



*CYCLOPAEDIA*

BY

FIONA MACDONALD



## TRANSFIXED BY THE GAZE: THE SPIRIT OF THE DEAD WATCHING



*he exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible. Slowly, in the course of the classical age, we see the construction of those "observatories" of human multiplicity for which the history of the sciences has so little good to say. Side by side with the major technology of the telescope, the lens, and the light beam, which were an integral part of the new physics and cosmology, there were the minor techniques of multiple and intersecting observations, of eyes that must see without being seen; using techniques of subjection and methods of exploitation, an obscure art of light and the visible was secretly preparing a new knowledge of man. 1*

The library of Elizabeth Bay House looks as if the occupant had just stepped out for a moment. This effect is artfully contrived. Books are piled on a desk, a basket of dried flowers lies on the floor. The house is a grand example of the 20th century spectacle of authenticity, a dedicated attempt to restore to its pristine state a neglected piece of the Australian past. It is a gem of memorabilia. Its current gracious 19th century atmosphere is, of course, a sleight of hand effect, a serene beauty which covers over and obscures its motley and somewhat less than gracious past.

Elizabeth Bay House is built between 1835 and 1838 for Alexander Macleay, Colonial Secretary of New South Wales. Alexander is an eminent insect collector, a member of the Royal Society and the Linnean Society. He installs his own magnificent collection of books and insects in the library of the neo-Palladian house. The brochure, provided to the visitor as a guide to the house, states:

*The house, renowned as "the finest in the colony", was an appropriate setting for three successive members of the Macleay family who lived there and who provided intellectual leadership and patronage for a developing colonial scientific tradition. 2*

A genealogy of collection, of science, of morals, of masculinity. The son of Alexander, William Sharp Macleay, becomes a great patron of science in the young colony. He is followed by W. J. Macleay who continues the avid, indeed obsessional, collecting of his uncle and cousin throughout New South Wales and in Papua New Guinea. When the collection grows too big to be stored in the house a separate museum building is constructed on the grounds.

This illustrious genealogy has, not surprisingly perhaps, some

folly. William Sharp Macleay, the son of Alexander, in fact takes the house from his father in exchange for paying off debts. A bitter rift develops between father and son as a result and Alexander leaves the house after having lived in it for only 6 years. There is even folly in the science. Practically bankrupt, Alexander continues to fund collecting expeditions. Collect, collect, at all costs.

These illustrious Macleays have long since died and become part of the specimens of history inherited by contemporary Australia. Alexander's house remains and it too becomes fossilized, a museum opened to the public in 1977. Preserved in a mad collage of different styles of apartment blocks, the house is now a shrine where people come to contemplate an incomprehensible past. The house, too, since the demise of the first family, has seen more than its share of folly. In 1926 the estate is subdivided into allotments and sold to a development company but these lots are never purchased. In 1934 artists squat in the house. In 1935 it becomes a venue for weddings and receptions and in 1940 it becomes 15 flats.

In 1990, Fiona MacDonald, an artist, places a display of collage work in the library of Elizabeth Bay House. Into this past made present she sets a series of collages of birds, butterflies, insects, shells and fossils, replacing the tasteful 19th century prints usually decorating the walls. The collage backgrounds are aerial photos of landscape patterns and electron microscope photos of the immune system fighting invading organisms and disease entities. Above the mantelpiece at the far end of the room are many eyes watching us watching. One collage is of human eyes and the other the glaring eyes of bald eagles. Here, in these collages, we have another act of ordering, a reorganisation of those creatures and objects already collected and placed triumphantly by that Linnean system of classification which the Macleay men championed and of which this room, with its glass fronted bookcases and specimen cabinets, speaks so confidently, so proudly.

The Linnean system is driven by a central paradigm of power, that to see, to collect and to classify, is to control. That paradigm speaks to us in the quiet, elegant decor of this library. MacDonald's work disturbs this order and elegance in a subtle way, by a trompe-l'oeil effect. Her work disorders by simultaneously imitating the

Linnean classification project while at the same time dismantling it. In this way an element of systematic, uneasy doubt is introduced to our vision. One looks and at first sees what appears to be a decorative grouping of specimens. One looks again and notices some of the strange and difficult-to-interpret backgrounds.

In its ability to introduce doubt and uncertainty into this paradigm MacDonald's collage work has much in common with Foucault's project of reminding the audience that the act of dominance and control is never complete, never entirely successful. The Panopticon, Jeremy Bentham's paranoid architectural design for maximum surveillance, has never been built. The discourse is never completed. There is always uncertainty in the paradigm that to see and to collect, as in jails, hospitals, schools and museums, is to control. The power base always has the eminent possibility of demise. This collage work mocks that power project. At first one feels the triumph of discovery. We can see everything! This glance is followed by a second one, a glance of doubt: But what does this seeing tell us? What are the systematic relations between being able to see the immune system and being able to see landscape patterns? What are the connections of these to eagles, birds and fossils, and to this very room itself?

