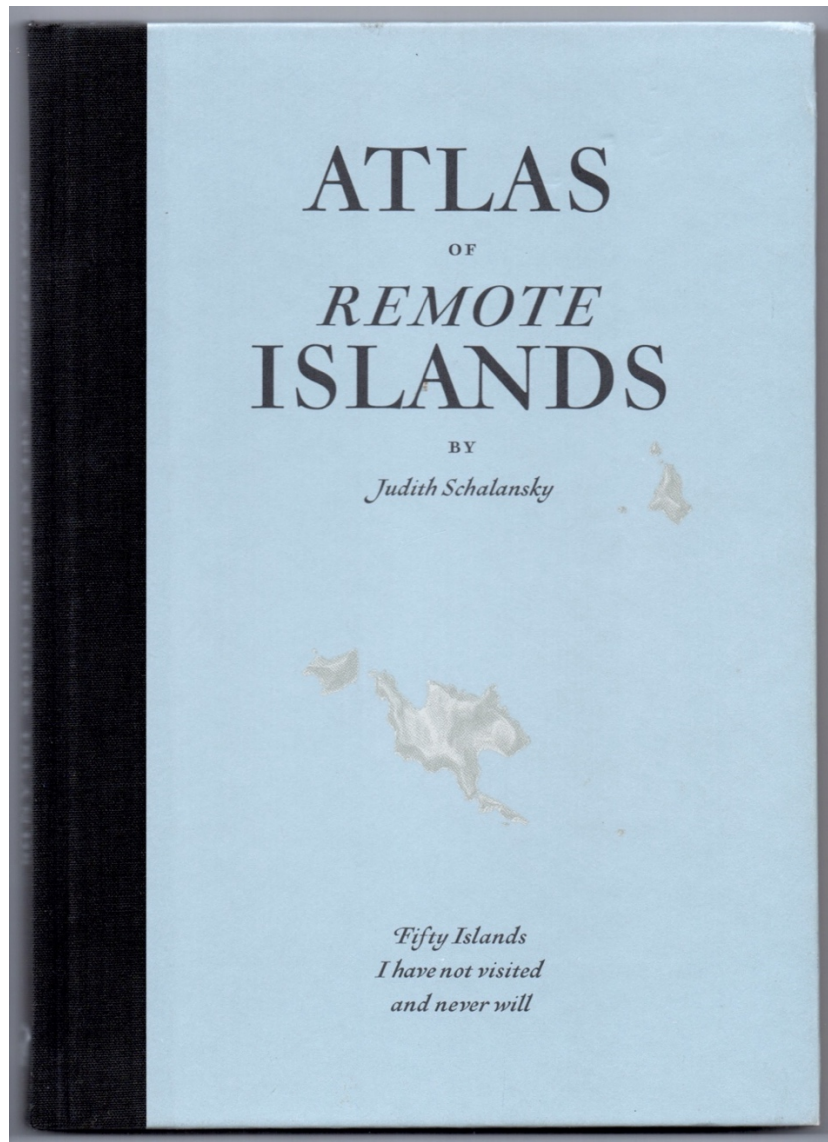


Figure 53: Judith Schalansky, *Atlas of Remote Islands: fifty islands I have not visited and never will*, 2010. Book cover, Particular Books, London. Image courtesy of Belinda Howden

The changes in form, use and attitude towards the island, over the course of European settlement and its pre-colonial mythology, are the fundamental “truths” behind the exhibition *The Island Could be Heard by Night*. Mansfield and I used these truths as departure points for our respective work to expand upon. This approach was inspired by our common interest in the literary work *Atlas of Remote Islands: fifty islands I have never visited and never will* by German author and designer Judith Schalansky (Figure 53). Part-armchair travel, part-cartographic exercise, Schalansky uses real islands – slices of their real histories, geologies, geographies, occupations or climatic conditions – to produce a document that exists part-way

between fact and fiction. There is a surveying aspect to the work, where Schalansky not only literally maps the fifty selected islands, but surveys the miniature worlds from the comfortable and authoritative position of her own lounge room:

Consulting maps can diminish the wanderlust that they awaken, as the act of looking at them can replace the act of travel. But looking at maps is much more than an act of aesthetic replacement. Anyone who opens an atlas wants everything at once, without limits – the whole world. This longing will always be great, far greater than any satisfaction to be had by attaining what is desired. Give me an atlas over a guidebook any day. There is no more poetic book in the world.³¹⁷

Schalansky's work prompted the original premise of the exhibition, to make use of facts or truths about Nobbys as a way of interjecting and expanding upon more intangible elements of mythology, iconography, and the phantasmagoric status of a lost island.

By the time I met Mansfield, in 2014, I had already worked at Nobbys as a site manager for the past year. Nobbys had opened to the public after a long period of inaccessibility due to the derelict state of the three lighthouse cottages it hosted. The elevated and exposed nature of Nobbys meant I spent a year observing the site, tracking weather as it moved across and around the headland, talking to visitors about the history of the site, and gaining a unique vantage on Newcastle from the second highest point in the city. Mansfield was enlivened by the idea that I worked as a 'lighthouse keeper'. Although my role had nothing to do with the function of the lighthouse, her willingness to mythologise my position was telling. I draw attention to this fact on two occasions. In the *The Island Could be Heard by Night* online publication, I reiterate this myth by introducing myself as 'an ex-lighthouse keeper'.³¹⁸ Then later, I undo this myth in the short story *The island is a document of desire*. As a form of self-portraiture, I write:

³¹⁷ Judith Schalansky, *Atlas of Remote Islands: Fifty Islands I Have Not Visited and Never Will*, trans. Christine Lo (London: Particular Books, 2010). Pg23

³¹⁸ Howden and Mansfield. Pg3

The other woman moonlights as a lighthouse keeper. She crafts her fictional life atop the island's crest. In the dark of winter, when no one visits, she choreographs her dances alone. The movements are swept over by the rhythmic spotlight. It reveals nothing, except maybe the shape of her limbs in space. She would never tell anyone she was a lighthouse keeper mainly because, categorically speaking, that would be fiction too.³¹⁹

The impulse to mythologise – the island, ourselves, the histories connected to Nobbys – touched all aspects of *The Island Could be Heard by Night*. From the broad decisions of curating our own work and interviewing ourselves for publication – the casual-looking results of which belie the heavy editing and careful construction – to the titles of Mansfield's work or placement of works in the gallery. During our first project meeting, Mansfield and I fleshed out a number of ideas: the importance of producing work for two exhibition spaces – the gallery and the publication; looking at the subject of an island lost in plain sight; revision of a colonial history obsessed with erasing the island; and a methodology, borrowed from the *Atlas of Remote Islands*, of crafting fact into fiction. This method, in particular, was important to all aspects of the project, and was used as a mechanism for commandeering the exhibition audience. Using fiction to interrupt and interject an alternative narrative trajectory was a method for overturning assumptions regarding the colonial history of the site, the myths of the island, as well as more unexpected yet equally important subjects of gender, the role of art within the process of place-making and story-telling, and processes of collaboration.

THE ISLAND IS A DOCUMENT OF DESIRE

In writing the creative fiction for *The Island Could be Heard by Night* I was influenced by *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (2009), a volume of short stories spanning more than two decades of the American author's work. Similar to Schalansky, Davis' stories present a 'slice' of insight; they act as a window or porthole into another world or another time. They are extremely short – from one sentence long, such as *Samuel Johnson is Indignant* (2001), up to ten pages; they are set amongst different times, locations, and written using different

³¹⁹ Ibid. Pg17

genders, points of view and languages. Their brevity and diversity is significant. Davis' stylistic choices reflect elements of Schalansky's atlas; both authors offer a compressed overview and glimpse into a self-contained world.

Another source of inspiration for the written works of *The Island Could be Heard by Night* was the work of Australian author and academic Margaret Merrilees, in particular the short story *The Attraction of Mountains* (2001). This story combines two narratives: one historical, one personal. The first recounts the efforts of Astronomer Reverend Nevil Maskelyne, who in 1774 travelled to Perthshire of Scotland, particularly the mountain Schiehallion, on a scientific mission for the Royal Society:

Maskelyne's plan was nothing less than to measure the Density of the Earth. In order to achieve this, he would quantify the Attraction of Mountains. The Royal Society's Committee of Attraction was overseeing the project...A plaque commemorates Maskelyne's experiment. He 'set up observatories on either side of Schiehallion to measure by how much plumb-lines would be pulled out of the vertical and towards the mountain by the gravitational force due to its mass...it became the first determination of Newton's Universal Gravitational Constant...It's all to do with weight.³²⁰

And the second narrative, woven between the snippets of historic detail about Maskelyne's scientific quest, describes the process of losing love. Set in the present day, Merrilees relates the universal laws of physics, the gravity of bodies and landscapes, to the relationship between herself and her partner Jane:

Jane and I were less clear in our aims. We went to Schiehallion by accident, meandering tourists. (Shouldn't we look at something?) Our goal was Skye and any other photogenic landscapes in between...We thought we knew the weight of our love.³²¹

³²⁰ Margaret Merrilees, "The Attraction of Mountains," *Meanjin* 60, no. 4 (2001). Pg1

³²¹ Ibid.

The Attraction of Mountains makes use of two literary mechanisms that I emulate in *The island is a document of desire*: twinning the past with the present, and using self-portraiture as a method for investigating gendered histories. By splicing time, and collapsing an historic event with the present day, Merrilees' approach is irreverent. It deflates the historic (and implied heroic) knowledge quests bound up in the acts of colonisation. And, pairing her subjects within the same geographic space, the historic quest and the personal quest are connected through time by landscape. They simultaneously borrow the power and reduce the weight of each other. In *The Attraction of Mountains* Merrilees' subjects are twinned in their common desire for knowledge and obedience to a type of universal law (the laws of physics and the rules of amorous attraction).

The second mechanism Merrilees uses – self-portraiture – destabilises the heroic narrative of the solo male as a central figure in shaping and changing modern history:

Maskelyne was no stranger to conflict. For a start, there was his Schiehallion assistant, the simmering Reuben Burrow. Maskelyne recommended Burrow for the project. However, the Royal Society feared that the results would be less credible if undertaken by Burrow alone 'on account of his inferiority of education and situation in life'. Or so Maskelyne notes. Maskelyne was prevailed upon to undertake the work himself...Burrow was later to claim that he had done most of the work and received none of the credit.³²²

Along with her insight into the reality of the scientific quest, Merrilees structurally positions the solo male scientist in opposition to two contemporary liberal women; 'veterans of tertiary education, protest movements, overseas travel, feminism and we knew about mountains.'³²³ Piggy-backing this technique, I also interject female characters in *The island is a document of desire* and borrow the heroic and narrative authority of the solitary male figure:

³²² Ibid. Pg4

³²³ Ibid. Pg2

One of the women is a Captain's granddaughter. She hates to be described like that, in relation to the men of her life, but she is aware of history's limitations. So, when she introduces herself as her grandfather's granddaughter she is really saying, 'the salt in my blood is thick.'³²⁴

Similarly, in writing through a male subject – such as Charles O'Hara Booth of *Increasingly scaled-down containment* or the grandfather of *Hear What?* – I draw upon the power and sanctity of the lone male figure for the purpose of re-telling and re-inventing familiar tropes within social history exhibitions or island literature. As Mansfield describes:

We can see the gap of female representation in island storytelling and island myth. From the beginning, I think our main subject was island myth but we've nicely woven the subject of female representation into the exhibition too. I think it is interesting for young women to make work about characters like Charles O'Hara Booth, using traditional historical vernaculars, because these vernaculars are a sort of comfortable space for audiences.³²⁵

INCREASINGLY SCALED-DOWN CONTAINMENT

The title of the short story *Increasingly scaled-down containment* is a reference to Elizabeth McMahon's essay *The Gilded Cage: from utopia to monad in Australia's island imaginary*. The essay looks at Elcho Island, Nauru and Christmas Island, and examines the attitudes surrounding these islands in relation to the 2001 Tampa Affair refugee crisis. McMahon questions the 'nationalist manoeuvres' of the Howard government, where said islands were seen to move in and out of favour according to their usefulness to the governing political agenda of the day.³²⁶ McMahon also makes use of an historic figure, Charles O'Hara Booth, as proof of how the contemporary figuration of these small islands today has developed from an inherited set of values.

³²⁴ Howden and Mansfield. Pg17

³²⁵ Ibid. Pg31

³²⁶ McMahon. Pg194

Charles O'Hara Booth was a significant figure in the early European history of Tasmania, where he was commandant-in-chief of the Port Arthur penal colony between 1833-40. McMahon looks at Booth's private journals for strategies of control, in terms of the convict population he governs as well as in his personal life. One of the most important revelations within his writings is described by McMahon as the 'carceral imaginary'.³²⁷ The movement from larger islands to smaller islands, a desire for increasingly scaled-down containment, is a process of reconstituting the self.³²⁸ The island boundary offers limitations to not only the physical body but to the excesses of the self, whether criminal – in the case of the convicts – or personal:

From his location, living on a narrow peninsula on a penal island colony at the end of the world, Booth dreams of escape to a smaller, more enclosed island home. His diary entries of late January 1838 complain of a bitter disappointment in love. A few days later he visits one of the outlying islands off the coast of the peninsula. He writes: 'February 7th 1839: Stuart & self with Lacey visited Mount Stuart, Long Point & made a tour after of Slopen Island for Lime – fine spot. Would it were mine with a good tempered little partner'.³²⁹

As McMahon describes, the movement towards smaller and smaller islands reflects a philosophy of imagined containment; the tighter the island boundary the greater the possibility for psychological cohesion, uniformity or control. The story of Booth, particularly his line of desire towards smaller and smaller islands, is most fascinating because, as McMahon describes it, he is propelled by unhappiness. This desire for tighter geographic boundaries is also found in a tourism rhetoric. Islands are presented as one of the last remaining bastions for a life beyond the incomprehensible scale, exponential or growth-driven systems and structures of the continent.³³⁰

³²⁷ Ibid. Pg199

³²⁸ Ibid. Pg200

³²⁹ Ibid. Pg199

³³⁰ Gillis, "Island Sojourns." Pg281

Increasingly scaled-down containment is a fictionalized version of the Charles O'Hara Booth story, as drawn out by Elizabeth McMahon. Adopting the stylistic manner of social history non-fiction, including false diary quotations that adopt the language and formatting of mid-nineteenth century journal entries, *Increasingly scaled-down containment* plays with a number of assumptions: island lure, island containment and boundedness, island scale and gender. The lure of islands is pointed to on a number of different occasions. Booth not only already lives and works on an island as Commandant of the Port Arthur penal colony, he positions the island as the ideal prison by implementing a number of incarceration schematics during his term:

...he introduced the practice of keeping guard dogs at the narrow isthmus connecting Port Arthur to mainland Tasmania. In essence, this rendered the penal settlement an island as convicts had to swim and risk drowning in order to escape. In his second year as Commandant, Booth developed a satellite colony off the coast of Port Arthur, making use of the small island of Point Puer. This was an incarceration site for female and prepubescent male convicts and devised by Booth as a method in 'minimising the excesses of the body' between the sexes.³³¹

On his return journey from Newcastle another island, smaller again, is introduced as a redemptive landscape, this time as quarantine:

On the fourth day of his journey Booth fell ill. Immediately upon arrival, having possibly contracted tuberculosis, he admitted himself to Lime Island – a smaller island off the coast of Point Puer designated as quarantine and hospital to the Port Arthur settlement.³³²

In *Increasingly scaled-down containment* the lure of Newcastle's Coal Island (Nobbys) is purposefully conflated with the quest for love. Having courted a woman whose identity, importantly, is omitted, Booth travels to Newcastle seeking a wife; a 'fair and good tempered

³³¹ Howden and Mansfield. Pg9

³³² Ibid.

little partner'.³³³ During his stay he finds himself attracted to Coal Island and his fictional diary entry describes a similar kind of possession; 'The rock emerges at the mouth of the Hunter River... Would it were mine, a fine residence it would make.'³³⁴ Set in 1834, and as indicated in the same diary entry, the reader is made aware that the construction of Macquarie's Pier connecting Nobbys to mainland Newcastle is near completion. Appropriately, Booth arrives in Newcastle to abruptly discover the wife he had come to collect was already betrothed. In this instance, the woman and the island are united as objects of thwarted desire and reflect Booth's pursuit for possession.

Disgruntled and unlucky in love, Booth's failed expedition prompts a swift return home during which he plots a fate for Coal Island that reflects a near-pathological desire for confinement:

Despite his emotional distress and distaste for Newcastle, Booth remained fascinated by Coal Island and the return journey proved productive. Within the first three days he had roughly sketched a reformatory structure to be situated on the island. It was a basic incarnation of what would later be known as a pan-opticon.³³⁵

Booth's carceral desires are made clear. First, in his effort to contain the excesses of the criminal (abject) body. Second, as a way of isolating the diseased body through quarantine. And third, the possibility of reconstituting the damaged (un-loveable) emotional body through mechanisms of containment and control. The island's geographic limits, across all instances, offer a kind of security and compartmentalisation that the physical or psychological body cannot.

As described earlier, framing the short-form historic fiction through the lens of a single male figure, Booth, was a purposeful choice. Not only did it draw upon a linguistic style familiar to museum, gallery and social history exhibition audiences, it was a way of thinking about the traditions of gender within island studies. In particular: the solo male hero archetype of Robinson Crusoe and its subsequent Robinsonades of the early 20th century; dominance,

³³³ Ibid. Pg8

³³⁴ Ibid. Pg9

³³⁵ Ibid.

sovereignty and the lingering idea within the empirical expansion of the West that history was produced by a ‘few good men’; the gendered morality of colonisation – that the naming and claiming of things is tied to the health and wealth of the individual male as an emblem of the larger colonial project; and, lastly, the omission of women and female labour within island literature.



Figure 54: (Installation view) Deb Mansfield, *Charles O'Hara Booth is a fair and good-tempered little partner*, 2015. Hand-woven photo-tapestry (while at sea), resin frame and cleat, lighting, electrical cord, 60cm diameter. Image courtesy of the artist.

