Re-Imagining Histories

An exhibition of artworks and artefacts from the collections of the University of Western Sydney and Eskbank House and Museum.

5 September to 1 October 2012
Re-Imagining Histories

Art Exhibition

A joint project between UWS Art Collection & Eskbank House and Museum, under the auspices of UWSCollege and Lithgow City Council.

Eskbank House and Museum 5th September – 1st October 2012

The exhibition Re-Imagining Histories features the collections of the UWS art collection and Eskbank House and Museum. This exhibition focuses upon the work of artists who are interested in re-interpreting histories presented within historical texts, houses, civic buildings and museums.

The exhibition features artworks by Judy Watson, Fiona Foley, Robyn Stacey, Michael Cook, Anne Ferran and Janet Tavener which are displayed in juxtaposition with artefacts from the collections of Eskbank House and Museum within its Courtyard Gallery. This exhibition suggests alternative narratives “Re-Imagined” from Australia’s colonial past.

Three of these artists, Foley, Watson and Cook are indigenous and their artworks are concerned with an alternative narrative of Australian history through the eyes of its dispossessed indigenous communities. Foley’s artwork “Enter the White Savage 1788” re-interprets the establishment of the Sydney Settlement in 1788, as an invasion by foreigners, not a peaceful European settlement of an uninhabited land, refuting the concept of “Terra Nullius”. Watson’s works reflect upon the thousands of human remains of indigenous people held within museum collections throughout Australia, severed from their original cultural context. Her work also draws attention to the 1000s of aboriginal bodies and remains that left Australia for overseas museums and university collections throughout the nineteenth century. Cook’s body of work, “Broken Dreams”, continues this theme of dispossession by illustrating an imagined journey from Australia to England through the eyes of a young Aboriginal woman. This work was inspired by historical accounts of indigenous people throughout the world, being lured to England during the later part of the nineteenth century as little more than “live” curiosity shows, not unlike those found in an exhibit.

The works by Stacey, Ferran and Tavener, suggest narratives of European settlement through the endeavours of those who colonised Australia. The artworks by Stacey and Tavener were inspired by the collections of introduced species of plants and vegetables found in the gardens of two historical houses in Sydney, Elizabeth Bay House (c.1839) and Vaucluse House (1805-1860’s). Tavener’s sculptures reproduce in resin, heirloom fruit and vegetables, varieties still grown in the gardens of Vaucluse House, whilst, Stacey recreates and photographs the exotic flora and fauna first introduced and established in the gardens of Elizabeth Bay House. The history of one of Australia’s first civic buildings, the Female Orphan School, inspired a series of photographs by Anne Ferran. This building was completed in 1818 designed by Governor Macquarie to house and educate the orphans in the new colony at Rydalmere. Through articles of clothing, such as
soft caps, with the interior of the then derelict building as a backdrop, Ferran suggests the human presence of the orphan girls who first occupied this place, of which there are few written and pictorial records. Her photographs of faceless/ghost like orphans, has in essence recovered their lost voices and acknowledges their presence.

In juxtaposition with these artworks by artists who have focused upon events, practices and places during the colonisation of Australia, is the building Eskbank House and its collection. The house was established in 1842 and has had an interesting history via its numerous owners and occupiers which have had links and interests in early transport routes, ironworks, railway constructions, foundries, pipe works and steelworks and the house and its museum collection reflects this.

The collection of this historical house was established by “The Lithgow District Historical Committee” formed in the 1940's. In 1950 the society’s intention was to furnish the house along the same lines of Vaucluse House, accumulating furniture of the style of the mid 1800s, similar to furnishings appropriate to its original occupants Thomas and Mary Brown, 1839 – 1881 which is still exhibited today.

The layout of the exhibition Re-Imagining Histories, situates artworks questioning history beside items from the museum’s collection, providing a visible setting and space for the viewer to jump back mentally to another time and consider another way of life, in that distant foreign land which is the past. For example the Lithgow pottery jelly moulds are displayed adjacent to artworks that reference other historical houses within this exhibition. A very common colonial sweet or savoury dish was to place fruits with jelly or vegetables and meats in jelly within these moulds. The jelly moulds are not only beautiful objects but also enable the viewer to re-imagine the delicacies that once may have been produced within them, especially when placed in juxtaposition with Tavener’s resin fruit sculptures and Stacey’s photograph of “Mr Macleay’s fruit and flora”.

The Victorian curiosity cabinet that is filled with items designed to assist in daily acts of grooming, are made from shell, bone and tusks and are deliberately set underneath Watson’s work pertaining to the bones and hair of indigenous people being kept in museums for scientific research. The civilised habits of European grooming is juxtaposed with their barbaric acts of the removal of skeletal remains from sacred burial grounds of indigenous people and displaying them in public museums.

The wooden travel chest, Eddison home phonogram and Eskbank House flagstones and bricks displayed as symbols of European settlement and civilisation within this museum, when displayed in juxtaposition with Foleys artwork “ Enter the White Savage, 1788”, suggest invasion and dispossession of indigenous people and remind visitors of the continued existence and right of the “original owners”.

The exhibition Re-Imagining Histories has endeavoured to provide a post colonial space for different voices to speak from the past, be that settler, aboriginal, servant or orphan, enabling the communal memory of all these narratives to be visible and heard within this particular historic house and museum collection.

Monica McMahon
Art Curator, University of Western Sydney
List of works

Works from the UWS Collection

Michael Cook
Broken Dreams #2
2010
Photograph ed.8
124 cm x 100 cm

Anne Ferran
Rydalmer Vertical
1997
Photograph
141 cm x 108 cm

Fiona Foley
1788 Enter the White Savage
1998
Collage
151 cm x 101 cm

Robyn Stacey
Mr Macleay’s fruit and flora
2008
Photograph
120 cm x 170 cm

Janet Tavener
Alpine Strawberries
2011
Glass and coloured resin
20 x 16 cm

Janet Tavener
Golden Arch Crookneck Zucchini
2011
Glass and coloured
21 cm x 17 cm

Pears, Pomegranates, Figs, Tomatoes & Gherkins
2011
Glass and coloured resin
29 cm x 24 cm

West Indian Gherkin Cucumber
2011
Glass and coloured resin
17 cm x 7 cm

Bell Lantern Capsicum
2011
Glass and coloured
11 cm x 13 cm

Judy Watson
Our bones in your collection
1997
Print
50 cm x 40 cm

Our Hair in your collection
1997
Print
50 cm x 40 cm

Artefacts from Eskbank House and Museum

Eddison home phonogram c1898

Wooden travel chest c1890s

Flagstones and bricks from Eskbank House c.1837

Ceramic jelly moulds (Lithgow Pottery Collection, various sizes, c.1900s)

Ladies beaded evening bag c1880 – 1890 (with ivory cameo)

Hamburg ring razor set (ivory and tortoise shell handle raiser) c1900

Various sewing implements (ivory and bone handles) c1900

Glove Hook (bone handle) c1870s

Ivory tusk cup

Silver brush and mirror grooming set

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