The glaring gaze of the bald-headed eagle watches us watching and introduces this systematic uncertainty. Do we control when we see more and more? Do we control when we collect and cage? The gaze of that bird questions this belief. To become a specimen is, after all, to be dead. The shadow of this powerful paradigm is that in the very act of looking, exploring and collecting the thing which is so intently sought is killed. To be collected in the grand library of this beautiful neo-Palladian house is to be dead. We are in a cemetery. The underside of our intent gaze is that it cannot, in fact, stave off death and, when carried to the extremes of lust for a particular kind of control which characterises the last two centuries, has us all in the death-like grip of the museum. The photos of the electron microscope catching

the immune system in the act of trying to defend itself from invasion remind one of this death-like grip. Now we can watch ourselves die. We may not understand why we live and die but who will notice when we can be transfixed, infatuated with our own gaze at ourselves.

The eagle watches us looking at the house, the room, the collages. This almost extinct bird glares at us watching our own history, our world fossilized in the process of death. The glare of the eagle's eye is emblematic of MacDonald's work in the context of this room. She renders poetically beautiful in visual metaphor that systematic doubt in the powerful paradigm of the gaze as does Paul Ricoeur render it in words:

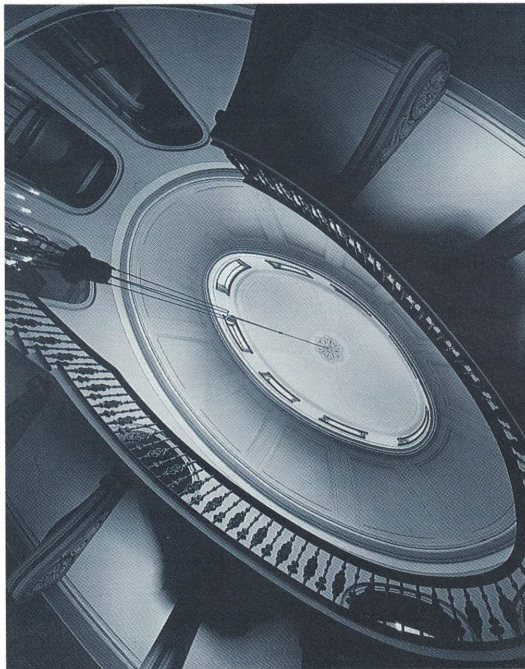
*When we discover that there are several cultures instead of just one and consequently*

*we acknowledge the end of a sort of cultural monopoly, be it illusory or real, we are threatened with the destruction of our own discovery. Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just others, that we ourselves are an "other" among others. All meaning and every goal having disappeared it becomes possible to wander through civilizations as if through vestiges and ruins. The whole of mankind becomes an imaginary museum...3*

Ricoeur writes, however, very much from the point of view of the centre watching its own demise. In the glare of the eagle's eye, however, we

are reminded that within the possibility of disordering the paradigm lies the hope.

**Diane Losche, 1989**



#### FOOTNOTES

1. Foucault, Michel. "The Means of Correct Training" in *The Foucault Reader*. Paul Rabinow, ed. Penguin Books. Harmondsworth. 1984: p.189.
2. Elizabeth Bay House. Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales. 1984: p.1.
3. Ricoeur, Paul. "Civilization and National Culture" in *History and Truth*. trans. Charles A. Kelbley. Northwestern University Press. Evanston. 1965: p.275.

## INVASIVE FRAMES — DECENTERING THE LABYRINTH



The general system of the sciences and arts is a kind of labyrinth, a torturous road which the spirit faces without knowing too much about the path to be followed. The encyclopaedic order of our knowledge, consists in reuniting this knowledge in the smallest possible space and in placing the philosopher above this vast labyrinth in a very elevated point of perspective. This enables him to view with a single glance his object of speculation, to distinguish the general branches of human knowledge and to detect the secret paths which unite it.

d'Alembert, *Encyclopaédie*. 1751.