The question of gender within island literature and island story-telling was investigated in a number of ways. For Mansfield, the subject was dealt with through self-portraiture (Figures 54 and 55). She adapted an existing work, *Sardine/Tangle-Eye* (2015) – a hybrid self-portrait combining her own image and Armenian-Canadian photographer Yousuf Karsh's 1957 portrait of Ernest Hemingway, by re-titling the work as a portrait of Charles O'Hara Booth – *Charles O'Hara Booth is a fair and good-tempered little partner* (2015). In the rare instances Mansfield's work contains figures, they are almost exclusively male subjects. For example: the all-male crew of the Apollo 7 splashdown featured in *Three weeks of sustained delirium*

(2015); John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr of *Gilligan's Island* (2014); or, American actor Paul Newman in *A scalene tribute to the men I've loved who have never loved me back* (2016). In a 2014 interview with Naomi Riddle, she says:

The depiction of people in artwork, particularly in photo-media based work, has always been slightly difficult for me to enter into. I can breathe easier in a people-less space. I have always loved the trajectory of the 19th century scenic wallpaper industry. The designers of these wallpapers started out creating panoramas of popular geographies (like the banks of the Seine etc.) and you could see in these scenes people picnicking, strolling and whatnot. But in the later years of production (around the 1850/60's) designers removed people from the wallpapers altogether, the focus became about creating incredibly detailed wood-blocked botanical scenes. There were no alter-egos directing the viewer – just a 360-degree geographical panorama to fall into.³³⁶

Considering this statement, a mutant self-portrait between herself and Hemmingway is a particularly salient choice. The idea that the portrait might adapt to new contexts – in its first iteration Mansfield posed it as a portrait of her fictional British naval captain grandfather³³⁷ and in the second iteration as a portrait of Booth – reveals an underlying trajectory in her own work as well as a type of interchangeability between stories, locations and alter-egos across the gendered histories of island approach. As a portrait posed as both Hemmingway and Booth, the flattened and amalgamated image produces a universal representation of the male subject with island literature.

If we recall the composite techniques of Hurley's photograph *A boat was lowered for the shore, ringing cheers greeted its approach, a terrible chapter in our lives was drawing to a close* or Dufour's panoramic wallpaper *Les Sauvages de la mer Pacifique*, Mansfield's composite portrait subscribes to similar philosophies of representation. The image is bent to suit a narrative. In this instance, the pictorial representation of the solo colonial male is

³³⁶ Naomi Riddle, "Interview with Artist Deb Mansfield," *Try Hard Magazine* 2014.

³³⁷ Andrew Frost, "Some Rocky Socket," <https://theartlife.com.au/2015/some-rocky-socket/>.

interjected with her own. In 'A Conversation Between Two Islophiles' Mansfield reflects on the portrait as a signifier of 'falseness'; she uses the portrait to undercut the masculinised trajectory of island approach within island literature:

I think there are structures of how we typically read island histories and storytelling. I'm sick of reading or hearing about men – white men – who've done something on the land in Australia. So, I like that we are using false histories. But, what I really want to say is I like that we are lying. I like that we are lying in these sea-faring, white, male spaces of storytelling. This is why I appropriated Karsh's portrait of Hemingway and merged it with my own. I hated the *Old Man and the Sea*. That book annoys the shit out of me. To me it's just a big cock-in-hand, fucking repeat of the male 'struggle'. The man that goes to battle with himself, with the sea or whatever lives in it... I'm bored of it.³³⁸



Figure 55: (Installation view) *The Island Could be Hear by Night*, 2015. The Lock-Up, Newcastle, NSW. Image courtesy of Deb Mansfield.

³³⁸ Howden and Mansfield. Pg29-30

If we return to the story *Increasingly scaled-down containment*, the question of gender is again raised via the alter-ego of Booth. In particular, through Booth's attitudes towards women, landscape and notions of propriety and possession. The only female character of *Increasingly scaled-down containment* is positioned as a prop to Booth's desire. When Booth finds his desires are unreciprocated, his attitude towards Newcastle shifts:

...Booth was clearly disappointed. His entries during this period were brief, primarily describing his dissatisfaction with the township: '...a place comprised of vulgar characters. P[ort]. Arthur – a settlement of those double distilled in poor logic and wretched will – contains more civility.'³³⁹

Further, Booth's plans to isolate women and pre-pubescent males from the primary convict corpus illustrates another position on gender, particularly in regard to sex and reproduction. Booth's desire for confinement along biological divisions reveals, firstly, the impossibility – in his mind – of women harbouring or acting upon lecherous urges and, secondly, by grouping them together Booth equates the potential value of female labour and productivity as equivalent to that of young boys. Booth's gendered vision, towards women and the islands he is either in charge of or lusts after, is propelled by the underlying provocation of his story: possession. Elizabeth McMahan touches on this in the real story of Charles O'Hara Booth, where the desire for control over both women and landscape are marked by processes of dominance and miniaturization. His original statement – *would it were mine with a good tempered little partner* – and my fictionalized version – *would it were mine a fine residence it would make* – demonstrates an 'island desire characterized by possession, by an image of secure domestic home life and by diminution.'³⁴⁰

Booth's failure in love inspires vengeance, carefully designed through the controlled surveillance of the pan-opticon. His ultimate demise, a sustained, undiagnosable medical malaise, was not only caused by what could be likened to heart-ache but was treated with the only remedy Booth knows – containment:

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ McMahan. Pg199

Medical records cleared Booth of tuberculosis, typhoid and other illnesses known at the time. However, due to the continuing nature of his fever he was retained for medical observation. Three weeks of a sustained delirium kept Booth in quarantine confinement and, in his absence, he was medically retired from his post as Commandant of Port Arthur. On the morning of 15 June 1843 Booth was found dead having drowned during the night in a failed attempt to swim to shore.³⁴¹

The allusion to an attempted escape from the island hospital suggests that even Booth himself was unable to live under the tyranny of his self-imposed confinement. A commandant with desires for containment and control is made the victim of his own mentality. What should be a redemptive landscape becomes a prison; reminiscent of McMahon's words, Booth's desire for the 'paradise of containment' ultimately gives way to a 'nightmare of imprisonment.'³⁴²

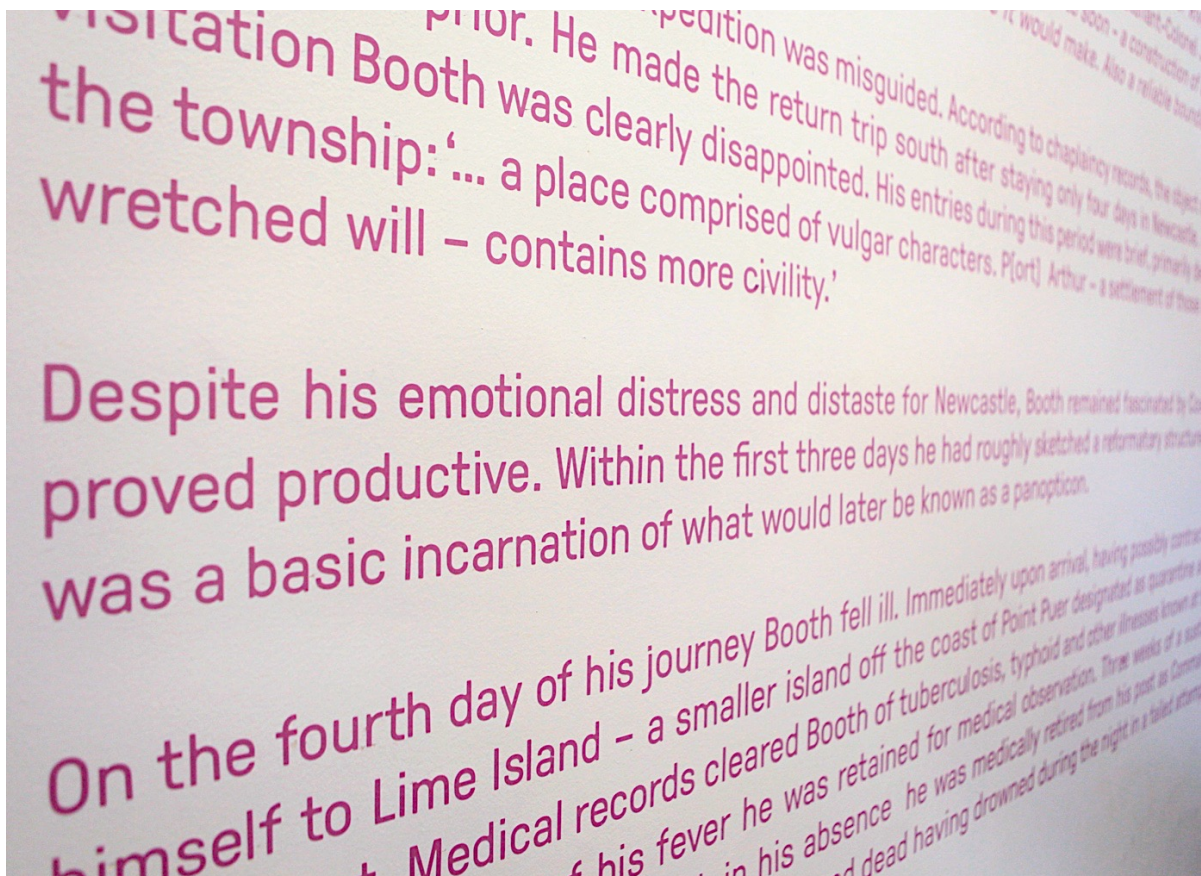


Figure 56: (Installation view) Belinda Howden, *Increasingly scaled-down containment*, 2015. Vinyl lettering, GT Pressura Regular, 180 x 180cm. Image courtesy of Belinda Howden

³⁴¹ Howden and Mansfield. Pg9

³⁴² McMahon. Pg201

Increasingly scaled-down containment was published online and installed in the gallery as part of the visual work of *The Island Could be Heard by Night* (Figure 56). Disguised as vinyl wall text the story was positioned, poetically and physically, as a touchstone for exhibition visitors – centering the exhibition on the subject of Nobbys (Figure 57). This decision was intended to challenge the assumptions of curatorial practice, particularly regarding Nobbys as a subject of social history. In ‘A Conversation Between Two Islophiles’ I explain:

It feels like there is an underlying assumption that the exhibition and our work will be didactic in some way or another. I think that assumption has a lot to do with the subject matter and a standardisation of the way we come to understand history, landscape and the intersection of the two... wall text is to help anchor an exhibition with a background truth – information about the artist or the subject that the audience might need. In this case though, the wall text is fiction. And yet, because of those assumptions, the audience will still approach [the] story as [an] historic anchor.³⁴³



Figure 57: (Installation view) Belinda Howden, *Increasingly scaled-down containment*, 2015. Vinyl lettering, GT Pressura Regular, 180 x 180cm. Image courtesy of Belinda Howden

³⁴³ Howden and Mansfield. Pg31-33

Mansfield's work *Emotional distress and distaste for Newcastle (the explosion has never been any different)* sat opposite the text, both works occupying the Exercise Yard's ante rooms (Figure 58). These spaces previously served as a museum display for the building's historic function, a police lock-up, in the early nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. As Mansfield describes, the 'front rooms are domestic, historical, fact telling, architectural spaces.'³⁴⁴ They double down on the audience assumption that the contemporary works on display will relay historic 'truth' and be in service to the past rather than challenge it.



Figure 58: (Installation view) Deb Mansfield, *Emotional distress and distaste for Newcastle (the explosion has never been any different)*, 2015. Hand-woven tapestry (while at sea), resin frame and cleat, lighting, electrical cord, 60 cm diameter. Image courtesy of the artist

³⁴⁴ Ibid. Pg33

The colour of the vinyl text was drawn from Mansfield's photo tapestry, whose title, in turn, was an amended line from *Increasingly scaled-down containment*; 'Despite his emotional distress and distaste for Newcastle, Booth remained fascinated by Coal Island...'³⁴⁵ The purpose of selecting the vinyl colour from Mansfield's image was to signify falseness. In 'A conversation Between Two Islophiles', Mansfield articulates the way in which her image was constructed; 'I used a piece of mainland imagery, flipped it and pushed it in a bit so it wasn't totally mirrored. But if you look at it closely it's mirrored enough to be distasteful... It's too perfect.'³⁴⁶ Moreover, she describes how the colour pink and the explosion, a reference to a real history of Nobbys, was necessary to the fiction of both the island itself and the interruptive potential of artists working with fiction:

...then I added a mine explosion to the image... An island exploding is less distasteful than a faux island. I used the pink at the top of the explosion because I knew it was a good way to give people an obvious untruth. Without the pink, I think the viewer would hone in on the faux island too quickly. The explosion weirdly comforts the viewer. If they're troubled by the island's pink explosion, they've missed the fact that the island doesn't even exist. On some level, I think everyone is going to recognise it is fiction and that's the same with your writing. You've used a historical vernacular to dazzle and distract the audience, and I've done the same with the explosion.³⁴⁷

CENTRALISTS AND PERIPHERALISTS

Centralists and Peripheralists is a longer piece of fiction with a more traditional narrative structure. Based upon the literature of utopianism, in particular Ruth Levitas' *The Concept of Utopia* (2011) and *Utopia as Method* (2013), *Centralists and Peripheralists* made use of an island setting as a geographic location and metaphor for mechanisms of utopian dreaming. Levitas' texts survey the field of utopian studies, drawing upon utopian works within the Western canon to look at a Western preoccupation with utopia. The texts consider: utopia's synonymy with the future, the propulsion of utopian impossibility, the difference between

³⁴⁵ Ibid. Pg9

³⁴⁶ Ibid. Pg32

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

utopian blueprints and utopian modelling, and, she also questions the universality of utopia. The historic nature of her survey works was the inspiration for *Centralists and Peripheralists*, particularly the possibility of the seemingly binary subjects – centralists and peripheralists – as two sides of the same coin. The scholarship Levitas traces appears to be ‘...quite literally men, across time, yelling at each other.’³⁴⁸ *Centralists and Peripheralists* was an occasion to address the gendered practice of utopian dreaming in Western history, but to also further consider the utopian and/or castaway character that has long occupied the literary island.

In *Centralists and Peripheralists* the island is a site of revolution. It is the stage on which opposing ideologies – centralists or peripheralists – are pitted against each other and played out to their most extreme logical conclusion. The two subjects are defined by their gaze, both temporally and spatially. Centralists are utopians, defined by a practice of looking inwards. And, peripheralists, who position themselves as castaways, are defined by a practice of looking outwards.

Centralists are resourceful. Their inward focus makes them productive, self-reliant citizens charged with a belief in the new world order. A daily ritual for centralists is to congregate at the centre of their island township every morning, where they ‘take a moment to greet each other and dream quietly about the possibilities of their future together.’³⁴⁹ Peripheralists, on the other hand, look outwards. It is ‘good practice for peripheralists to stand at the edge observing the ocean,’ and their outward gaze suggests the inverse of the centralists; they long for an Old-World order, and a return to the past.³⁵⁰

The conflation of both temporal and spatial vision – looking out to the past, looking in to the future – is borrowed from Hernan Díaz’s observations of island literature. Returning to his words in *A Topical Paradise*, he writes:

There are basically two different relationships to the shore. Castaways desperately scan the horizon: “The starved eye devours the seascape for the morsel / of a sail. /

³⁴⁸ Ibid. Pg30

³⁴⁹ Ibid. Pg14

³⁵⁰ Ibid. Pg13

The horizon threads it infinitely,” writes Derek Walcott in the “The Castaway”. [Collected poems, 1986, p57] Utopians, for their part, turn their back to the surf and look inward,” writes Lezama Lima. [Ensayos Latinoamericanos, 1997, p116].³⁵¹

In the case of *Centralists and Peripheralists* this binary is pushed to its extreme. For the centralists, the island is a redemptive landscape, a paradisiacal opportunity to begin again. They act accordingly: first, by relocating to a new island – the differences between two ideologies quickly deemed irreconcilable; and, second, in setting up a new, apparently ideal society:

...they rearranged their lives to reflect what they considered the highest order – everything for the greater good. The centralists decided they were only allowed to engage in occupations that benefitted the community. They banned the notion of private property and rid their existence of institutions like marriage, punishment, persecution, and the military. Leisure time was plenty, as everyone worked hard for the benefit of others, but they agreed that time was not to be used on deleterious practices such as gambling, imbibing, or hunting for sport.³⁵²

As the industrious centralist society grew to a scale of criticality, they engaged a smaller group of centralists – what might be argued as an island within an island – to act as representatives and make decisions on their behalf. Where industry quickly became the cornerstone of their new world order, and the sole purpose of the centralist being productivity, the group of representatives slowly transformed their guiding social principles into a sequence of increasingly prohibitive rules:

They also decided if anything were to distract a centralist from their work it should be banned. Leisure time became a controlled terrain. Music was forbidden along with creating art, and the short hours in the evening that centralists once spent

³⁵¹ Derek Walcott and José Lezama Lima quoted by Díaz. Pg84

³⁵² Howden and Mansfield. Pg13

entertaining and telling stories to each other were now dedicated to thinking about improving island productivity.³⁵³

The centralist story is followed through to revolt, albeit one that is subtle; ‘Murmurs of misgivings began to spread’.³⁵⁴ In their daily practice of gathering at the centre of the island, where they were to engage in future dreaming, the centralists begin to rebel. ‘Uttered complaints about tired eyes and aching backs became more and more frequent until one day someone suggested the unforgivable, ‘can’t we just go back to the old ways?’.³⁵⁵

The spatial and metaphorical movement of the centralists, to follow their gaze further and further inwards, is reflected by both the miniaturization of their society – where communal power is assigned to a select few (as if an island within an island) – as well as their daily ritual of future thinking. With their backs to the edge, the centralists imagine their island as salvation. Their social structure reflects not only a real political ideology – communism – but also the social theory of Thomas More’s *Utopia* (Figure 59). In More’s *Utopia* Raphael suggests the perfect system operates in a different space or location to the current system. He doesn’t seem to think utopia can be achieved within the society he lives within, through a few well-made decisions or amendments; utopia must be a clean slate.³⁵⁶ Siting utopia as an alternative location suggests utopia can only exist near enough yet far enough from the current system. Hence, the centralists’ own relocation; ‘Moving to a sister island they would prove to the peripheralists just how it could be done, the ease with which their ideal community could be established.’³⁵⁷

Another premise within More’s *Utopia* that reflects the logical end point of the centralist’s ideology, is in the descriptions of artistic expression, pleasure and sexuality. More’s writing on *objet d’art* describes art and the ornamental life as superfluous. Gold, precious jewels, finery and silk are made symbols of criminality and slavery.³⁵⁸ Sex and sexuality are almost

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Ibid. Pg14

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ More. Pg41

³⁵⁷ Howden and Mansfield. Pg12

³⁵⁸ More. Pg71-73

overlooked in More's new world order and his suggestions as to how they operate reflect more upon the time in which More lives than any radical new arrangements concerning love, sex, sexuality, belonging or interdependence. Retaining one's virginity prior to marriage remains a sacred vow; marriage is considered a privilege and legally deniable by the state (primarily in response to promiscuity); and an emphasis is placed on the monogamy of marriage as an economically beneficial arrangement for Utopia's greater social productivity.³⁵⁹ The manner in which marriage is arranged is also defined under terms of financial procurement. On the subject of obtaining a bride More writes, 'if they are but to buy a horse of a small value, are so cautious that they will see every part of him, and take off both his saddle and all his other tackle, that there may be no secret ulcer hid under any of them'.³⁶⁰ The failure within More's utopia, as is the case for the centralists, is an inability to address fundamental human drives, and the complex conditions of the human interdependence.



