

100 KM ARTWORKS

■ Catriona Moore

Fiona MacDonald's Local Studies

Wollongong, grand final weekend. I listen to speedy St George-Illawarra winger Brett Morris on local radio. He remembers his dad, Steve 'Slippery' Morris, scoring for St George in the 7-6 grand final loss to Canterbury in 1985. "... one of his biggest regrets, that grand final." The Morris family story reminds us that local legends are the most accessible and treacherous forms of historical research. They start with what is immediately at hand: most commonly, unreliable and unfashionable categories like 'personal experience', 'local hero', 'the Illawarra' or even 'civic pride'. Their research methods can be traced back to the itineraries of Tudor antiquarians who invented the shire and county as particular topographical and cultural spaces. The later explosion of parish histories in turn bequeathed to the colonies an ever-flourishing network of local history societies, community archives and genealogical enthusiasts. Then, as now, the truth of local studies is always negotiable, often banal, and usually only resonates in this or that particular place. Yet we all come from somewhere, and no matter where we are we instinctively grasp the significance of the faded footy photo behind the bar, appreciate the civic sizzle of a Lions' Club sausage, or acknowledge the shaming history of once-segregated public baths.

In the atelier and academy, microhistory has had larger aspirations, "searching for answers to large questions in small places", to use the definition given by Charles Joyner in the context of US slave narratives.¹ Artists are particularly skilled in patterning and connecting incidental material that is instantly recognised at the local level to broader national or transnational stories. Fiona MacDonald immediately comes to mind as someone who has always pictured local and thought global. Like an undisciplined archaeologist, she cuts, pastes, weaves and appliques regional cultural memories. Her archival methods draw upon the logic of collage, letting loose an affective spectrum that runs from the slow pulse of stitch and patchwork to sharp, kinetic shock. Her collages complicate images of local attachment and activate a creepy unhomeliness.

MacDonald unerringly ferrets out archival stories that are difficult to tell – of local nobodies, worthies and outright bastards – who make regional Australia both singular and crushingly familiar.² *Tongue and Groove* (2009) abuts timber-width strips of photographic portraits recycled from the Mercer Photographic Studio archives in Rockhampton, the artist's hometown.³ Vinegaring has eaten away the photo-emulsion from the old negatives, rendering a creepy-cracked veil over each sitter's face, so that the series has the sad chill of 19th century clairvoyant or spirit photography. MacDonald's deft hand-tinting and photoshop touch-ups further embalm the original artifice of these home-grown-Hollywood mementos, the estate detritus of a once-flourishing Main Street business and long forgotten, living-room mantelpieces. Images of old timber Queenslanders, each a recent photo of the address, forms a decorative, border under each portrait.

Queensland's northern industrial heartland and the NSW steel cities share histories of organised labour. MacDonald's Wollongong-based *Legend and Legacy* (2010) records a time when miners marched, and unions and co-ops built amenities and resourced communities.⁴ May Day floats were piped and drummed by local marching bands, every year since living memory. Coastal communities constructed sea baths. The Kemira women's auxiliary supported a year-long underground occupation against pit closures.

MacDonald reminds us of the civic space of these modern events: the shop floor, meeting hall, and local park. These public spaces resonate with memories of symbolic as well as everyday uses and practices. As the French writer Henri Lefebvre asked, back in 1974, "What is an ideology without a space to which it refers, a space which it describes?". However Lefebvre also cautioned that new social relations demand new spaces, and vice-versa.⁵ The Cold War and post-war economic boom effectively compressed the space of old-style, radical public debate and civic action. Where do we find the mass movement today? Those once-broad spaces of progressive industrial and civic life are now shelved in a narrow seam of legend and ledger. MacDonald mines the archives of the Trades and Labour Council, the Illawarra Mercury and local museums for answers. Archival ordering



Fiona MacDonald *Tongue and Groove No 10* 2009, inkjet print from digital image on Hahnemühle Photo Rag 188gsm paper, 47 x 63cm. Source images: Mercer Studio portraits left to right G Maestri, Innisfail 1938, N O'Brien, Mackay and K Murray, Rockhampton 1941; Ewan MacDonald photographs of Rockhampton houses 2008. Art Work Source images courtesy: Mercer Studio portraits from the Central Queensland Collection Rockhampton Regional Council Libraries, Louis Marcellin Martin sketches from the Capricornia Collection University of Central Queensland. 3 Artist Proofs (also published as catalogue poster). Licensed by Viscopy, 2010.