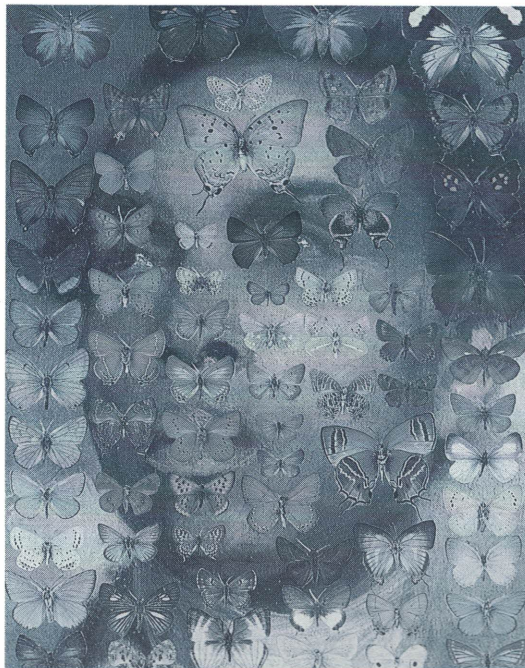
"Cyclopaedia" is a logical development of the concerns animating Fiona MacDonald's work to date, namely the interpenetration of systems of classification and processes of perception. In no previous work however has MacDonald so disconcertingly deprived the visual artwork of the conventional supports governing its legibility. As such, this exhibition of photo-collages by MacDonald offers visitors to the Macleay House-Museum with an unclassifiable and seductive viewing experience.

MacDonald's pictorial and textual strategies in this exhibition are basically tactics of invasion. In previous collage works, MacDonald has perceptively constructed visually extravagant, humorous critiques of colonial European culture's obsessive classification of the natural world. During the mid-19th century the Macleay Library in Elizabeth Bay House was the hub of pioneering research by Alexander and W. S. Macleay in the Natural Sciences. By infiltrating this historic library, with works created specifically for it, MacDonald explores further the intimate bonds that exist between objects, owners' desires and the cultural spaces they and we as viewers inhabit.

All the photo-collages in "Cyclopaedia" mimic in some way or other the "proper" procedures of the Natural Sciences. Each work is dedicated for example to the visual tabulation of a single biological species, genus or class. Yet we learn nothing from these works about

the "order of the natural world" that such visual displays generally offer up. Instead we are presented with visual conflagrations of colours, shapes and images disinterred from their "original" scientific premise — the botanical journals and science books from which MacDonald collected her "specimens" initially. In this very simple way MacDonald parodies the fundamental equation that all empiricist discourses make between vision and knowledge as truth.

Characteristically, MacDonald achieves this subversive message in terms accessible to nearly anyone. The tonal drop-out, duo-tone images of high-school textbooks that she uses in the *Specimen* collages,



are redolent with the doctrinaire rhetoric these works so pleasurably undercut. Similarly, the ordered divisions organising the visual space of the works are recognisable as the textural companions of that disciplinary matrix through which scientific discourses conventionally separate the visible world into discrete units for analysis. In this way MacDonald's work undertakes its own systematic dismantlement of not only the classificatory techniques of the museum, the archive and the book,

but also their attendant technologies of power. In its turn however MacDonald's work does not reveal what is hidden by these institutions and discourses but more curiously rearranges what is already there. Bringing to the fore what is usually considered superfluous — the formal visual rhythms, the undulating tonal values and contrasts, in short, the sensual pleasure already present in scientific modes of display and representation.

For MacDonald, the physical context in which images and objects are installed and so viewed is crucial to the meanings they generate. In prior exhibitions such as the "Presence of the Past" MacDonald used titles such as *Specimen*, *Collectors Cabinet I or II* and so forth, thereby alluding to the cultural spaces of early ethnographic museums that were densely packed like her lush collages with exotica from far flung

territories. In this way MacDonald clearly signalled her interrogation of the confluence of imperialist agendas of conquest and possession with natural scientists' collecting practices. By locating her work in the actual space of the Macleay Library MacDonald is able to develop her insights into the interactions between knowledge and power in a more lucid, complex manner.

The movement of bodies in space within a museum is highly constricted, both by the institution's corded off areas and the physical logistics of the displays themselves. In order for example to see the specimen trays of butterflies it is necessary for the drawers to be opened and then to be positioned correctly, above yet slightly back from them. In the photo-collage, *5 Paces*, MacDonald mimics these regulated movements ingenuously. The title is an instruction, that provides viewers with directions for correctly seeing the image. Only by moving constantly backward and forward approximately 5 Paces can any focus be partially gained of the regiment of butterflies that visually replicate collectors' cabinet drawers in the Macleay Library.

The multiple visual and semantic games at play in *5 Paces* is typical of MacDonald's approach in other works where each visual, literary or historical term will have at the very least a duplicitous function. In this work the butterflies as focal point are also a screen that functions metaphorically as the mental image of the figure they overlay. This reproduction, extracted from an English interior design journal, is a portrait by Joshua Reynolds of Frank Barber, beloved servant and heir of the lexicographer Dr Samuel Johnson who wrote the first English Dictionary. Our eyes flicker between two visual messages, from Barber as victim of a plague of insects to Barber as visionary, to Barber as the victim of his master's vision of a universal lexicology.