Figure 59: *Utopiæ insulæ tabula*, 1518. Woodcut, 17.9 × 11.9cm. Gillian Hill, *Cartographic Curiosities*, 1978. British Museum Publications, London, p22

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.* Pg94

The peripheralists' story is the inverse. They are castaways. They look outwards, casting the ocean as history, tradition and connection to elsewhere, the inference being that 'elsewhere' is home. They defend their position with portentous warnings. In opposition to the future oriented centralists, they ask: 'Who are we if we know nothing of who we were?'³⁶¹ The 'starved eye' of the castaway is the ultimate demise of the peripheralist. They quite literally starve themselves through their extreme attentiveness to the island's edge:

Out of fear that the centralists might make an attempt to return, the peripheralists agreed they should increase their vigilance. Their township emptied out. Pausing business and abandoning their duties, the peripheralists now camped along the perimeter perennially scanning the horizon...Their vigilance was quickening their path to starvation. An increased dedication to the border meant food production had ground to a halt. The peripheralists lived on whatever the ocean washed up and their hungriness quickly became restlessness.³⁶²

Exercised through intergenerational tension, the peripheralist youth are the catalysts of revolt. The young peripheralists don't see the point of looking to the past or longing for elsewhere because their life is made up of only the future. Pointing at the centralists' island, they exclaim, 'Look! They flourish while we sit here and watch... Can't the elders see? If we don't leave there is no future. Leaving is our only hope.'³⁶³

Following both stories to their most extreme ideological end, results in a narrative inversion. The centralists, primarily concerned with utopian dreaming and island insularity as a method of protection, become trapped. Paradise turns to prison as their new world order becomes increasingly controlled, surveilled and restrictive. The peripheralists, on the other hand, are undone by their obsession with elsewhere, whether temporally (the past) or spatially (the invisible 'home'). Propelled by their hungry eye and now hungry body, they turn to a defining utopian impulse of the centralists as their answer – hope. The narrative inversion sees both parties swap their spatial and temporal relationships to the island landscape. Now, the

³⁶¹ Howden and Mansfield. Pg12

³⁶² Ibid. Pg14

³⁶³ Ibid.

peripheralists look to the future, and look inward, as a way of saving their society from its ultimate demise. And conversely, the future dreaming of the centralists is now replaced with a longing for the past. They wish to return to a previous existence, a previous location both in space and time. Charged with the desire to escape, they become castaways.

The purpose of the narrative inversion was to exercise a number of ideas within utopianism and island-bound literature, particularly where the two subjects meet. As mentioned previously, *Centralists and Peripheralists* addresses the ongoing obsession of utopia within a scholarly tradition. More's *Utopia* is a compelling example of how an ideal society is imagined in relation to the bounds and restrictions, the time and location, of those who imagine it. The second idea *Centralists and Peripheralists* addresses is the inherent futility of utopia. This isn't to say that utopian dreaming, or utopian modelling is inherently purposeless. But rather, the utopian blueprint or object is designed with failure in mind; implausibility or impossibility are both innate to its shape. Levitas explains:

[The argument that] needs, nature and utopia are all subject to social construction leads to a similar conclusion. There can be no universal utopia, not just because our needs are differently perceived by different observers but because needs actually do vary between societies. If needs are socially constructed, the project of trying to read off the good society from a definition of human nature and human needs is doomed to failure.³⁶⁴

The centralists and peripheralists prove the dangers of utopia when futility and failure isn't factored in as an important part of utopian modelling. They prove the dangers of extremism, the 'right way', the failure of 'beliefs' as guiding principles and how quickly those beliefs change shape in the face of dissatisfaction – whether political, physical, psychological or spiritual.

The last idea addressed in *Centralists and Peripheralists* is the premise of 'home'. The gaze of both parties, including their inversions, frames the island as a short-term, experimental

³⁶⁴ Levitas. Pg123

location. If we recall Beer's description, where the triumph of all island fiction is to ultimately return home, we remember a history of island departure that has long produced the island as a short-term location. Although we never witness a complete and final departure from their respective islands, there is a constant sense of temporality over both the centralists and peripheralists' lives. The centralists are quick to abandon the first island, which they share with the peripheralists, in the hopes of demonstrating a better and new experimental order. In their abandonment the centralists colonise a sister island, a proxy to the original, and their speed and willingness suggests this new island is an easy substitution. Both islands, then, become a prop to their ideology as neither are described as 'home'. Similarly, the peripheralists' gaze links them to elsewhere. As Díaz describes, the castaway's 'strategy consists in unifying island and mainland (motherland, fatherland) by means of material and symbolic bridges'.³⁶⁵

In *Centralists and Peripheralists* the tension between opposing ideologies, the inward and the outward, lies with the island edge. The spatial and temporal gaze of each subject charges the island edge with a kind of dynamism common to island literature:

An insular shore is always a critical edge, a line of resistance against the outer agents (natural or historical) constantly threatening the island with annihilation. Topical islands are figures of radical isolation with at least four shores that resist four different forms of continental inscription or *graphs*: spatial (*geographs*), historic (*chronographs*), linguistic (*phonographs*) and textual (*paragraphs*)... Every segment in the circumference of an island ceaselessly insists against its surroundings, exerting a centrifugal force... But the intensity of this expulsive force is proportional to one of the invading powers.³⁶⁶

As Díaz describes, both the centralists and the peripheralists make the island edge a line of contestation, whether from the outside looking in or the inside looking out.

³⁶⁵ Díaz. Pg79

³⁶⁶ Ibid. Pg79-84

THE ISLAND IS A DOCUMENT OF DESIRE

The island is a document of desire was the last story written for the exhibition *The Island Could be Heard by Night*. It was a summation of not only the historic environmental and cultural changes pressed upon Nobbys, over the course of European colonisation, but also tracked the processes of producing the exhibition. In this sense, it was self-reflexive. Although I've already touched on a set of ideas embedded within the story – self-portraiture as historic critique, or collapsing temporal and spatial relationships to the past as a method for re-presenting history – there are two fundamental ideas to the story that are yet to be discussed. First, the subjectivity of history, and second, self-reflexivity as method for inserting oneself into the narrative course of history, and thereby altering it.



Figure 60: Promotional poster for *The Island Could be Heard by Night*, 2015. Paper, 29.7 x 420cm. Image courtesy of Belinda Howden

Self-reflexivity was visually executed as part of *The Island Could be Heard by Night's* too, in particular as a collaborative tool. As Figure 60 illustrates, the promotional material produced for *The Island Could be Heard by Night* was a collaboration in self-portraiture and self-reflexivity. Mansfield and I captured a series of public photo booth self-portraits, backgrounded by select photo-tapestries – specifically, an unframed edition of *Emotional distress and distaste for Newcastle (the explosion has never been any different)*. The promotional image alludes to a type of playfulness and humour not typically visible within the island genre – such as gazing through hand-binoculars as an allusion to ‘the act of looking’, or a tongue-in-cheek salute to the male authorities of Charles O’Hara Booth or the grandfather figure. As Mansfield questions in ‘A Conversation Between Two Islophiles’, ‘I’m curious if you think humour is an emotion people associate with islands? ...my gut feeling is that people are inherently serious about islands.’³⁶⁷ As a primer for the exhibition, the promotional image also introduced a relationship between the female body and the body of the island. Enacted by observing our own image, self-reflexivity is demonstrated as a method of visual interjection.

If we return our attention to *The island is a document of desire*, we see how self-reflexivity functioned within a narrative form. Roslyn Kerr’s timeline for Macquarie’s Pier, and Nobbys tunnels and lighthouse, doubled as the timeline for *The island is a document of desire*. The physical changes imposed upon the site, not only reflected changing cultural attitudes towards the landscape but also the subjectivity of history. The instability of the site and its possible future uses, points to a kind of instability within history. Each paragraph of *The island is a document of desire* therefore sets up a sequence of doing and undoing, presenting and re-presenting history, as a method for drawing out this premise. For example, it was on Governor Macquarie’s second visit to the Newcastle colony that the construction of the Pier commenced with a ceremonial laying of the Foundation Stone. As described earlier, his journal describes the moment written as a documentary yet personal record.³⁶⁸ *The island is a document of desire* uses this evidence and fictionalizes it, as a way of describing the possible subjectivity of Macquarie as both a man and a public servant:

³⁶⁷ Howden and Mansfield. Pg20

³⁶⁸ Newcastle. Pg13

Skipping forward another few years, twenty-one to be precise, and the rock quarried in hunger becomes a means to an end. Another man, this time Macquarie. This time the island must be made useful. 'Rest its innards at its feet,' he might have said. 'Let us build a bridge made from its guts,' he probably didn't say, but rather dreamt himself saying in a reverie one hot night.³⁶⁹

In *The island is a document of desire*, Macquarie is imagined, firstly, as an outsider. He is away from home and confronted by the uncanniness of Australia; 'The convicts build the missing Freudian link between homeland and hostile vessel while Macquarie calls out for England in his sleep.'³⁷⁰ The pier had been washed away multiple times, and was painstaking slow to build in terms of convict labour; 'work on the Pier continued up until about 1823/4 when the project was discontinued. Newcastle had ceased to be a penal settlement, and Governor Macquarie was recalled back to England.'³⁷¹ The public infrastructure was a construction equivalent 'of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, and just as costly.'³⁷² From a contemporary perspective, the sheer expense and physical determination of Macquarie's Pier doesn't describe the triumph of history and culture over nature but rather an inability to see beyond a set cultural framework. Macquarie views Nobbys through European eyes and the concept of building a pier is the transposition of a foreign idea onto a foreign landscape. As *The island is a document of desire* describes, the scale, persistence and physicality of construction is significant. By framing the island as a human body, the 'guts' of the island are disemboweled, the graphic weight of the environmental changes are illustrated. The description also produces a second re-reading of history, that Macquarie is an autocrat.

The history of Nobbys as a lighthouse is also referenced in *The island is a document of desire*. This history, again, is mythologized and inhabited by a 'few good men': 'One bright eye forever fixed on the ocean. Powered by 20,000 candles, every night the light searches for a

³⁶⁹ Howden and Mansfield. Pg16

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ Newcastle. Pg15

³⁷² Ibid.

shred of sail. Protected by three men they huddle round making sure it doesn't blow out in one cold southerly gust.³⁷³ The pattern of doing and un-doing is set up once more:

Seventy-seven years on and the sons of the three men decide enough is enough. How archaic, they think, to follow in their fathers' footsteps. They get up from their huddled position to stretch their legs and with seasons' worth of knowledge collected under their skins they shake hands and say their goodbyes. The island is de-manned.³⁷⁴

The de-manning of the island, literally and metaphorically, opens up space for the island to be occupied by female story telling. The final four paragraphs set up the narrative purpose of self-reflexivity and self-portraiture; 'Two women stretch their legs too. Only, it's not then, it's now.'³⁷⁵ The conflation of past and present, the historic and the mundane, opens up the possibility of each influencing the other. That is, rather than the past being historic and the present mundane, the past might be made mundane and the present historic.

The last paragraphs of *The island is a document of desire*, that operate as self-portraiture, trace a walk Mansfield and I took as part of the research phase of the exhibition. It reveals the way in which we approached the site and determined our own path through a history of ideas connected to Nobbys, its myths and realities. In 'A Conversation Between Two Islophiles' we consider the contradictions of our physical and metaphoric approach, recalling the early idea that the ideal island doesn't require constant physical visitation. The ideal island can operate and exist in the phantasmagoric space of the imagination:

...remember that day we went up to Nobbys' Headland together and took photos and hung out talking?... I recall from that day we somehow agreed we were going to go there every Sunday... I haven't been since. That was a year ago. Even the conception of the work has happened in the myth space. I don't actually ever go to the island... It's an imaginative space you're working in. And, it's kind of visual. You still hold the

³⁷³ Howden and Mansfield. Pg16-17

³⁷⁴ Ibid. Pg17

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

visual of Nobbys in your mind's eye, or at least I did, but easily transplant other stories into that landscape...³⁷⁶

...we find it hard to separate the island real from island myth. There is genuine confusion between myth and real. When we use the word island, the fact that we have to even clarify whether it is real or imagined goes to show how pervasive in human thinking and projection the mythological island is.³⁷⁷

The final paragraph of *The island is a document of desire* refers to this enduring practice to mythologise islands: 'As the two women climb the island they churn through their collective thoughts... They reach the top and they decide the island is definitely not about them or their desires. They agree. That would be archaic too.'³⁷⁸ As DeLoughrey describes, the island is '...a chronotope of desire'.³⁷⁹ Similarly, Baldacchino states '...islands, it seems, can stand for all things desired.'³⁸⁰ And, the purpose of *The island is a document of desire* was to flesh out these ideas. Nobbys is presented as an archival landscape; it traps the history of desires of those who look at or *to* it, and impose themselves and their visions upon it. It appears the island is continuously projected onto. Even two women – researching island myth, island desire and islands as cultural and colonial objects – are caught by the same mechanism as the men that came before them.

CONCLUSION

The Island Could be Heard by Night was an exhibition closer in intent to the disruptive philosophies of *Nowhereisland* than it was to the statements of solidarity within *Ash Island and its Transformations*. *The Island Could be Heard by Night* inverted historic modes of island figuration, island narration, and the concepts of 'islandness' explored in Chapter One. For example: interrupting the authority of solo male figure within island literature and the island

³⁷⁶ Ibid. Pg21-22

³⁷⁷ Ibid. Pg21

³⁷⁸ Ibid. Pg17-18

³⁷⁹ DeLoughrey, "'The Litany of Islands, the Rosary of Archipelagoes': Caribbean and Pacific Archipelagraphy." Pg31

³⁸⁰ Baldacchino, "Editorial: Islands - Objects of Representation." Pg248

genre; using self-portraiture and self-reflexivity to question tropes around gender, representation and the figuration of history; and, using historical vernaculars, revisionism and creative fiction as an interrogative tool.



Figure 61: (Left) Deb Mansfield, *A reliable boundary (and this is where Bel was found)*, 2015. Hand-woven photo-tapestry, resin frame and cleat, lighting, electrical cord. (Right) Deb Mansfield, *The island punctuated her last thoughts of the evening*, 2015. Hand-woven photo-tapestry, resin frame and cleat, lighting, electrical cord. Images courtesy of the artist.

However, as the conversations between Mansfield and I prove, the difficulty in pulling away from the ‘island lure’, an approach that has physically and imaginatively dogged islands across a Western history, remains. Within the literary and visual works of *The Island Could be Heard by Night* the construction of an island hierarchy and the persistent desire to engage in island myth rather than island reality, describes a kind of romanticism reminiscent of *Nowhereisland* (Figure 61). In ‘A Conversation Between Two Islophiles’, Mansfield points to this lure:

When I read your first piece of writing for the show I thought we absolutely have to call our exhibition *The Island Could be Heard by Night*, as these were the words that stood out to me immediately. The sentence conjures up everything we have been

trying to achieve; a tangible false history. It is incredibly seductive and inherently visual.³⁸¹

The premise of a small, whole world – a clean blank slate for re-writing history (even a new or feminist history) – makes the island an attractive landscape for projecting one's desire onto.

As an exhibition project *The Island Could be Heard by Night* revealed this mechanism to both its audiences, and to Mansfield and myself as producers. Beyond the cynical reading that positioning Nobbys as a phantasmagoric island is tied to romanticism and processes of colonisation, the exhibition was an important curatorial exercise. It not only revealed the mechanics of romanticism, through the processes of writing, image-making and curating, it raised the notion that there is a generative potential to the concept of island lure. Chapter Five brings together the two case studies – *The Island Could be Heard by Night* and *Ash Island and its Transformations* – in an analysis of their common and disparate results. Here, we see evidence of how the island itself and the premise of island lure is well-suited to this form of inscription. In analysing the two projects, island tropes such as short-term occupation and the idea of the experimental laboratory – despite their negative historical associations – prove well-suited to curatorial and artistic exhibition-making practices.

³⁸¹ Howden and Mansfield. Pg31-32

CHAPTER FIVE – THE CURATORIAL GAZE

To analyse the curatorial purpose and results of both *Ash Island and its Transformations* and *The Island Could be Heard by Night*, we must first understand a number of broader curatorial concepts. American curator, writer and teacher Mary Jane Jacob suggests, to describe the lived processes of curating is a 'little like describing the wind'.³⁸² Although the difficulty of description persists, and this itself appears to be a unifying feature, the formulation of a philosophical approach is important to this study. This is because both case studies are practice-based research. They were crafted as investigations into how an exhibition might be realised, why an exhibition is an appropriate form in the first instance, and what the form reveals in terms of new knowledge within broader fields of study – island studies as well as contemporary art.

At this point it is important to note that the curatorial ideas and processes exercised through the two case studies were fundamentally under investigation as well. The exhibitions were not just a complementary contextual exercise, where methods and frameworks from a literature-dominated field of island studies were borrowed and retooled to fit the new contexts of contemporary art and the gallery. The exhibitions themselves were hypotheses in curating. In this sense, *Ash Island and its Transformations* and *The Island Could be Heard by Night* formed a number of propositions in addition to the what, how and why of exhibitions: what is the purpose and place of curating; what are the generative powers of curating; and, what knowledge do we gain through curating research? In other words, what do we gain in our attempts to describe the wind?