Fiona MacDonald *Drawing the line between Native and Stranger*, No. 2 2009, inkjet print from digital image on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag 188gsm paper, image size 47 x 75.5cm paper size 54 x 83cm each. Edition of 3 with 2 proofs. Licensed by Viscopy, 2010.

is always arbitrary (chronological, alphabetical, Dewey system, or the local historical society's own invention). This allows the artist to be equally selective and inventive in her artistic processes. Abstracted drawing and restrained colour washes lend a bittersweet nostalgia to the *Legend and Legacy* series, prompting uncomfortable memories of a proudly independent, left-leaning political culture that is now ailing, its Labour Council and local government squeezed between unscrupulous business interests and Labour Party factions who call the shots and pre-selections from afar. The artist inks in sinister, silhouetted figures lifted from the Illawarra Mercury - Mark Arbib, Bill Kely and Lindsay Fox - grouped like the three graces for a photo-op on (electorally marginal) Shellharbour beach.

MacDonald reaffirms the steel city's radical legacy in recent community struggles to save the Nepean and its tributaries from long-wall mining and Wollongong's coastal suburban sprawl from unregulated development creep. A watercolour sketch from an Illawarra Mercury photograph shows a demolished tent from the 2009 Helensburgh Climate Camp,

a delicately ambiguous, oddly traumatic image. Today, these spaces of locally organised, left wing action are more opportunistic, democratic and diffused. New times have demanded new spaces and new ways of organising. Focus has shifted from the labour movement leadership to more sporadic and spatially dispersed campaigns by rainbow-coloured community action.

Rewind and *Native and Stranger* (2010) revisit Botany Bay, white Australia's foundational site. In 1770, the Endeavour dropped anchor alongside local people fishing in bark canoes along a stretch of sand they called Kundall, a locality that still wears the consequences of that extraordinary encounter. MacDonald first charted this fraught, archival space in a public art project for the Olympics at Sydney Airport.⁶ *Rewind* cuts up images from that earlier project and re-edits the strips in a wonky cross-weave. It has the blurred and stretched look of home video, and its archival message is clear. Public artists beware: government commissions do not guarantee monumentality, or even permanence. In this case, the airport was sold after the Olympics to the Macquarie Bank, and the celebratory Olympic art commissions were removed to allow for a more commercial use of public space.

Native and Stranger traces the Sydney coastline as a social frontier, illustrated through selected encounters from first contact to the recent past. Silhouetted images from the terra firma of official inscriptions – colonial medallions and the illustrated journals of James Cook, Joseph Banks and Sydney Parkinson – are jostled by William Fernyhough's c1836 caricatures of colonial class and race relations, the *Ombres Fantastiques*. MacDonald collages Enlightenment curiosity and colonial incursion, native and stranger, call and response. Cook reflected in his *Endeavour Journal* that "They live in a Tranquillity which is not disturb'd by the Inequality of Condition: The Earth and sea of their own accord furnishes them with all things necessary for life", to which the Kamay/Gweygal people responded "Warra, warra, wai" or "go away", as Sydney Parkinson recorded in his diary. MacDonald juxtaposes canon and caricature to re-file these darker historical narratives. Her archival sweep retrieves more aberrant colonial moments through satirical images and maverick imagery. These dissonant and creative gestures are valuable, prompting a fresh take on hometown truths and generating change. ■

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1 Joyner, Charles 1984 *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

2 See MacDonald's 1993 *Universally Respected*, University of Central Queensland.

3 *Local Studies: A View from Central Queensland Archives*, Artspace Mackay, Mackay, 2009, reviewed in *Artlink*, vol. 3 no.2

4 *Local Studies: Legend and Legacy*, Wollongong City Gallery, 2010.

5 Lefebvre, Henri 1991 *The Production of Space*, Blackwell, (1st pub. In French in 1974) p. 59.

6 *Millennium Tympanum*, 2000, with Jo Holder and Cathy Grant.

OPPOSITE TOP: Fiona MacDonald *Tongue and Groove* No.6, 2009, inkjet print from digital image on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag 188gsm paper, 60 x 90cm. Source images: Mercer Studio portraits left to right E Childs, Rockhampton, C J Ryan, Warwick, M W Phillips, Rockhampton and P Scott, Comet c.1941. Art Work Source images courtesy: Mercer Studio portraits from the Central Queensland Collection Rockhampton Regional Council Libraries, Louis Marcellin Martin sketches from the Capricornia Collection University of Central Queensland. Edition of 5 with 2 artists proofs. Licensed by Viscopy, 2010. **OPPOSITE BELOW:** Fiona MacDonald *Local Studies* No.12 (*May Day banners*, 1938) 2009, watercolour on archival paper, 53 x 73cm. Licensed by Viscopy, 2010.



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Artlink, Vol. 30. Issue 4 2010