MacDonald's collage techniques exemplify the seamless interaction between subjective and objective realities that her work in a sense is about. Much of the impact of her collages derives from an ambiguous illusionism created by the forceful tension she maintains between figure and ground within the different strata of the collage. Never one thing or the other, her works ultimately focus on the relations between elements; between the legible and the illegible, image and surround, the world outside the frame and what conventionally belongs inside it. In this respect, MacDonald's work

continues traditions of modernist collage that have, since Picasso and Braque, asserted perception to be primarily plural, a polymorphous experience that representation willy-nilly closes down upon, that "art" frames. Yet MacDonald also departs from this avant-gardist approach in her willingness to forego the cultural privilege accorded the artist as creator of a unifying vision in plastic form. These works are purely contingent, they rely so heavily upon the existing objects in the Macleay Library for their meanings to be apparent that their status as artworks in traditional terms becomes problematic.

In "Cyclopaedia" MacDonald touches upon a new level of difficulty concerning the interactions of power, desire and cultural orders of visibility. Works such as *Eyes* for example introduce the problem of the immersion of the viewing subject within the very networks of power the exhibition as a whole seeks to render visible. For here the sovereign gaze necessary for the administration of the labyrinth of knowledges the "encyclopedia" embraces, is itself shown as subject to the very techniques of analysis and penetration this gaze inaugurated. The sovereignty of the gaze is thus replaced by the sovereignty of technical reproduction. These images of multiple, single eyes raise a notion of power that excludes the possibility of any cultural ownership whatsoever.

In these works it is technologies of signification themselves that produce the visible world. The eye, the sign par excellence of subjectivity is here superseded by the grid form, by fast colour film, that faster even than the blink of an eye, renders the eye sightless and so powerless. In the *Eyes* collages a kaleidoscope of collisions occurs between images, vision and the representation of these, so that hierarchies of representation are turned inside out.

We live, according to contemporary philosophers, in a "civilisation of the image", in which, devoid of any fixed reference to an origin, the image appears to refer only to other images. In such a situation according to Barthes,

*To change the level of perception produces a shock which shakes up the classified, named world (the recognized world). In fact, if art had for its goal only to make us see better, it would be nothing but a technique of analysis, an ersatz science; but in seeking to produce that something else which is in the thing; it subverts an entire epistemology. 1*

No longer the mirror of a prior biological reality, *Eyes* describe instead representation itself as an interplay of self-multiplying mirror images.



The oval frames with their convex glass are not *for* our eyes so much as eyes themselves, constitutive of vision and what can be seen is shown as supported and interpenetrated by what is outside sight.

"Cyclopaedia" could thus be described as an encyclopedia without a centre. MacDonald removes the "en" (enclosure, surround), the philosophising subject in "his elevated point of perspective." In so doing she unleashes the cyclical, spiralling relation between images and realities. The symmetry described here between language and perception is not static but interacting, a dynamic symmetry perhaps more like that found in the biological world.

Eloise Lindsay, 1989

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Barthes, R., *The Responsibility of Forms*, UK, 1986: p.224.

#### F I O N A M A C D O N A L D

BORN 1956 ROCKHAMPTON. LIVES IN SYDNEY.

**INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS:** 1983, 1984 *Elective Affinities*. 1986 *Lure of the Grotesque*. 1987 *Salon Des Ciseaux I* — Mori Gallery, Sydney. *Salon Des Ciseaux II* — Studio 666, Paris. 1988 *The Presence of the Past* — Mori Gallery, Sydney.

**SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS:** 1985 *Queensland Works* — Uni. of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane. *Australian Perspecta '85* — Art Gallery of N.S.W., Sydney. 1986 *The Gothic: Perversity and its Pleasure* — Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. 1987 *The New Romantics* — Macquarie Galleries, Sydney. *The Age of Collage* — Holdsworth Galleries, Sydney. 1988 *A New Generation: The 1980s* — Australian National Gallery, Canberra. *No More Blue Horizons* — Flaxman Gallery, London. *Dissonances* — Place Vendome, Paris.

**COLLECTIONS:** Australian National Gallery, Art Gallery of Western Australia, National Gallery of Victoria, Araluen Arts Trust, N.T., Artbank, Allen, Allen & Hemsley, Queensland Art Gallery, National Art Gallery of New Zealand, News Ltd.

#### A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

Dr Peter Emmett — Curator, Elizabeth Bay House. Anne Flanagan — Historic Houses Trust of N.S.W., Jo Holder and Stephen Mori — Directors, Mori Gallery. Clinton Garofano, Narelle Jubelin, Jennifer McCamley, Peter Smart — Photography. John Fear — Graphic Design, Beaver Creative. Max Dupain — E.B.H. Dome.

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