'The un-stated aim of any curatorial endeavour is to produce a situation like no other.'³⁸³ Claire Doherty, Director of Situations and crew member aboard Hartley's 2011 expedition, describes her curatorial, theoretical and managerial practice as a producer of the temporal-spatial event. Swiss-born curator and Artistic Director of Serpentine Galleries, Hans Ulrich

³⁸² Monika Molnár and Tanja Trampe, "Public Art: Consequences of a Gesture? An Interview with Mary Jane Jacob," *OnCurating.org*, no. 19 (June 2013). Pg36

³⁸³ Claire Doherty, "Curating Wrong Places... Or Where Have All the Penguins Gone?," in *Curating Subjects*, ed. Paul O'Neill (London: Open Editions, 2007). Pg107

Obrist, points to an equally important yet opposing drive within his own curatorial philosophy. He borrows a turn of phrase from British historian Eric Hobsbawm in saying, 'I think that might be the best definition for what curating could be – a protest against forgetting'.³⁸⁴ If we are to combine these two philosophies – where the exhibition acts as a situational mnemonic – we arrive at one of the primary organisational principles of both *Ash Island and its Transformations* and *The Island Could be Heard By Night*.

Framing both case studies as situational mnemonics – the combination of time, place and context is both retriever and generator of memory – we are able to look deeper into the use of place in contemporary art, particularly within curating. Place, despite its ubiquity in contemporary art, is often left un- or ill-defined. Tim Cresswell suggests, at least in terms of his own field of geography, this is largely due to the fact that it is not a specialized academic term; place is an everyday word 'wrapped in common sense.'³⁸⁵ In his treatise *Place: An Introduction*, Cresswell offers us both simple and complicated understandings of the term. He borrows the theoretical trifecta of location, locale and sense of place, devised by political geographer John Agnew, to arrive at a definition of place as 'a meaningful location'.³⁸⁶ Perhaps more telling, though, are Cresswell's descriptions of what place isn't. That is, place can be made distinct from its siblings – 'space' and 'landscape' – and therein lies its meaning.

Cresswell proposes space as a kind of in-between. As if a moment between landfalls, space is place *before* it has undergone its alchemic transformation. We have yet to build up a patina of importance or significance on space and, because of this absence, we feel the horror of its unbound, unrestrained geometry. It is meaningless rather than meaningful. 'From the safety and security of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa.'³⁸⁷ Landscape, on other hand, might be thought of as an entirely different category well beyond the dynamics of space and place. Landscape is deeply bound to a specific history of capitalism and economy, and continues to be tied to the politics of representation:

³⁸⁴ Hans Ulrich Obrist quoted by Sarah Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World*, 2nd ed. (London: Granta Books, 2009). Pg250

³⁸⁵ Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2015). Pg6

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.* Pg12

³⁸⁷ Yi Fu-Tuan quoted by Tim Cresswell, *ibid.* Pg15

Landscape...[combines] a focus on the material topography of a portion of land (that which can be seen) with the notion of vision (the way it is seen). Landscape is an intensely visual idea. In most definitions of landscape the viewer is outside of it. This is the primary way in which it differentiates from place. Places are very much things to be inside of.³⁸⁸

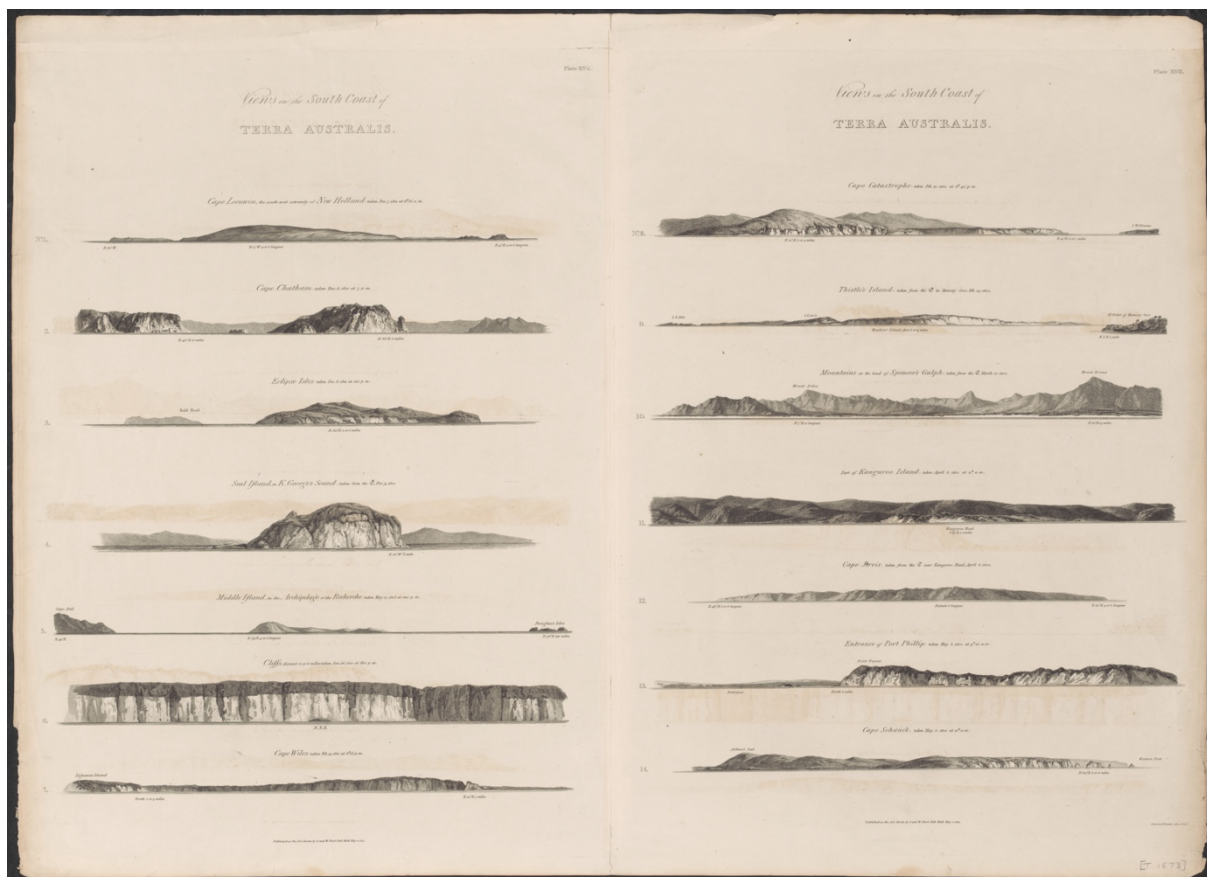


Figure 62: William Westall, *Views on the South Coast of Terra Australis*. Plate XVII. Drawn by W. Westall, 1814. 14 maps on 1 sheet, 72.4 x 99.8cm. Published by G and W Nicol Pall Mall, May 2, 1814. From the collection of the National Library of Australia

If we might, for example, consider the panoramic gaze of William Westall's *Views on the South Coast of Australia* (1801-1802) (Figure 62), or the persistent representation of islands being looked to in contemporary art and literature – Walton Ford's *The Island*, 2009 (Figure 63) or M. L Stedman's *The Light Between Oceans*, 2012, we see evidence of Cresswell's ideas about landscape. The politics of looking (and possession) are articulated through the visualisation of place and landscape. Cresswell's distinctions between landscape and place are reminiscent

³⁸⁸ Ibid. Pg17

of Ronström's orientational metaphors and spatial hierarchies, specifically the relationship between inside and outside, being 'in' or 'on'. At its simplest, landscape is viewed and seen from the outside, and that vision is a construction for others. Place, on the other hand, is a lived experience.



Figure 63: Walton Ford, *The Island*, 2009. Watercolor, gouache, pencil and ink on paper, 248 x 350cm. Image courtesy of Paul Kasmin Gallery

Having determined a fundamental distinction between space, place and landscape, we can return to the subject of curating. In her 1995 essay 'Notes from a recent arrival', Lucy Lippard touches on one of the founding functions of *Ash Island and its Transformations* – the exhibition as an evocation of a lost landscape:

...even as power of place is diminished and often lost in modern life, it continues, as an absence, to define culture and identity. When history fails a community, memory takes up the task... When governments and dominant cultures prove inadequate,

grandmothers become the authorities. And the landscape triggers their memories, becomes symbolic, conveys different messages in different cultural languages.³⁸⁹

The curatorial evocation described here is three-fold. First, and most importantly, the physical or geographic erasure of place doesn't necessarily equate to an erasure of mythopoetic power. Ash Island is no longer an island. To visit the island today is to visit a ghost; the sign at the bridge between Hexham and Kooragang is one of only a few remaining traces of its former island geography. Despite the absence of physical terrain, Ash Island – the 'place' – persists. As Lippard suggests, even when the island is lost, and perhaps even more potently due to its absence, it becomes a spectral figure from the past that haunts the present. A curatorial premise that deals with retrieved and prompted memory, then, is made all the more important. The exhibition not only generates new memories, but doubles as an archival practice in the face of lost territory, lost memory and overlooked locations.

The second evocation is the failure of history. Ash Island has been failed by history in more ways than one. Of course, most significantly in its physical changes through processes of colonisation, European occupation and the modern industrialization of the Newcastle region. But also, more subtly – the way in which it has been historically overlooked. For example, the individual visual and scientific contributions of the sisters (rather than their familial unit) were only considered historically significant until a very recent past. Marion Ord's 1988 dual publication – *Historical Drawings of Native Flowers* and *Historical Drawings of Moths and Butterflies* – were among the first monographs dedicated to the sisters' botanical illustration, combining their scientific and artistic practice with their lived experience of Ash Island. And, one of the first Australian Museum collection-based exhibitions to emphasise a significance of place within their work was produced only within the last decade – *Beauty in Nature: Art of the Scott Sisters* in 2011. The reframing of history through these literary and visual representations is important. They indicate broader shifts in attribution of cultural worth; an expanded recognition and attitude towards contributing "voices"; and they are constitutive

³⁸⁹ Lucy Lippard, "Notes from a Recent Arrival," in *Situation*, ed. Claire Doherty, Documents of Contemporary Art (London; Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, 2009). Pg155

material of history, not only for the individuals represented but for the institutions of representation – the exhibition, the museum and the monograph.³⁹⁰

In 2017 the Australian Museum produced *Transformations: the art of the Scott Sisters*. The exhibition furthered the momentum of its 2011 precursor, particularly the characterization of the sisters as visual artists:

For the first time, the Australian Museum's exhibition examines each sister's art side by side... Although difficult to tell apart, each sisters work is an expression of their individual interests and style – technical precision, textures and bold deep colours for Harriet and, more often colour, movement, and an open composition for Helena.³⁹¹

Alongside wall-sized digital animations and scaled-up replications of their paintings, the original works, their drawings, diaries, sketchbooks and specimens were housed in wooden museum vitrines, evoking the controlled violence and aesthetics of nineteenth century cabinets of curiosities (Figure 64). The sub-themes of the exhibition, which were well-defined by the catalogue – the sisters' early lives, the nineteenth century European context and 'craze' for natural history, the influence of Ash Island within their artistic practice, the efforts of producing *Australian Lepidoptera and their Transformations*, the difficulties of women 'turning professional' and the enduring institutional significance of their legacy³⁹² – traces a clear narrative thread through the visual material on display:

[As] colonial Sydney's finest natural history artists... Their notebooks, manuscripts, sketches and butterfly and moth paintings are an important record of the colony's natural landscapes and a rare pictorial record of two talented and determined women successfully working across the boundary of art and science.³⁹³

³⁹⁰ Bruce W. Ferguson, "Exhibition Rhetorics: Material Speech and Utter Sense," in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, ed. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne (London; New York: Routledge, 1996). Pg126

³⁹¹ "Transformations: Art of the Scott Sisters," (Sydney, NSW: Australian Museum). Pg16

³⁹² Ibid. Pg1-16

³⁹³ Ibid. Pg1



Figure 64: (Installation view) *Transformations: the art of the Scott Sisters*, 7 February – 25 June 2017. Australian Museum, Sydney, NSW. Image courtesy of Wirth Design

If we return to Lippard's words, we recognize the failure of history; '...if history comes from above and outside, from teachers and governments, stories are told from the inside at ground level.'³⁹⁴ Within *Transformations: the art of the Scott Sisters* we witness this kind of 'top-down' telling and re-framing of history. Despite the important revisions made around the significance of the sisters' visual and scientific contributions to Australia's early colonial history, the linear and uninterrupted course of colonisation remains unmoved. Furthermore, as exhibition visitors are invited to simulate the sisters' visual practice of looking,³⁹⁵ the assertion of the colonial gaze is not only rehearsed but embodied by contemporary audiences. As Bruce Ferguson observes,

Exhibitions are publicly sanctioned representations of identity, principally, but not exclusively, of the institutions which present them. They are narratives which use art objects as elements in institutionalized stories that are promoted to an audience.

³⁹⁴ Lippard. Pg155

³⁹⁵ "Transformations: Art of the Scott Sisters." Pg16

Exhibitions act as the visible encounter with a public which receives and acknowledges their import and projected status as important signs of important signs... That is where the systems of representation which formulate and uphold identities (artistic, national, subcultural, “international,” gender- or race-specific, avant-garde, regional, etc.) are most available for investigation and, perhaps, treatment or even exorcism. The will to influence is at the core of any exhibition.³⁹⁶

If we consider the curatorial will to influence, then the third evocation of *Ash Island and its Transformations* is to produce an alternative archival history. From the relics of absence and the failures of handed down histories from institutions elsewhere, the ‘power of place’ is reimagined and reanimated through memory. The exhibition re-stages lost memory, found memory and produces new memories. This is most obvious in artist Cherie Johnson’s work *Within* where, quite literally, Aunty Sandra Griffen and Aunty Glenda Simon are ‘grandmother authorities’ on the subject of place. When their interviews are conducted *in situ*, the landscape – the phantom island – is a trigger. The aunts are active participants in the generation and retrieval of memory and history, both personal and political. Their recollections of place are attributed with multiple meanings for multiple audiences and their stories describe a snapshot of the island at a moment in time. They depict a child’s interpretation of place and landscape, living memory of the island in recent history, the trajectory of Aboriginal occupancy and living cultural memory, and the complexity of contemporary indigenous and non-indigenous relations.

On a number of occasions Johnson publically pointed to the fact that sections of the interviews were edited and produced for a distinct second audience, separate to the exhibition – the aunts’ immediate families.³⁹⁷ Johnson proves that silence, too, is just as important in the production of politics as the authority of those speaking. The prospect of a second audience, then, in a different temporal-spatial location to that of the exhibition questions the notion of display; why ask a specific cultural language (oral history) to perform under the context of a different and distinct cultural language (an exhibition), particularly as

³⁹⁶ Ferguson. Pg126-128

³⁹⁷ Johnson. 25 May 2017

both are loaded with their own internal coding and politics of power? Here, we can see the curatorial evocation of *Ash Island and its Transformations*, as well as the curatorial will to influence, is thrown into question. Lippard considers this premise too:

Much has been written beyond the art world in the last twenty years about 'a sense of place' or 'the spirit of place', which are symbiotically related to a sense of displacement, 'longing and belonging', or longing to belong... The sense or spirit of place has become not just a cliché, but a kind of intellectual property, a way for nonbelongers to belong, or to appropriate a place, momentarily, as long as it is convenient. Ideally there should be no stigma attached to being adaptable, to feeling most at home in someone else's home. But given the history of this hemisphere... such an emotion becomes alarmingly proprietary.³⁹⁸

It is safe to suggest that the curatorial process can 'make itself appear natural, invisible and incontrovertible, even to museum professionals'.³⁹⁹ And, *Ash Island and its Transformations* is no exception. This has been outlined within the case study, most obviously through its institutional shaping as a project produced, firstly, under a university research paradigm and secondly, under the specificity of institutional imperatives. But further to this, Johnson's doubled space of display (and its doubled audience) demonstrates the kind of curatorial risk when dealing with 'place', as expressed by Lippard. The conceptual occupation of place, the curatorial representation of place, and the way in which memory and narrative are framed, all run the risk of doubling down on mechanisms of colonisation; they make inroads into establishing a home in someone else's home.

In *One Place After Another: site-specific art and locational identity*, Associate Professor of Art History at UCLA, Miwon Kwon also identifies a number of these risks. With a focus on urban architecture, urban design and the politics of social and public space, Kwon argues that, over the past thirty years, the "site-specific" artwork and the premise of 'place-making' has come to be the 'creation of a thematic destination that embellishes social memories for capital

³⁹⁸ Lippard. Pg154-155

³⁹⁹ Catherine Speck and Lisa Slade, "Art History and Exhibitions: Same or Different?," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 14, no. 2 (2014). Pg145

gains.⁴⁰⁰ The art history genealogy she traces opens up a number of issues around place and place-making: the limited understanding of site as bound to or embodied by a fixed physical geography; the problematic corporate, curatorial and artistic motivations behind unearthing 'repressed sociohistorical narratives'; the essentialising of site and the voice of a community; and the sanctioned role of the artist to speak 'on behalf' of others.⁴⁰¹

Kwon argues that "site-specific" has become a ubiquitous term, signalling "criticality" or "progressivity", without receiving any real articulation as to how, why or what makes it critical or progressive, or not.⁴⁰² Its prevalence in the mainstream language of the market, museums and galleries, as well as academia, reveals how the term has been hi-jacked as a servant to branding for all three. Neither *Ash Island and its Transformations* nor *The Island Could be Heard by Night* were ever curatorially or publically framed as "site-specific". Primarily because, as Kwon says, its critical edges have dulled, its pressures absorbed.⁴⁰³ But, just because both exhibitions evaded the terminology doesn't mean they escaped its trappings.

In terms of site-specificity, *The Island Could be Heard by Night* most wholly subscribes to Kwon's theories of place. First, and foremost, it is a counteractive response to place as a fixed geography. Although *Ash Island* and *Nobbys* share a history of erasure, and are therefore united by their investigation into the phantasmagorical island, *Nobbys* has a stronger presence within Newcastle as both an icon and as a physically visible location. What we recognise in Cresswell's theories are reflected in Kwon's, that place is more than geography; place is 'an intersection of mapped location, urban mythology, power dynamics and social interaction.'⁴⁰⁴ Whilst place is of course a meaningful location, its meaning is produced. And, the grooming of meaning is most clearly portrayed in the colonial history of *Nobbys*, a narrative deeply connected to the establishment of the Newcastle colony and, more broadly,

⁴⁰⁰ Amy Scarfone, "Book Review: 'One Place after Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity' by Miwon Kwon," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, no. 37 (2007). Pg210

⁴⁰¹ Ibid. Pg210. And, Doherty. Pg104

⁴⁰² Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: The MIT Press, 2004). Pg1

⁴⁰³ Ibid. Pg2

⁴⁰⁴ Doherty. Pg104

the European settlement of Australia.⁴⁰⁵ The purpose of the exhibition, then, was to destabilize Nobbys as an icon, particularly its rigid, euro-centric, masculine heroics of place.

In the 2004 anthology, *Situations*, Doherty describes this principle:

If we understand place as an unstable, shifting set of political, social, economic and material relations, and locality as produced and contested through a set of conditions that we might describe as situation, our experience of works which truly produce remarkable engagements with place will be characterized by a sense of *dislocation* – encouraging us no longer to look with the eyes of a tourist but to become implicated in the jostling contingency of mobilities and relations that constitute contemporaneity.⁴⁰⁶

The suggestion here is not that *The Island Could be Heard by Night* was successful in its attempts, nor produced ‘remarkable engagements’ with place. Rather, the project was characterized by efforts to unsettle the teleological vision of history established by colonial practices and upheld today through the eyes of the tourist or visitor. It sought to destabilise the myth of Nobbys by way of visual and narrative interjection. Professor Nikos Papastergiadis, Director of the Research Unit in Public Cultures at The University of Melbourne, describes this mechanism as a ‘circuit breaker’; it is the effective disruption of ‘small gestures in specific places’.⁴⁰⁷ The scale proposed by Papastergiadis is important. Nobbys not only towers over its residents, metaphorically and geographically, the possibility of producing a large-scale incursion into the island site (and its mythology) seemed antithetical to our original premise of disturbance. If a cue might be taken from the material history of the site, the most effective method of altering the landscape was not the dramatic exercise of attempting to blow it up but the incremental ‘nibbling’ at Nobbys – the quarrying away of rock, over time, that ultimately reduced its height by a third.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁵ This is evidenced in Chapter Four.

⁴⁰⁶ Claire Doherty, ed. *Situation*, Documents of Contemporary Art (London; Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press 2009). Pg18

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid. Introduction. Pg15

⁴⁰⁸ Kerr. Pg9

The Island Could be Heard by Night effected a 'sense of the wrong place by shifting the status quo; by intervening in the bordered, prescribed spaces of location.'⁴⁰⁹ Although the 'wrong place', a term coined by Kwon, is written in relation to art occupying places where it doesn't typically belong – for example, beyond the gallery context – the geosophy of the 'wrong place' is still enacted both visually and literally. The works of *The Island Could be Heard by Night* are united by their transplantation of 'wrong places' – Broken Hill, Ball's Pyramid, Point Puer, the pan-opticon, and even the wrong people – Charles O'Hara Booth, Ernest Hemmingway, the grandfather, the naval captain. This shifts the iconic status of Nobbys. These wrong places and wrong people destabilise and dislocate the heroics and mythology of its colonial history by way of relocation and re-habitation.

'The contemporary power of the past',⁴¹⁰ as described by Mary Jane Jacob, is an idea central to both *Ash Island and its Transformations* and *The Island Could be Heard by Night* where the 'borrowed power' of the past is used to enliven the present.⁴¹¹ Within both case studies, this power is neither strictly celebrated nor strictly critiqued. Rather, there is an assertion of personal, political and collective identities alternative to the established narratives and traditions. The power of non-histories, non-sites, non-places becomes clear when the dominant culture fails to satisfy or reflect a lived experience. By redefining and rewriting history through an assertion of the wrong place, the right place – the island subject – is thrown into relief.

Another way in which *The Island Could be Heard by Night* challenges the status quo is found within its organisational structure. Beyond the content of individual works, the exhibition was an experiment in, firstly, producing and framing fiction within a gallery context and secondly, self-organisation, which includes collaboration. Not only does self-organisation reflect the political shape of the arts, as it mirrors the hierarchies and dynamics of power and approval, it also provides a creative solution to these same obstacles. German artist, curator and

⁴⁰⁹ Doherty, "Curating Wrong Places... Or Where Have All the Penguins Gone?." Pg107

⁴¹⁰ Mary Jane Jacob, "Places with a Past," in *Situation*, ed. Claire Doherty, Documents of Contemporary Art (London: Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, 2009). Pg199

⁴¹¹ Grayson Perry, *Playing to the Gallery: Helping Contemporary Art in Its Struggle to Be Understood* (New York; London;: Particular Books, 2014). p64

researcher, Marion von Osten, points to a genealogy of self-organisation as a generative and valid method for curatorial and artistic thought. On the distinction between roles – artist, curator, producer, researcher – she says:

...the roles belong together...The Constructivists historically did not divide between these positions. [They] designed exhibitions, made artworks, published, created posters and so on. So, it's a question of tradition, of which genealogy you insert yourself into. There is the 19th Century male genius model that is still working, but [I] refer to a feminist and micro-political approach. If you look at feminist art from the 70s, you find that they had to self-organize and create exhibitions...I would like to see the taking of multiple roles more as a necessity to inhabit different possible articulations in the art field...to understand [it] as an intellectual laboratory...⁴¹²

In developing *The Island Could be Heard by Night*, Mansfield and I move between the roles of artist, curator, project coordinator, researcher, author and editor. One of the primary revelations within this method highlights, rather counter-intuitively, the role and purpose of the curator. 'The artist is the curator is the artist' is, today, a well-versed mantra within contemporary art, with the insight being that one role enriches the other.⁴¹³ In the case of *The Island Could be Heard by Night*, however, there was more than one occasion when the project would have benefitted from a curator-broker to act as mediator between artist and institution. This was most acute when marketing, media presence, production of online content and censorship came into question. As Mansfield and I moved between creative and organisational roles over the course of the project, the shape of the final project was significantly changed. This is most explicitly outlined in 'A Conversation Between Two Islophiles', where I reflect upon my own experience:

...when I approached you, I put myself in a supporting role... the writing was supposed to support the exhibition, which is what I'm comfortable with. Coming out onto stage

⁴¹² Charlotte Barnes, "Marion Von Osten on Her Collaborative Style and Multiple Roles: Interviewed by Charlotte Barnes," *OnCurating.org*, no. 19 (June 2013). Pg89

⁴¹³ Iben Bentzen, "Thirty-One Positions on Curating," *ibid.*, no. 1 (2008). Pg1

with you, and being given equal weight in terms of exhibition content and visibility, was unexpected.⁴¹⁴

Although this statement is couched in ideas about writing and creative fiction within the visual realm of exhibition-making, it also indicates an innate curatorial philosophy. As Mary Jane Jacob says, ‘artists care about the questions they are working on... Curators take care as partners, cultivating ideas, holding open an exploratory space during the time of creation, and then caring for the exhibition of what was explored for a time.’⁴¹⁵

Within Mansfield’s practice, self-organisation and self-curation appears to be a preferred exhibition-making or curatorial method. The ability to control all aspects of her work is exercised across all elements of production: the generation of new work is produced through outsourcing labour;⁴¹⁶ independent writers are commissioned to produce artist statements;⁴¹⁷ exhibition installation is accomplished through her own labour, which in turn shapes the formal qualities of her work; and the publicity and marketing material is typically self-generated and self-published.⁴¹⁸ Mansfield is a mid-career artist and so we must recognize her practical philosophy of self-organisation as a political choice. She rejects the exclusionary hierarchies – based on gender, age, education and exhibition pedigree, encountered within the arts industry – by choosing this methodology. As an early-career curator and researcher, I have found this method also effectively solves issues related to living and working in a regional centre where resources, networks and avenues of production can be limited. Although we recognize self-organisation as a generative tool, used in response to some or all of these issues, the premise of self-organisation must not remain uncriticised. On

⁴¹⁴ Howden and Mansfield. Pg29

⁴¹⁵ Molnár and Trampe. Pg37

⁴¹⁶ This is made evident in Chapter Four, where issues with Mansfield’s photo-tapestry suppliers changed the course of the exhibition outcomes. Another example is the production of Mansfield’s resin and LED–illuminated frames. This labour was outsourced to Newcastle-based craftsperson Jesse Neale.

⁴¹⁷ In 2017, Mansfield engaged Australian curator and writer Isobel Parker Philips to author an exhibition statement for *The Last Vestiges of Instinct*, 2015, held at Galerie Pompom in Sydney, NSW.

⁴¹⁸ In 2014, Mansfield self-generated and self-published all marketing material for exhibitions: *Get out of the water*, 2014, at Ryan Renshaw Gallery in Brisbane, QLD, and *And dive into the sea*, 2014, at Wellington St. Projects in Sydney, NSW.

the topic of distinct roles – artist, curator and the still distasteful practice of curating your own artistic work – Marion van Osten raises the risks associated with such a practice. It ‘...actually is still a taboo – you can either be one or the other. This divide represents a boundary you cannot cross.’⁴¹⁹ The taboo appears to lie with an attitude of double-dipping. In terms of opportunities for artists and curators, the self-curated exhibition doubles-down on the authority of the subject and their voice. The curator not only borrows the power expertise associated with an artist, but, charged with the assumed cultural authority that their own position has come to represent, the voice of the subject in question is double distilled.⁴²⁰ There is an implied danger within this curatorial practice which, most certainly, runs the risk of becoming insular.

Van Osten, who has a practice of curating her own artistic works into group exhibitions, finds the taboo generative; ‘ideological boundaries are interesting for an artist to work with.’⁴²¹ Whilst issues of ego, authority and representation are deeply questionable, and should be held accountable, we can recognize something else in Van Osten’s words. She calls for a dissolution of hierarchies and power structures between artists and curators. She stages the distinctions between the roles – the processes, ideas and methods of thinking and producing – as ideological rather than actual and, therefore, interchangeable. If we return to idea of that the exhibition might act as an ‘intellectual laboratory’, then the practice of self-curation might be considered an experimental practice, in a systematic sense. The artwork, the exhibition, the thesis are simply pearls on the string of hypothesis. The philosophy of self-curation, then, becomes an exploration of one idea through multiple forms – visual, written, theoretical, curatorial, organizational, spatial. One premise can be explored through varying methods of display and can engage a variety of discrete audiences.

If my original purpose was to ‘describe the wind’ then the assessment of these case studies reveals a number of curatorial mechanisms uniting both projects. First, they are both an attempt to engender place. As discussed, *The Island Could be Heard by Night* achieves this through methods of disruption. The interjection of the ‘wrong place’ and ‘wrong people’

⁴¹⁹ Barnes. Pg89

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

dislodge established myths and psycho-geographies surrounding Nobbys island, particularly the machismo of colonial environmental intervention. *Ash Island and its Transformations*, on the other hand, doesn't take such a confrontational position. Through its conservative exhibition structure and adherence to curatorial convention, we see place generated as an 'act of solidarity.'⁴²² Taking on a 'position of solidarity rather than simply...provocateurs', the artists of *Ash Island and its Transformations* produce place and a re-reading of history – both pre- and post-colonial – through lived experience and first-hand memory. As furthered by Doherty, the 'effectiveness of this solidarity depends on [the artists'] sensitivity to local political dynamics, histories and cultures and the possibility of a sustained [curatorial] relationship with participants.'⁴²³ Through the combination of an outsider's perspective (van Leest), local artistic perspectives (Hensel, Johnson and Turner Carroll) with a local curatorial perspective, an alternative understanding of place is crafted. This understanding operates beyond the handed-down histories from, firstly, outside the Newcastle context, and secondly, institutions that determine cultural worth and validate specific cultural voices in support of their own institutional legacy.

The second uniting feature between case studies is experimentation with organizational and curatorial structure. As discussed in the case study, *Ash Island and its Transformations* was couched in the curatorial conventions of regional gallery practices as well as the research imperatives of the curator-scholar tradition. Whilst a lot of the decisions within *Ash Island and its Transformations* can now be attributed to the 'invisible' activities of curating – which, in turn, reflects how we inherit standardised forms of production and thinking – there is still something to be argued for the choices that were explicitly made: the decision to produce an ahistorical exhibition with an historic subject focus; to investigate memory as a valid form of historical record; to present 'place' as an archival device; to prompt a contemporary understanding of place through the 'borrowed power' of the past; and, perhaps most importantly, to present a survey of competing voices and cultural narratives as a dynamic figuration of place. As Nigerian curator and theorist Okwui Enwezor suggests:

⁴²² Grant Kester quoted by Doherty, "Curating Wrong Places... Or Where Have All the Penguins Gone?." Pg106

⁴²³ Doherty. Ibid. Pg107

...the group exhibition model is very interesting because in a sense it works contra to the canonical model... It shows the vital and productive messiness of the contemporary, the inherent disarray within its forms, the indiscipline of the contemporary artist to adhere to a single rule.⁴²⁴

In terms of organizational structure, *The Island Could be Heard by Night* emphasised experiment. It was a structure produced, first, as a reaction to the 'invisible' decisions of *Ash Island and its Transformations*, which were made visible through the processes of academic analysis and evaluation. Second, it was informed by methods of historical mimicry and narrative intervention. And third, it was a product of collaborative processes. These three forces resulted in an exhibition governed by self-organisation and self-curation, where self-reflexivity, self-portraiture and the possibility of fiction within historical cultural frameworks operated as interrogative tools.

Van Osten states that the interchangeability of the artist and curator is, in practical terms, more obvious than typically acknowledged. She suggests this interchangeability leads us to an enriched understanding of both:

What you learn as an artist is to make exhibitions; I think that's completely forgotten. Maybe you don't learn everything you wanted, but what you learn is how to make an exhibition. I think that's absolutely crucial because art historians don't learn that during their studies. From the first minute of your education as an artist, you have to think how you would put a work on display, even for a class discussion. The publicity and the publication of the work is always a part of your practice, so there isn't a big step from this kind of practice to larger exhibition making.⁴²⁵

Although Van Osten is strictly describing an artist's education, it is fair to suggest that her insight also applies to the curator's education. Both place an emphasis on practice-based learning; both the artist and the curator think through doing. Just as the process of writing is

⁴²⁴ Okwui Enwezor, "Curating Beyond the Canon: Okwui Enwezor Interviewed by Paul O'Neill," *ibid.* Pg112

⁴²⁵ Barnes. Pg91

a method for thinking, as is curating, and as is making an artwork; the acts of producing an exhibition, a film, a piece of fiction, are bound up in this process.

The last uniting feature of both case studies, is the exploration of the island – real and phantasmagoric. The united subject matter is an obvious choice for the fact that it enables us to look between the case studies, using a constant subject for deeper investigations into methodologies for curatorial or artistic approach. But more subtly, there is another reason why the island, in particular, is well-suited to the temporal and spatial mechanisms of the exhibition. In terms of the exhibition format, Van Osten points to it here:

...it has a complete other time space. You don't know who will come and see it, and so you don't know how people will move through your space...this question of space...there will be visitors in this space and bodies will move through and perceive an exhibition. And they will perceive it not in a linear narrative.⁴²⁶

In the Western imagination, the island has a long history of being both out of time and out of place, located 'elsewhere' and relegated to the past or future. It embodies a kind of geo-temporal 'otherness' reflected in the philosophies of the white cube of the gallery or museum. If an exhibition is a situational mnemonic, so too is the island. They mirror each other in their imagining as distinct, discrete and spatially demarcated locations; the ontological security of the island's bounded edge is equally enlivened in the psychological edge of the four walls of the gallery. The island and the gallery isolate space and time. They both offer a compression of history, or chronology as Van Osten describes, and both are marked and enlivened through acts of visitation.

This thesis is not alone in relating the island to the metaphoric space of the museum, gallery or exhibition. Lowenthal describes the island of Tasmania as a 'museum of history and archaeology', constructing the island as 'a static vessel for history.'⁴²⁷ On the subject of post-colonial Caribbean literature and the history of European colonisation of the region,

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ Lowenthal. Pg214

DeLoughrey also casts the island as a museum; 'continental contemporary discourse associates tropical island nations with isolation and premodernity (an erasure of colonial contact) and commonly relegates island spaces as "museums" for tourism, anthropological inquiry, or sociological praxis.'⁴²⁸ And, Ronström also makes the comparison:

Downsizing and minaturisation are common techniques to take control over the presented "other" in places like exhibitions, museums, souvenir shops and theme parks. Control is achieved by time and space compression, reduction of complexity, and increase of overview and comprehension.⁴²⁹

Conjuring the island as a gallery, museum or exhibition space, however, is a powerful idea. As Ronström describes, the 'overview' offered by the island and the exhibition ratifies the panoramic gaze. In the case of the island, this is enacted by the visitor – be they the colonist, the author or the tourist. For an exhibition, this controlled overview is evident in the curatorial gaze. Personal politics, historical chronologies and art-history genealogies are not only temporally and spatially compressed but they are also pressed into service for a greater narrative invented, observed and authored by the curator. Less cynically though, the island and gallery share what Van Osten describes above as a non-linear narrative. Unlike the authorial sequence of island arrival and departure, the gallery and the exhibition are temporally and spatially rhizomatic in their nature. They offer connections between ideas, places, times and histories, not necessarily in an ordered teleological sequence. Whilst the compression of time and history certainly can engender the panoramic curatorial gaze, the exhibition also offers a moment to challenge the dominance of these chronologies and cultural narratives. In 'A Conversation Between Two Islophiles', this idea is pointed to. Although the subject is the possibility of fiction in the exhibition or gallery space, there is a shared sentiment:

...I think making use of those historic modes as a way to insert a different narrative is much more revealing. It gives you space as a writer or an artist, a space to engage with

⁴²⁸ DeLoughrey, ""The Litany of Islands, the Rosary of Archipelagoes": Caribbean and Pacific Archipelagraphy." Pg24

⁴²⁹ Ronström, "In or On? Island Words, Island Worlds: li." Pg241

a poetic truth. Your position is less bound to the arguable truths of history and more open to questioning, exploring the very modes we use to know ourselves.⁴³⁰

In recalling Gillis' words – that Western culture not only thinks about islands, but thinks *with* them – we recognise the mechanisms of curatorial practice. Not only is an exhibition a subject and object worthy of analysis unto itself, it is also in a state of process. It is a method of and for thinking, one that makes that methodology material, aesthetic and embodied.

⁴³⁰ Howden and Mansfield. Pg31

CONCLUSION

Within the field of island studies, the written word is championed as *the* form for expressing island encounter, island metaphor, and the island as a device of and motif for thinking. Visual or contemporary art is only occasionally the subject of discourse.⁴³¹ And, we can see why. The expedition journal and the epistolary novel (like *Robinson Crusoe*), are foundational forms for inscribing and narrating a sequence of island arrival and departure. These forms have been translated into the contemporary “pulp-fiction” of island-set romance or crime fiction, which constitutes the largest proportion of literature featuring islands, as well as the plethora of film, television and the tourism industry today.⁴³² The visual image, the spatial object or the experimental moment of the exhibition, then, has been overlooked and dismissed as a distinct form. Drawing on its own internal politics and mechanisms that simultaneously challenge and subscribe to the tropes of ‘islandness’, this thesis sought to address that missing criticality.

If we read island encounter as a framework, we can pull back from the horrors or violence of real island encounters to view the subject of island approach as a methodology. In Chapter One the sequence of island encounter is mapped out in great detail, from the invention of mythological or imaginative island geographies to the final assertion of subject over object within island departure. By mapping this sequence, island tropes and the ‘naturalised’ state of the island comes to the fore: the island is located both out of place and out of time – beyond mainland structure and order; throughout Western history islands have been approached and dealt with thematically rather than phenomenologically; an island encounter, book-ended by arrival and departure always frames the island as a short-term location; and, due to the short-term nature of occupation or inhabitation, the island is an experimental space.

⁴³¹ At the 2017 ISISA conference, the sub-category of “Nurturing the Human Spirit” covered a range of arts, literature and education focused on islands and the island subject. Of the seventeen presentations only four focused on the topic of visual art.

⁴³² Crane and Fletcher. Pg637

In Chapter Two, the *Nowhereisland* case study is a key example of a work of contemporary art that can be analysed under the island encounter framework. It wholly subscribes to the established and well-worn patterns of island approach in Western history and literature. Hartley's engagement with the tropes and rituals of island approach, however, appears to produce conflicting results. First, he demonstrates an enduring and deep romanticism towards temporarily inhabiting an island as a device for thinking and dreaming. This, as DeLoughrey, Loxley, Weaver-Hightower, Beer and Lowenthal all suggest, is a method for mystifying the processes of colonisation, occupation, dominance, sovereignty and control. Counter to this, however, is the results of Hartley's engagement with these traditions. As a utopian artwork, *Nowhereisland* is deeply political. Hartley offers his audiences a moment to reconsider the future, to communally propose the ideal shape for a nation in the twenty-first century. As both an object and emblem of climate change – Nyskjaeret could only be 'discovered' in response to a changing Arctic landscape – *Nowhereisland* makes use of established islands tropes as a way of highlighting the artwork's political intent. *Nowhereisland* also sets up the premise that the existence and use of island tropes in a contemporary work of art, or curatorial project, is not necessarily conservative.

Ash Island and its Transformations looked closely at the question of occupation. Having been failed by history, as a landscape overlooked and produced from the 'top-down' by preceding social history exhibitions, the concept of 'place' demanded a return to the site itself. The phantasmagoric island of *Ash Island and its Transformations* proved to be both generator and retriever of memory; the exhibition can therefore be described as a situational mnemonic. But, the risk associated with curating 'place' comes close to Lippard's warnings about setting up a home in someone else's home. *Ash Island and its Transformations* demonstrated the assumptions and ideologies within curatorial practice that can remain hidden to artists and curators, as well as the institutions that prompt such projects. The case study demonstrated less a failure of curatorial intent, but rather that curatorial practice requires investigation and critique. Curating and exhibition-making has the potential to uphold hierarchies of power; the curator plays a significant role in choosing which voices might or might not be heard, which stories might or might not be remembered.

The fact that *The Island Could be Heard by Night* was devised as an antidote to *Ash Island and its Transformations*, particularly because Ash Island wasn't considered sufficiently island-like, demonstrates the lure of the phantasmagoric island. Just like Hartley, both Mansfield and I wanted to engage in island tropes and the possibility of short-term island occupation and experiment. And, just like Hartley, we made use of the 'naturalised' island tropes as a method for inverting them and making them visible. The fictional histories of *The Island Could be Heard by Night* – its 'wrong places' and 'wrong people' – were interjections into an existing history of Nobbys. The teleological vision of history is momentarily interrupted. This interruption was achieved through mechanisms we know carry a legacy: the island is portrayed via the personal inscription of history (the self-portrait); the male solo hero (or anti-hero) is a dynamic subject set against a static island-object; the island is dealt with thematically where the figuration of an island is conceived as interchangeable – utopia, prison, quarantine; and, the premise of fiction and literary intervention speaks back to a long tradition of inscribing the island through the written word.

All three case studies contribute to the missing criticality regarding islands in contemporary art. They demonstrate the risks of working with concepts of 'place' and site, and the potential to simply further the panoramic gaze of the curator or processes of cultural colonisation. But, they also demonstrate a generative potential. Island tropes offer contemporary art something distinct from literature in that they reflect a similar pattern of figuration, imagining and experiential phenomenon, and for better or worse. The island and the exhibition share a number of properties: they are both imagined and produced as ontologically bound spaces; through miniaturisation and compression, they generate an alternative space-time location; their form and inscription is marked by visitation; and, both are a dual figure for thinking – they embody both the product and the process of thinking about our place in the world. This process, it must be said, remains uncomplicated only when we aren't inhabiting real islands with real occupants, or re-writing real island histories from the outside.

The purpose of this study was to present a practice-based investigation into the island as an artistic or curatorial device. The island, as a creative totem, has been groomed by centuries of thought and imagining over the course of Western history and has come to represent 'naturalised' features that this study has systematically debunked. Within the constraints of

this research, these same features have also been re-presented, through the curatorial case studies, as generative curatorial and artistic methodologies. The potential power and risks within curatorial or exhibition-making practices is demonstrated. The curator can reaffirm spatial, temporal, narrative and visual hierarchies associated with the politics of 'place' and the politics of 'looking'. So too can they use those same practices to question such politics. However, an open-ended question remains: what is the lasting effect of the exhibition? To consider if *Ash Island and its Transformations* or *The Island Could be Heard by Night*, and possibly even *Nowhereisland*, had a lasting or significant effect on the audiences and artists involved is too difficult to determine within the limits of this study. Certainly, through academic analysis, the curatorial practice has been revealed as a methodology for enacting knowledge. As has the politics of the curatorial gaze. The influence of these projects on the audiences or their artistic effectivity in the long-term, however, remains unresolved.

Islomania has long been an affliction on the Western mind. This mania makes islands appear as curiosities, far-flung outposts of aberrant and endemic exoticism, paradise and prison; as Victor Hugo describes, 'nothing changes form so quickly as clouds, except perhaps rocks.'⁴³³ With a closer look we recognise '...islands really own us, for in seeking them we are more often than not in search of ourselves.'⁴³⁴ Like the artwork or the exhibition, islands are not only an object to think about but they are a device for thinking:

[Islands] are the objects of our most intense desires and the locus of our greatest fears about environmental degradation, even species extinction. We feel extraordinarily free there, but also trapped. Associated with pleasure, islands harbor pain, for they can just as easily be prisons as refuges. Isles remind us of our isolation as individuals while sustaining visions of community; and though unparalleled as places of solitude, they are also among the few places we feel cosmically connected. Islands bring out both our possessive instincts and our most generous communitarian impulses. They are witnesses to our will to mastery and reminders of our powerlessness. Long objects

⁴³³ Victor Hugo, *The Toilers of the Sea*, trans. James Hogarth (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2002). Pg12

⁴³⁴ Lowenthal. Pg202

of science, they remain shrouded in mystery, still a part of that mythical geography we can never do without.⁴³⁵

⁴³⁵ John R. Gillis, "Island Sojourns," *ibid.* Pg286

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APPENDIX

CATALOGUE OF WORKS FOR EXAMINATION

The curatorial case studies *Ash Island and its Transformations* and *The Island Could be Heard by Night* are the primary creative outcomes of this research. They are extensively discussed within the thesis and should be considered as both the principal tool and results of this practice-lead study – *The Island in Contemporary Art: a curatorial gaze*. The following appendices includes links to the films of *Ash Island and its Transformations* and a full description of works from *The Island Could be Heard by Night*, including ‘A Conversation Between Two Isophiles’, all of which are key creative outcomes and exhibition resources integral to the execution and analysis of both case studies.

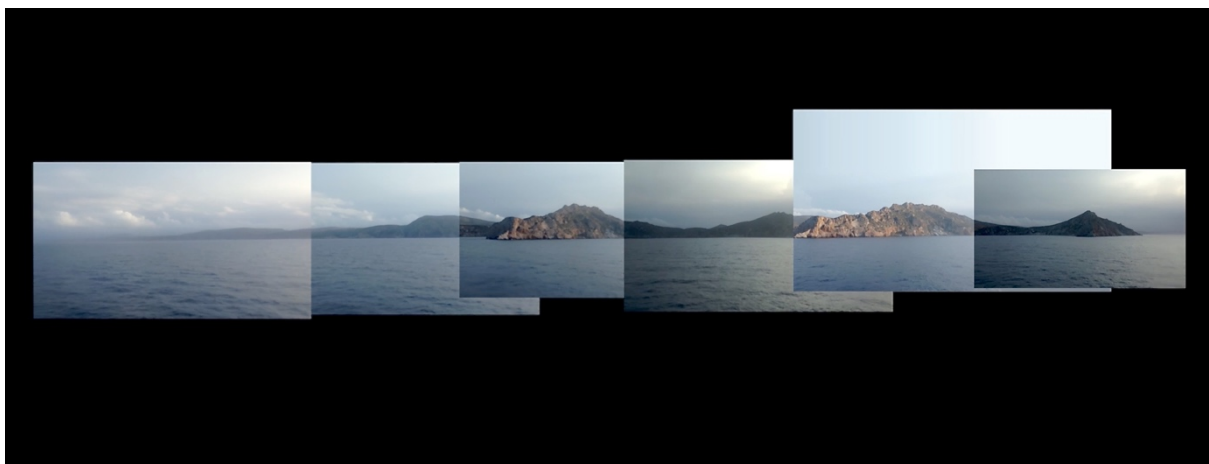


(Installation view) *The Island in Contemporary Art: a curatorial gaze*, HDR Examination Exhibition, SCA Galleries, Sydney, NSW. 8 December – Saturday 9 December 2017. Image courtesy of the artist

The individual works chosen for final examination at the SCA Gallery reflect a looser methodology of doing and thinking. They fall beyond curating as the final creative research outcome and are therefore not addressed in the body of the thesis. These works are considered ‘gestures’ rather than final forms. Although they are not central to the analysis and development of the thesis argument they remain relevant to the broader theoretical development of this study. If we consider again Mary Jane Jacob’s words – trying to describe the processes of curating is a little like trying to describe the wind – then these works reflect the more elusive yet essential properties of thinking about island metaphor in the visual realm of the gallery space; the island as an imaginative device or as a focus for desire; and the processes behind exhibition-making and curating research.

Two of the three works – *Untitled – Lesvos* (2017) and *Untitled – Kangaroo Island* (2017) – were made in direct response to two academic conferences I attended, both hosted by the International Small Islands Studies Association (ISISA): ISISA Conference XIV, *Niss(i)ology and Utopia: Back to the Roots of Island Studies*, Lesvos Island, Greece, 23 - 28 May 2016; and, ISISA Conference XV, *Small Island Communities: Models for Global Survival*, Kangaroo Island, South Australia, 3 - 8 July 2017.

Attending and presenting at these conferences was deeply important to the development of my research. As a transdisciplinary academic organisation, the ISISA conferences are united by their island focus. They offer academics drawn from a diversity of fields – environmental sciences, marine biology, conservation, tourism, governance, policy-making, literature, education, human-geography – an occasion to consider the island subject from a broad cross-sectional perspective. Certainly, within my own research, exposure to this transdisciplinary approach contributed significantly to the depth and consideration of the island as equally a product of both physical and cultural conditions.



(Still) Belinda Howden, *Untitled – Lesvos*, 2017. Single channel digital video with sound, 18 mins 12 secs. Image courtesy of the artist

Untitled – Lesvos depicts a fictional island. It is a composite digital video made up of iPhone recordings, captured when journeying across the Aegean Sea. The samples of different island edges quite literally describe an island approach as the recordings were taken from the Hellenic Seaways ferry between Athens and the island of Lesvos. The continuous movement of the sea, created by the consistent motion of the ferry travelling past different landfalls,

generates this phantasmagoric island as unreachable. The viewer looks *to* the island but never arrives.

In producing *Untitled – Lesvos* I wanted to visually explore the concept of island lure. As expressed in 'A Conversation Between Two Islophiles', Mansfield and I discuss the possibility of island hierarchy – that there might be an ideal island form marked by shape, rocky-ness, height, scale and site. This concept is articulated in Elizabeth McMahon's notion of the 'panoramic gaze', as well as Owe Ronström's descriptions of the importance of size, sight and overview in casting the island as a small, self-contained world. *Untitled – Lesvos* is a visual articulation of that ideal island. It is a fictional composite of geographic features deemed alluring to the island – remote, isolated, contained, and positioned elsewhere in both time and space. And, the ideal island of *Untitled – Lesvos* remains a fiction in its unattainability. As has been deeply considered within the body of the thesis, island lure appears to be one of those things generated by absence rather than presence.



Belinda Howden, *Untitled – Kangaroo Island*, 2017. Polyester, cotton thread, 85 x 195cm. Image courtesy of the artist

Untitled – Kangaroo Island was made during the 2017 ISISA Conference held on Kangaroo Island, South Australia. As part of attending and presenting at the conference I was awarded an ISISA Student Scholarship. The conference organisers asked all scholarship recipients to present an object, during the closing ceremonies, that summed up our conference experience. At this request, I chose to make *Untitled – Kangaroo Island*, a banner embroidered with the statement: What is a country without land. These words were an academic citation taken from ISISA President and Professor Godfrey Baldacchino's opening address: *There is so much more to sea: islands and mobility in a foetid 21st century*.

There were a number of features within *Untitled – Kangaroo Island* that were decided upon within the five-day conference period. In this sense, the work is gestural. It reflects an intuitive, material response to the conference conversations and discussions concerning islands as models for the future. A rationale for the chosen features of *Untitled – Kangaroo Island* can be found in my closing ceremony statement:

When Godfrey emailed us to say we were part of the closing ceremonies, I was caught by the suggestion that we might present a photograph, a shell, an object, that summarised our Kangaroo Island and conference experience. I took up this challenge and today I offer this object. It is a banner I have made over the past five days, spanning the conference period. It is hand stitched with a sentence, part-way between question and statement: What is a country without land.

There are a few key ideas, heard and observed over the course of this conference, that have gone into the making of this banner:

Tension. During this conference, I have listened to the push-pull of competing priorities: building island economy yet maintaining environmental conservation, increasing industry yet managing sustainability, opening borders yet ensuring biosecurity. This is the healthy tension between jostling needs and diverse voices, heightened by an island's limits and sense of containment.

Repetition. On the second day, a presentation by Elizabeth McMahon prompted an interesting discussion: can poetry affect policy? There was debate. The outcome seemed to be a defeated 'no'. But, I think what was left out of that conversation was the idea of repetition. Art cannot save the world as much as technology cannot fix all our problems. But, the gradual attrition of an idea or belief that no longer serves us is powerful. As is telling and re-telling stories that do. This conference is a part of that all-important practice of rehearsal.

If anyone attended Grant McCall's presentation, we might consider the statement 'what is a country without land' as a step towards de-territorialisation. Generally speaking this is a scary concept, especially for those living on islands where the threat of social or environmental destabilisation is very real. But also, how privileged might this idea be? How can colonised or oppressed peoples fight back for their land, how can a community protect the natural resources that they *do* have, if the world has now been declared de-territorialised? Less cynically though, de-territorialisation is an idea reflected in the very nature of us meeting this week. Drawn from all over the world,

we have come together, united by our common subject as members of a transient community continuously on the move.

And finally, a small contribution from my own field. In 2009 a French curator and cultural theorist, Nicholas Bourriaud, theorised the way in which the twenty-first century artists make art. He dubs the contemporary artist a *homo viator*; a traveller whose passage through signs, symbols, formats, contexts, locations and histories refers to the contemporary experience of mobility, travel, migration and transpassing. Please consider my offering today as a kind of wandering; this is an object deeply bound to a time and place but one that also speaks to a trajectory. From the choice of safety orange – the colour of visibility – to the shonky-ness of my hand-crafted stitches, the speed of making and the aesthetic of the final object is reminiscent of agitation propaganda: placards, banners, protest, activism. Having cited the statement from Godfrey's opening address, we can reflect again in our closing ceremonies: what is a country without land?⁴³⁶



(Documentation) Belinda Howden, *Untitled – Kangaroo Island*, 2017. A banner sewn and flown in response to the 2017 ISISA Conference, Kangaroo Island, SA. Polyester, cotton thread, 85 x 159cm. Location: 36°02'38.7"S 136°46'19.1"E Image courtesy of the artist

⁴³⁶ Belinda Howden, "Isisa Conference Closing Ceremony Statement" (paper presented at the 15th International Small Island Studies Association Conference - Small Island Communities: Models for Global Survival Kangaroo Island 7 July 2017 2017).

Within this study we recognise the lingering problems of conceptualising 'place'. Often geopolitical realities – the social, historic, spatial or environmental conditions of a place – get in the way of and complicate the seemingly neutral act of 'place-making'. To consider this idea again, particularly in the analysis of *Untitled – Lesvos*, *Untitled – Kangaroo Island* and *Ash Island* (2014) (pictured below), is important. These works not only demonstrate a method for thinking beyond the temporal, spatial and organisational limits of curating, they describe a kind of acquiescence in making use of and exploring island tropes.



Belinda Howden, *Ash Island*, 2014. 35mm film printed on aluminium, 572 x 500cm. Image courtesy of the artist

All three works enact the 'panoramic gaze'. *Untitled – Lesvos* quite literally presents the phantasmagoric island in a panoramic format, and thus positions the island as not only a static object but an object of desire. The island appears to float (as if islands float), and can be taken in or understood within a glance. *Untitled – Lesvos*, *Untitled – Kangaroo Island* and *Ash Island* are works dominated by the horizon line. If we consider again Brook Andrew's sentiments – that the horizon line is tied to male conquest, represents patriarchy and dominates other cultural methods of 'looking' – then we recognise how the visualisation of 'place', of islands and landscape, is deeply connected to patterns of control, power, authority and sovereignty. These works inadvertently subscribe to these philosophies. It appears that the difficulty of thinking beyond the horizon line or the 'panoramic gaze' comes from its deep history of rehearsal within the Western imagination and a Western mode of 'looking'.

This leads us to the final work included in the examination exhibition – the sound recordings from Cherie Johnson's *Within* (2014). The significance of this work has been extensively written about in Chapters Three and Five. Under the context of *Ash Island and its Transformations* the work was, to use Kester's words, an act of solidarity. It reached into the

past, in order to generate, record and situate new, living memories. It was an archival act in the face of a colonial history obsessed with documentation. And, it spoke to the importance of maintaining and disseminating intergenerational knowledge.

Under this new context the work takes on another role. It moves from an act of solidarity into an act of disruption. By displaying *Ash Island* and *Within* together, the audio interrupts the dominance of an eye hungry for the horizon. Johnson's work stands alone as an evocation of memory, place, history and landscape. In this new context, its inclusion echoes the processes of research. It reflects the discoveries, mistakes, the knowledge gained and the knowledge changed through the processes of doing, making, thinking and curating.



(Installation view), Belinda Howden, *Ash Island*, 2014. 35mm film printed on aluminium, 572 x 500cm. Image courtesy of the artist. Cherie Johnson, *Within*, 2014. Stereo soundscape. Track 1: Aunty Glenda Simon, 10mins 40 secs, Track 2: Aunty Sandra Griffen, 18 mins 40 secs. Work courtesy of Cherie Johnson.

ASH ISLAND AND ITS TRANSFORMATIONS – FILMS

The following links are to the *Ash Island and its Transformations* films, produced and released online in September 2014. The films document each artist's practice, their creative process and the development of their ideas for the exhibition. They were produced by Isaac Turier of Black Box Pictures and Peter McMurray of Lumina Visual.

The *Ash Island and its Transformations* films were supported by the NSW Government through Arts NSW. The 'Australian Lepidoptera and their Transformations' imagery is provided courtesy of the Australian Museum and the soundtrack – 'Fallen' – is courtesy of Firekites. The audio excerpt from 'Within' (2014), by Cherie Johnson, was provided courtesy of the artist. Special thanks to Aunty Sandra Griffen and Aunty Glenda Simon.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewers are warned that the following films may contain images and voices of deceased persons.

Ash Island and its Transformations – Introduction

<https://vimeo.com/106981879>

Duration: 5:45 minutes

Ash Island and its Transformations – Nicola Hensel

<https://vimeo.com/107309256>

Duration: 4:16 minutes

Ash Island and its Transformations – Cherie Johnson

<https://vimeo.com/107330891>

Duration: 5:19 minutes

Ash Island and its Transformations – Emma van Leest

<https://vimeo.com/107310093>

Duration: 4:14 minutes

Ash Island and its Transformations – Shan Turner-Carroll

<https://vimeo.com/107437725>

Duration: 4:22 minutes

THE
ISLAND
COULD
BE
HEARD

BELINDA
HOWDEN

BY
NIGHT

DEB
MANSFIELD



Are you sure you can't hear that?

Deb Mansfield, 2015, hand-woven photo tapestry, resin cleat, lighting, electrical cord



Belinda Howden is currently a PhD candidate at the Sydney College of the Arts. Her research focus is the island as a cultural object.

She has completed an island residency, Iceland, and worked on the islands of the Veneto.

Her most recent curatorial project *Ash Island and its Transformations* looked at the cultural significance of Ash Island of the Hunter River, NSW.

Howden is an ex-lighthouse keeper.



The Island Could be Heard by Night is a collaborative project between Belinda Howden and Deb Mansfield.

With a focus on Nobbys Headland, Newcastle NSW, the project began in July 2014. It was seen through to an exhibition at The Lock-Up, Newcastle, in May 2015.

This document is a record of the stories and visual works featured in *The Island Could be Heard by Night* followed by a transcript of a conversation held between the two islophiles. The subject of conversation is, of course, islands.



Deb Mansfield is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Newcastle. Her research focus is islands she cannot reach.

She has completed two island residencies: Newfoundland and Tasmania.

Her most recent solo exhibition *Some Rocky Socket* brought to light her personal and familial sea-faring histories.

Mansfield is an armchair traveller.

My Grandfather was born and raised in Broken Hill. A town defined by dust and mining, its airborne soil cast a rusted haze across his childhood. He played, happily enough, amongst the endless sunburnt days. But as a young man who would one day become a sailor, and then one day a Captain, he dreamt only of a salve. He wished for a wet to all that dry. A cool to all that heat.

My Grandfather told me that Broken Hill was known for its rich orebody, a stream of silver and zinc and lead that flowed beneath its streets. It was a stream that buoyed the economy and the conversations of his colleagues. The townspeople built their houses in the half-shadow of the capped mountain, the broken hill after which the town was named, and mutually agreed the hill definitely didn't look any different to yesterday.

My Grandfather said he never believed his teachers and friends and he never tired of his daily practice of questioning. 'Are you sure you can't hear that?' he would ask. Some of them relied on a convenient cough or a well-timed sneeze but most would just flatly respond, 'hear what?'



Emotional distress and distaste for Newcastle (the explosion has never been any different)
Deb Mansfield, 2015, hand-woven photo tapestry, resin cleat, lighting, electrical cord

The island could be heard by night, a low reassuring groan that called out from the harbour. If she half listened, in the state between awake and asleep, it had a sort of rhythm to it like a heavy body, turning and rolling, sharing her bed.

She liked to think it was just the sound of stretching, the island yawning itself from the heat of the day into the cool of the night. But really it was the sound of defeat. Each night the island distantly mourned. Coiled in on itself it faced away and quietly waited for the comfort of another body against it.

On some nights and for no real reasons, the cracks and groans were louder than usual. It was on these nights the island punctuated her last thoughts of the evening: the twitching muscle in her leg, resolving to call her sister tomorrow, a list of clothes needed for her trip, the sinking softness of her pillow, that she must, she must leave this town.



Charles O'Hara Booth is a fair and good-tempered little partner
Deb Mansfield, 2015, hand-woven photo tapestry, resin cleat, lighting, electrical cord

In 1843, during the early years of European settlement of Newcastle, a Commandant by the name of Charles O'Hara Booth visited the expanding colony. According to Booth's diaries his singular reason for making the lengthy voyage north was regarding a close acquaintance, a 'fair and good tempered little partner'. At the time of writing Booth was stationed in Port Arthur where he oversaw the daily operations of one of Australia's most significant penal colonies for reoffenders, a position he had occupied for the previous decade.

Booth was known as a strategic authoritarian. During his time at Port Arthur, he introduced the practice of keeping guard dogs at the narrow isthmus connecting Port Arthur to mainland Tasmania. In essence, this rendered the penal settlement an island as convicts had to swim and risk drowning in order to escape. In his second year as Commandant, Booth developed a satellite colony off the coast of Port Arthur, making use of the small island of Point Puer. This was an incarceration site for female and prepubescent male convicts and devised by Booth as a method in 'minimising the excesses of the body' between the sexes. Although his rationale was founded in Christian sentiment, the practice of increasingly scaled-down containment was a practical resolution to containing the body or self, in this instance unwanted pregnancy and increased strain on already minimal medical resources of an outlier colony.

The extent of correspondence between Booth and his 'fair and good tempered' acquaintance inspired him to make the five day journey from Port Arthur to Newcastle. The letters between the two were of a personal tone but it is Booth's diaries that expose a deeper intention: 'should she be willing, a commandant's wife can live a very satisfactory existence'.

Upon arrival Booth describes the early settlement of Newcastle, paying particular attention to Coal Island (Nobby's Headland):

...a tall and distinct outcrop. The rock emerges at the mouth of the Hunter River, bore South 82 degrees West, distance three or four Leagues from Colliers Point. Morisset [Lieutenant-Colonel James Thomas Morisset] tells me works connecting the island to mainland will be complete soon – a construction of significant perseverance against the sea. Would it were mine, a fine residence it would make. Also a reliable boundary it would make – excellent for those in need of reformation.

Unfortunately, Booth's expedition was misguided. According to chaplaincy records, the object of his desire was already wedded two months prior. He made the return trip south after staying only four days in Newcastle. Considering the short period of visitation, Booth was clearly disappointed. His entries during this period were brief, primarily describing his dissatisfaction with the township: '...a place comprised of vulgar characters. P[ort]. Arthur – a settlement of those double distilled in poor logic and wretched will – contains more civility.'

Despite his emotional distress and distaste for Newcastle, Booth remained fascinated by Coal Island and the return journey proved productive. Within the first three days he had roughly sketched a reformatory structure to be situated on the island. It was a basic incarnation of what would later be known as a panopticon.

On the fourth day of his journey Booth fell ill. Immediately upon arrival, having possibly contracted tuberculosis, he admitted himself to Lime Island – a smaller island off the coast of Point Puer designated as quarantine and hospital to the Port Arthur settlement. Medical records cleared Booth of tuberculosis, typhoid and other illnesses known at the time. However, due to the continuing nature of his fever he was retained for medical observation. Three weeks of a sustained delirium kept Booth in quarantine confinement and, in his absence, he was medically retired from his post as Commandant

of Port Arthur. On the morning of 15 June 1843 Booth was found dead having drowned during the night in a failed attempt to swim to shore.



Copper and Silver and Sonar
Deb Mansfield, 2015, hand-woven photo tapestry, resin cleat, lighting, electrical cord

For Nissologists, those who commit their life to the study of islands, the relationship between the centre and periphery is one that perpetually troubles their arguments. For many, knowing the centre comes at the cost of the periphery. It is to hear the heart but not feel the skin. And, vice versa. Those who place all their attention on the fragile boundary forget the very purpose of vigilance in the first place. In their arguments the centralists make wild claims like, 'the sea is history!' and 'the island is pure present!' Some would even go so far as to say, 'islands are our only hope. They are our only chance to create a perfect society.' To which the peripheralists would quickly retort, 'you fools, don't you know what's good for one isn't what's good for all?'

The arguments would play out in all sorts of fashions. Some centralists thought themselves clever and made it an intellectual pursuit. They talked down their peripheralist opponents with words like salvation and redemption, and made evocative statements about ground zeros and clean states and new beginnings. The equally persuasive peripheralists, however, were never short for answers. 'What about tradition?' they would ask. 'What about history? Who are we if we know nothing of who we were?'

At this, the more practically-minded centralists would take up arms and supplies and stores and they would relocate. Moving to a sister island they would prove to the peripheralists just how it could be done, the ease with which their ideal community could be established. It was a very convincing method. So much so the centralists saw a flurry of new followers, usually those on the fence or the weaker-willed peripheralists, proffering themselves as essential to the new world. The more hardened older peripheralists, however, would remain unmoved. Upon their island they reassured their younger counterparts. 'You just watch.'

And they did just that, they watched. It was good practice for

peripheralists to stand at the edge observing the ocean but many now found their gaze rested on the centralists' island. From their vantage the centralists appeared always in progress. Every other day their farms expanded and every other week new houses were raised. Out of fear that the centralists might make an attempt to return, the peripheralists agreed they should increase their vigilance. Their township emptied out. Pausing business and abandoning their duties, the peripheralists now camped along the perimeter perennially scanning the horizon.

The centralists' life looked idyllic. Their new island existence was opportunity to begin again. And so, they rearranged their lives to reflect what they considered the highest order – everything for the greater good. The centralists decided they were allowed only to engage in occupations that benefitted the community. They banned the notion of private property and rid their existence of institutions like marriage, punishment, persecution, and the military. Leisure time was plenty, as everyone worked hard for the benefit of others, but they agreed that time was not to be used on deleterious practices such as gambling, imbibing, or hunting for sport.

As the township and their influence expanded across the island the centralists decided a small group dedicated to the centralist cause was needed, particularly to make decisions on behalf of those too busy with building and farming and teaching and caring. This group of centralists were small in numbers but efficient in enacting rules. As the centralists ever-increasing presence on the island had proven, they were nothing if not industrious. And together, the group decided industry was cornerstone to a centralists' way of life. They also decided if anything were to distract a centralist from their work it should be banned. Leisure time became a controlled terrain. Music was forbidden along with creating art, and the short hours in the evening that centralists once spent entertaining and telling stories to each other were now dedicated to thinking about

improving island productivity.

It was usual practice for centralists to congregate in the city centre every morning. At the beginning of each day they would take a moment to greet each other and dream quietly about the possibilities of their future together. It was a ritual the centralists enjoyed rehearsing. However, as their island existence became increasingly constrictive the older centralists grew weary of so much work and tired of the daily practice. Murmurs of misgivings began to spread. 'I don't feel like thinking about what I can do for my island today,' one would suggest to the other. 'Well, let's be honest,' the other would reply. 'What has your island done for you lately?' Uttered complaints about tired eyes and aching backs became more and more frequent until one day someone suggested the unforgivable, 'can't we just go back to the old ways?'

Across the way, the peripheralists were doing no better. Their vigilance was quickening their path to starvation. An increased dedication to the border meant food production had ground to a halt. The peripheralists lived on whatever the ocean washed up and their hungriness quickly became restlessness. Pointing at the centralists' island, they would exclaim, 'Look! They flourish while we sit here and watch'. As the desperation set in they would plea to each other. 'We must escape this godforsaken place! If we don't leave, we are as good as dead.' 'Can't the elders see?' the younger peripheralists would ask each other. 'If we don't leave there is no future. Leaving is our only hope.'



Three weeks of sustained delirium

Deb Mansfield, 2015, hand-woven photo tapestry, resin cleat, lighting, electrical cord

The island is a document of desire.

In 1770, when Cook spied the rocky outcrop floating in the then (to his knowledge) un-named harbour, he made it ugly: 'A small clump of an island lying close to shore.' Unforgettable and inessential. He nestled it close to the mainland – close to the known, the noteworthy – and scaled its matter down to that of little consequence. A small clump on the map.

Twenty seven years later and something changed, albeit not much. Perhaps just the title of the man. Shortland visited the town in search of making a name for himself. Coal was his currency and the island, a rich store. Two seams of hunger ran through his body: one at sea level washed visible by the salty tides, the other a thick black line drawn just above his eyes. 'Commence digging', he might have ordered his men. 'Make it mine.'

Skipping forward another few years, twenty-one to be precise, and the rock quarried in hunger becomes a means to an end. Another man, this time Macquarie. This time the island must be made useful. 'Rest its innards at its feet,' he might have said. 'Let us build a bridge made from its guts,' he probably didn't say, but rather dreamt himself saying in a reverie one hot night.

Thirty eight years is the time it can take to fold one landscape into another. Of course, most will tell you the mainland is the mother and the island a child, but how can you be sure? No time to think on that though, especially when there's work to be done. The convicts build the missing Freudian link between homeland and hostile vessel while Macquarie calls out for England in his sleep.

Ten years later, long after Macquarie's body and dreams are dead, the island is granted a vision. One bright eye forever fixed on the ocean. Powered by 20,000 candles, every night the light searches

for a shred of sail. Protected by three men they huddle round making sure it doesn't blow out in one cold southerly gust. The island is granted a voice. Who knows when? You could probably look it up but it's better to listen for the answer. The tone sings with a strength that reverberates the chest, calling out to you and your cargo.

Seventy seven years on and the sons of the three men decide enough is enough. How archaic, they think, to follow in their fathers' footsteps. They get up from their huddled position to stretch their legs and with seasons' worth of knowledge collected under their skins they shake hands and say their goodbyes. The island is demanned.

Two women stretch their legs too. Only, it's not then, it's now. Eighty years later. They climb the face of the island not as conquest but rather to uncover something. Perhaps to uncover something about themselves, but probably not.

One of the women is a Captain's granddaughter. She hates to be described like that, in relation to the men of her life, but she is aware of history's limitations. So, when she introduces herself as her grandfather's granddaughter she is really saying, 'the salt in my blood is thick.' As fate would have it, she suffers terrible seasickness and often needs to travel by armchair.

The other woman moonlights as a lighthouse keeper. She crafts her fictional life atop the island's crest. In the dark of winter, when no one visits, she choreographs her dances alone. The movements are swept over by the rhythmic spotlight. It reveals nothing, except maybe the shape of her limbs in space. She would never tell anyone she was a lighthouse keeper mainly because, categorically speaking, that would be fiction too.

As the two women climb the island they churn through their collective thoughts. Each step a new statement, a new idea. Some

sure-footed others a little crumbly. They reach the top and they decide the island is definitely not about them or their desires. They agree. That would be archaic too.

A
CONVERSATION
BETWEEN
TWO

ISLOPHILES

BELINDA
HOWDEN

DEB
MANSFIELD

I think the mindset people have when looking to an island, or with the intention to inhabit it with ideas or narratives or philosophies, is desire. It's a space where people place their desires, it is so often a landscape of desire.

No, I think humour is just one aspect of that desire. That might be one person's particular way of approaching the space. I do think it's broader than that. In your case, you've nailed the humour of being an islophile – making this ridiculous costume and serenading another islophile.

But the beachside is pretty serious too. At least, in an Australian identity. It's an extremely contested border. It's the stage for a lot of our fights and our violent history. It's also a line of death. You literally have lifesavers on that border.

I like the humour and the play we've brought into this project but in my own research I feel I approach the island with great seriousness, a sort of a gravity that other landscapes don't have.

When I moved to Newcastle in 2014 I was told there was this woman in town doing a PhD on islands. I got so excited there was another islophile in town that I joked I was going to make a papier-mâché island dress and stand out the front of your house serenading you. So I'm curious if you think humour is an emotion people associate with islands?

So do you think desire is humourless?

Obviously, in regards to the papier-mâché island dress I was just joking, and most probably drinking at the time, but my gut feeling is that people are inherently serious about islands. I mean, I don't know what geographies would be humorous? Maybe the beachside?

Absolutely.

I know, right? And, it's not a sublime gravity.

No, no its not. It's funereal or the nightmare of imprisonment.

Exactly. There is a continental freedom or freedom from the mainland.

Yeah, you're right. There is a strange finality to it that we assume exists. Why do we assume that? Why is that not present in other landscapes? It seems like on an island you're saying, 'well, if this is it once...this is it forever.' Has it got something to do with the fact that it is bound? Or the concept of containment? Because containment lends itself to homogeneity doesn't it? We think the physical nature of an island is consistent. We assume the island isn't varied because we also assume there isn't much space for variation and this creates a sort of homogeneity. Everything becomes uniform across the landscape.

Are you talking about a hypothetical island or do you actually mean Nobby's Island?

I remember thinking at the beginning of the project...remember that day that we went up to Nobby's Headland together and took photos and hung out talking?

The fantasy of escape.

Actually that is a sort of sublime. To me the island is serious because it is mythical. And, therefore, it could have all the answers but they could be all the wrong answers. You only get one attempt to get there. The myth isn't really to return, is it?

Do you think these assumptions are because we never actually go to 'the' island?

See? This is what I mean. The reason that you just asked that question is because we find it hard to separate the island *real* from island *myth*. There is genuine confusion between myth and real. When we use the word island, the fact that we have to even clarify whether it is real or imagined goes to show how pervasive in human thinking and projection the mythological island is.

The foghorn.

I recall from that day we had somehow agreed we were going to go there every Sunday.

Fucking, when? I haven't been since. That was a year ago. Even the conception of the work has happened in the myth space. I don't actually ever go to the island.

Yeah, it's an imaginative space you're working in. And it's kind of visual. You still hold the visual of Nobby's in your mind's eye, or at least I did, but easily transplant other stories into that landscape, like the one about Broken Hill.

Yeah it is. Last year I worked on an exhibition about Ash Island, which is set in the mangroves too, and just...every other weekend I was out there visiting the island. Not really by choice a lot of the time. I found I just had to keep going there.

I'm not sure. I think it might be because it's an island lost. It physically isn't an island anymore, it was reshaped through amalgamation with other islands. It's lost its sense of containment or boundedness. But, there is still a residue like its namesake - Ash Island. It still has elements

Yeah, and you told me about that light off the cliff.

Yeah, the foghorn. That was amazing.

Haha!

I think that is really important to acknowledge.

Years ago I did work about mangroves. I physically went there all the time. I mean, *all* the time. It didn't have the myth that is so heavily associated with the island. I agree with you. I don't feel like I have to go to the island either...which is wild!

Do you think it's because it is a flat island?

of what we consider to be island-ness.

Yeah, true. Maybe you're right, maybe it's because Ash Island is flat. But, Ash Island is tidal too and that gives it a different nature. The tides dominate, they make the landscape less about island-ness and more about filtration and cleansing.

I couldn't say whether it's only height that produces that feeling. But, I have recently been thinking about the concept of size in my writing and research. I've been wondering whether the larger the island, or the more ballooned our sense of containment, the less likely the island is a location for desire. In other words, the tighter the boundary the more desire.

Yeah, you're right.

Yeah, I think it is a similar imagining. I love that Judith uses the scientific as a point of departure. There are seeds of truth in her work. She has done her research and that's all you can do because, like she says,

But, Nobby's is a lost island too. It's connected to Newcastle by the break wall. So, why go to Ash Island but not Nobby's? They're both lost.

Do you think the pointier or taller or bigger the island the less we feel inclined to visit it in the real? And we are more content to work with its myth. I love that idea of island hierarchy.

It might also work in reverse. At some point there is a moment where the island becomes too tiny. It doesn't hold the projection, it's just a rocky outcrop. It needs to hold the desire. And, for some people that geographic limit is hard to articulate.

Ok, can I ask you my next question? Over the past year we have met many times and talked at length about islands and false histories. One of our earliest conversations was about our love of the book *Atlas of Remote Islands: fifty islands I have never visited and never will* by German author Judith Schlansky. Do you see *The Island Could be Heard by Night* as a similar imagining? And, do you think Judith would like our exhibition?

she's never been to those islands and never will. But, the way she fabricates narrative around those seeds...

Yeah, so I feel like maybe she'd like it.

...satisfying?

Can I ask you a question? I came to you with the exhibition subject of Nobby's. How do you feel about your position as someone having recently moved to Newcastle in trying to tackle such a significant local icon?

How long have you been here, again?

Haha.

...symbol.

...and crosses time, which is what you've done with your writing too.

I hope she would like it. Judith's writing was my first departure from how I'd been working in regards to storytelling. It shifted how I make and how I want to make, which is why this collaboration has been...

Yes.

I think taking on Nobby's came out of how difficult I found this town in my first year here.

Fifteen months.

When I moved to Newcastle I was quite taken aback at how parochial the community is. There is a palpable contempt, or maybe snobbery, towards outsiders and other towns. Novocastrians are very proud of Nobby's and I don't think, as a newcomer, I could have responded to any other site. Nobby's is such a pious...

Yeah, a symbol of Novocastrian pride. The other day I read in the Herald, an opinion piece on the university by a PhD candidate there, Bronwyn

McDonald, where she wrote, “We are a parochial and committed bunch.”¹ I couldn’t believe she was using the word parochial as a positive. I couldn’t believe she was using the word parochial as a way to *describe a university*. There is a world beyond this town filled with interesting people and I’d say a lot of Novocastrians are interested in that. But I’m mentioning McDonalds line because it’s an attitude I have encountered quite a bit here. Celebrate the insular. It’s myopic and odd, and it permeates this town’s identity. But, that’s just my experience. What about you?

I would say I have an oscillating love-hate relationship with Newcastle. I’m not from here so I don’t have that staunch Newcastle pride you’re talking about. There are so many fantastic ways to live a well-lived life here. But, in so many other ways it is unsatisfying. Newcastle has a sort of perpetual nature to it, a nature of never becoming. To tackle Nobby’s is ambitious because it really is Newcastle’s icon. I think part of making it our subject is to address the myth of that pride. For me, that’s where the false histories come in. We are creating a space and moment to re-write the myth, or at least to unveil aspects of it. You know?

Shall we move on then?

I’ve never had that! You are officially the first person to have ever asked me.

Seriously!

Wait, do you mean in general? Or, because I’m researching islands?

Absolutely. But, to be honest, this is a slightly scary topic to be talking about.

Ok, let’s do that. As an islophile, do you hate it when people ask you the ‘what would you take to a deserted island’ scenario?

Bullshit.

How have you gotten this far in life and not had that question?

I would probably be a fucking smart arse. I'd say, 'it depends what you consider deserted because I've read a book about the idea of kinship on the island. And, just because it's not occupied by humans doesn't mean the island is deserted. What about all other classes of life forms? Like, plants and animals?' Haha.

Great.

Jesus, I don't know.

Yes! That is exactly what I was thinking! An atlas of islands that I will never visit.

Another copy of Judith Schalansky in case the first one gets ruined.

Yeah, and water. What about you? You can't get out of answering that.

That's not practical at all!

No, I mean in general. I thought you would have played this game because you are an islophile. You love islands. But, if people did ask you the deserted island question, how would you respond?

Well I ask because my last question is: What would you take to a deserted island?

And, you're allowed three things.

What about Judith Schlansky's...

That is the best answer. The second thing?

I think that is a personality thing.

I would be very practical. I would take fire, somehow, fire things. I would take my German winter feather doona. I would really miss that. And then chocolate.

Oh yeah, totally. There definitely isn't a Tom Hanks situation happening for you.

See, that's where the gravity of the landscape comes in again. Immediately you think of the island as a keeper of death.

...yeah. Even if I'm parasitic, lying on my side, I'll be flicking through...

Yeah, yeah. Dysentery...

I wanted to talk about two key ideas. The first is collaboration. What was it like to be exposed to a different methodology? And what does collaboration mean to you?

...you think you had the idea for this exhibition?

I can absolutely tell you, after you made your papier-mâché island dress joke, I said, 'well we should probably do a project together.'

I know, but it's kind of emotionally practical. Because I think, quite rightly, I'd die within three days.

I think even knowing that, I'm like, 'I'll give that to you island. You can kill me. You can kill me.'

Yeah, and we may as well go out with two copies of Judith Schlansky's book. You know...as the island's volcano erupts and the lava takes over...

...when you've got chronic diarrhoea...

So, moving on from the dysentery, Bel. What are your questions?

I think this collaboration is incredibly positive. Before, when you said you came to me with the idea of Nobby's...

Yep, I did. In my head I had already rewritten history.

I suppose it shows how positive I think the collaboration has been. If it

was negative I'd be saying..

...oh, it's Bel's shit idea. I've been dragged along by this shit idea that she's cooked up without me. I had nothing to do with it.

Yep. Exactly.

Well then, it's actually fantastic that you consider it your idea.

Initially though, I was freaking out because you didn't have a practice that I thought was extensive.

Yeah, or even very clear.

But I knew I just wanted to do something with you. I think the way you and I talk about our research is very much aligned. And, we are very generous with each other. There is a real respect and we've become friends because of it. In our area of academia that doesn't get spoken about much.

Yeah, I think collaboration is a word too easily thrown around. I don't think a lot of people know what it is. What we have done so far is more successful than some of my experiences in curating. And, that job is mostly a supportive position. I've found even in a role like that you've got to fight for something to happen, you know? It can be like pulling teeth. It gets pretty scary if you're trying to realise a project with someone you've not got a lot of confidence in. And, that works both ways, especially if the connectivity is lacking.

But, if we are talking in an industry sense people use the word collaboration for funding, marketing and all sorts of things. The definition of how collaboration works and what it means for those involved goes unarticulated. It seems like good collaboration can generate new knowledge and not just tick the box. But, because collaboration is process-based it can be, at times, quite invisible and hard to define.

Do you think a collaboration like this will reoccur for either of us again during our PhD's or do you think it is a one-off thing?

I don't know. I think it is too soon to say. I need to digest what has happened because it has taken me by surprise. When I approached you with project...

Haha. Anyway, when I approached you I put myself in a supporting role. In my head the writing was supposed to support the exhibition, which is what I'm comfortable with. Coming out onto stage with you and being given equal weight in terms of exhibition content and visibility was unexpected. I think it's a lot to say right now whether it's a one-off or if what we have done has actually worked.

I know!

Yeah. I think having a conversation about the exhibition as if it's already happened is completely in sync with everything else we have done.

Haha, exactly.

So, the other topic I wanted to ask you about is gender. You've already mentioned the fact that this is a two-woman show. What do you think of this? There are moments in the exhibition that address issues of gender, making use of male subjects such as grandfathers and Commandants. Is this something you were expecting or intending? What is your understanding of how this subject emerged?

I think we've already established that you didn't....

And this is interesting, us reflecting on the exhibition because we haven't even installed it yet. We haven't seen the work up and finished.

But we are so confident in it.

Yeah, delusional.

I think there are structures of how we typically read island histories and storytelling. I'm sick of reading or hearing about men - white men - who've done something on the land in Australia. So I like that we are using false histories. But, what I really want to say is I like that we are lying. I like that we are lying in these sea-faring, white, male spaces of

storytelling. This is why I appropriated Karsh's portrait of Hemingway and merged it with my own. I hated the *Old Man and the Sea*. That book annoys the shit out of me. To me it's just a big cock-in-hand, fucking repeat of the male 'struggle'. The man that goes to battle with himself, with the sea or whatever lives in it... I'm bored of it. I like that we're giving Charles O'Hara Booth this mutated Hemmingway portrait. It seems fitting.

I don't think you can move through the art world, or society, as a female and not be thinking about gender. I really don't have space for people that don't. And it doesn't have to be the thing that I talk about the most, but I would be foolish not to think about it. I'm a 38 year old female artist who works at a tertiary level of research. I would say gender discrimination is real and prevalent. You?

Well one of the stories, *Centralists and Peripheralists*, has been written almost entirely out of my disgust for... you know, the subject of that story is utopianism – the idea that we can live a better way and we can lead a better life. But, the scholarship around this subject is quite literally men, across time, yelling at each other. And to me... I think, well...you're all wrong. That's the point right? They're all wrong. There is no right. Why do these scholars think they have the voice to say what should or shouldn't be? The arrogance of it is overwhelming. Who says they know how everyone else should live? Most the time the models, if you look closely at them, don't factor women. There is no sense of childcare, the role and value of women's work, or even a basic premise of what it is to be female.

So, in that sense, one of the stories has been written from my distaste at that discovery. I find it interesting that I've chosen to write some of the other stories through male subjects although I'm unsure as to whether that helps or hinders female representation in island storytelling and histories.

And, what's their role?

Absolutely.

Yeah, I agree. What do women in sea-faring stories even look like? What's that visual?

Normally for watery, sea-faring stories our options are Ophelia...

...or Mills and Boon. I mean, what are the women doing in these water stories?

You know, when they aren't *fetching* it...

Haha.

But, seriously. We can see the gap of female representation in island storytelling and island myth. From the beginning, I think our main subject was island myth but we've nicely woven the subject of female representation into the exhibition too. I think it is interesting for young women to make work about characters like Charles O'Hara Booth, using traditional historical vernaculars, because these vernaculars are a sort of comfortable space for audiences.

Exactly. I think in an exhibition about a landscape like Nobby's there is a sense of anticipation, maybe even an expectation, that these historic modes will be present. It feels like there is an underlying assumption that the exhibition and our work will be didactic in some way or another. I think that assumption has a lot to do with the subject matter and a standardisation of the way we come to understand history, landscape and the intersection of the two. Of course that assumption is so fucking boring and makes for boring artwork, too. But, I think making use of those historic modes as a way to insert a different narrative is much more revealing. It gives you space as a writer or an artist, a space to engage with a poetic truth. Your position is less bound to the arguable truths of history and more open to questioning, exploring the very modes we use to know ourselves.

Well, I think your writing is beautiful. The thing I really enjoy about it, which is probably what I enjoy about my work too, is that we neaten everything. We neaten everything that we are kind of angry about, for want of a better word. When I read your first piece of writing for the show I thought we absolutely have to call our exhibition *The Island Could be Heard by Night*, as these were the words that stood out to me immediately. The sentence conjures up everything we have been trying to achieve, a tangible false

history. It is incredibly seductive and inherently visual.

Actually that is a good segue because we haven't spoken about the visuals of your work. For example, the exploding island image. How did you come up with that particular image?

I find that image a little bit uneasy, in a good way. I created the 'island' from appropriated mainland imagery so it's not a real island at all. I don't love that island because it's not an island. A lot of my imagery draws on appropriated islands, just not this work.

So basically it is a bitten off piece of mainland.

Yes. I used a piece of mainland imagery, flipped it and pushed it in a bit so it wasn't totally mirrored. But if you look at it closely it's mirrored enough to be distasteful. If you're an islophile it's distasteful. It's too perfect. We know how islands should look.

Yep.

And then I added a mine explosion to the image. So, the island is about to die anyway or, at least, be severely altered. An island exploding is less distasteful than a faux island. And, I used the pink at the top of the explosion because I knew it was a good way to give people an obvious untruth. Without the pink, I think the viewer would hone in on the faux island too quickly. The explosion weirdly comforts the viewer. If they're trouble by the island's pink explosion, they've missed the fact that the island doesn't even exist. On some level I think everyone is going to recognise it is fiction and that's the same with your writing. You've used a historical vernacular to dazzle and distract the audience, and I've done the same with the explosion.

The explosion works so well too because Nobby's once was an island the community actually wanted to blow up. And, they half did.

Boom...If someone can look at my work and feel slightly unsure or confused but still using a seductive aesthetic, then that's what I'm aiming for. I like *dis-ease*. And I think that is where you and I connect. We

Yeah, I agree. I think disturbance is core to what we've been doing in this project. For both of us, there is an attempt to usurp people's assumptions.

...truthful.

Yeah, agreed. I really enjoy the fact that I've disguised the Charles O'Hara Booth story as wall text. I love the idea that people will potentially read it as truth. My curatorial understanding of wall text is to help anchor an exhibition with a background truth – information about the artist or the subject that the audience might need. In this case though, the wall text is fiction. And yet, because of those assumptions, the audience will still approach that story as the historic anchor.

Yeah, that's right.

Exactly. It's so wonderful your exploding island and the Booth story will sit opposite each other in those rooms.

I haven't told you this before but I sent the Booth story to someone for editing. There was a comment against one section where they said the language was too evocative. And, it dawned on me. They were reading the story as if it were history.

both work with disturbance.

The more I move through the art world, through academia and being an artist, there are these spaces where you are meant to be...

Yeah. But, if your practice is to question and query then I think we should be having a crack at those assumptions too.

And those two front rooms are domestic, historical, fact telling, architectural spaces.

And that's where the two biggest lies of the exhibition are sitting.

I know. It's the lie and the lie.

No, I didn't tell them it was fiction, not at all. I couldn't believe I actually had a moment where I was like, 'oh, they've read it as history'. Immediately, I had a kind of defensive response. I thought, no, that's not right. I want the subtle evocation. I want the reader to go into that that evocative space.'

Exactly.

Exactly.

...yeah, to realise the disturbances are working.

Had you told them that it was...

So maybe you can't make the vernacular so strict.

...like the mirroring of the island...

To get the edit back and find out...

The disturbances are working.



L: *A reliable boundary (and this is where Bel was found)* R: *The island punctuated her last thoughts of the evening*
Deb Mansfield, 2015, hand-woven photo tapestry, resin cleat, lighting, electrical cord

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¹ McDonald, Bronwyn 'Newcastle University a Unique Place', *Newcastle Herald*, April 14, 2015, <http://www.theherald.com.au/story/3011442/opinion-newcastle-university-a-unique-place/?cs=4522>

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