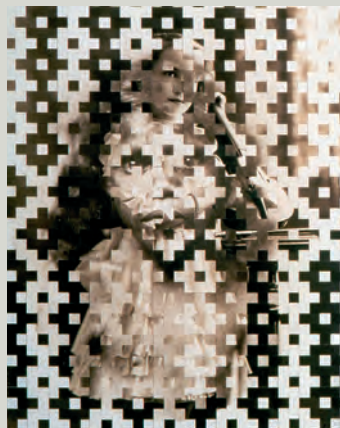


LOCAL STUDIES

FIONA MACDONALD



CURATED BY JO HOLDER
18 DECEMBER 2009 - 31 JANUARY 2010



LEFT: *Mob No. 18*, 1993, woven sepia photographs, 41 x 33 cm
SOURCE IMAGES: J H Lundager portraits Darumbal child, Yaamba c.1890
and Alma Moodie child musician, Mt Morgan c.1907

RIGHT: *Mob No. 16*, 1993, woven sepia photographs, 41 x 33 cm
SOURCE IMAGES: Doug Steley portrait of Fiona MacDonald 1993 and photographer
Unknown portrait of John Mann c.1930 and group including ML Martin c.1880

LOCAL STUDIES, GLOBAL REACH: A VIEW FROM CENTRAL QUEENSLAND ARCHIVES

We ruefully say that history belongs to the winners. Fiona MacDonald's *Local Studies* overturns the 'winners are grinners' canon to install other viewpoints. Let's first consider the view of MacDonald's own great-grandmother who as a young unaccompanied woman sailed from Copenhagen to take up a job in Queensland. What did Oline Christiansen think of landing at busy Mackay wharf and seeing indentured Kanakas disembark to work on sugar estates? Four generations later the artist considers this threshold and the entangled storylines of our ongoing colonial legacy.

Fiona MacDonald set out to research and create a 'portrait of a people' living in a mid-sized Australian town as time unfolds—using local photographic treasure troves and collections found in and around her hometown of Rockhampton. This unique exhibition surveys what became a 16-year undertaking. It spans five solo exhibitions: two site-specific, the first *Universally Respected* at the Rockhampton Club (1993) and *Close* at Rockhampton Botanic Gardens Interpretive Centre (1995) with the others held in Sydney and Melbourne. Eminent art historian Joan Kerr observed different locations—regional versus metropolitan—had wildly different meanings and resonances but "each place benefited by these creative combinations of the familiar and the alien":¹ Blessedly this first opportunity for a review takes place on native soil.

Local Studies shares some common ground with social portraiture but such records, as evocative as they may be, deny or repress real and historically embedded differences, injustices and conflicts. Fiona MacDonald's ends are subversive: she creates a lattice-like framework for interpreting catastrophic events from first contact and colonial rule to the Second World War and Americanisation to globalisation and interactions with multinational mining companies. She marries images to create a superficial relationship based on race, gender or class and stress cultural differences. Lest this sound dull, the use of wit and visual paradox—often using paper collage, assemblage, weaving, silhouette and printmaking techniques—distinguish her exhibitions. Of such mischief Kerr writes: “The respected pioneer and the despised outsider are quite literally an amalgamated portrait of our past.”

This local look at embedded controversy also points to important questions about how communities interact with a global economy. Each exhibition is a chapter in an ongoing narrative and involves protagonists, including the artist and her family, and disputing voices and issues that may leap an exhibition to reconnect later.

LEFT: *Close (Gardens Curator)*, 1995, woven sepia photographs, steel pins, 42 x 32cm
SOURCE IMAGE: photographer Unknown George Simmons, Rockhampton Botanic Gardens c.1937

RIGHT: *Close (Anzac Day)*, 1995, woven sepia photographs, steel pins, 42 x 32cm
SOURCE IMAGE: *Rockhampton Morning Bulletin*, Hector MacDonald, Rockhampton Botanic Gardens 1960



David Malouf in *A First Place* (1985) about growing up in Brisbane, writes about the importance of local knowledge: *My purpose is to look at the only place in Australia that I know well, the only place I know from inside, from my body outwards, and to offer my understanding of it as an example of how we might begin to speak accurately of where and what we are.*

Universally Respected (1993) placed MacDonald's inter-woven historical images alongside original caricature sketches of 'Rockhampton Notables' by Louis Marcellin Martin (1837-1908) publisher of the satirical weekly journal *Rockhampton Laughing Jackass* (the only surviving copy is dated 1881 in Rockhampton Library) and *Mosquito* (lost). These surviving caricatures were displayed in the Cigar Divan, Martin's tobacconist shop in East Street. MacDonald commissioned frames to match Martin's originals resplendent with barbershop-cross corners.

MacDonald's portrait composites include diverse 'found' works by the likes of newsagent and local politician JH Lundager, whose self-serving publication *Views of Mount Morgan: the famous gold and copper mine, Central Queensland* (1911), boasted the source of the vast wealth of the Rockhampton Club members. But it is Louis Martin's cosmopolitan view that is honoured. French born Martin moved to Rocky from New Caledonia in the 1860s and spent forty years in classic good-natured puncturing of greed, vanity, delusion and wrong-doing with his skilled drawings, caricatures and cartoons such as enhanced his *Jackass*. Naturally, his signature is a frog.

The series *Fragile* (1996) is another example of taking up the threads of an earlier storyline: the inter-generational collection begun by Alexander Macleay, Colonial Secretary of New South Wales. An installation at Macleay's Elizabeth Bay House in Sydney dealt with his renowned natural history collection (*Cyclopaedia*, 1990). In 1875 his nephew, William John Macleay, struck out and organised the first Australian scientific expedition to the Torres Strait and New Guinea amassing "a vast and valuable collection." Fiona MacDonald cross-weaves Macleay Museum collection records into ethnographic 'abstracts' to amplify the unsettling status of colonial loot.²

Fragile crosses over with a parallel series to *Local Studies* dealing with *International Relations*: seamy neo-colonialism, social turmoil, hot media and populist democracy. Queensland forms one side of the Coral Sea that also includes New Guinea and Pacific Islands and cast covetous eyes on Melanesia for natural resources and cheap labour. Several other series of works deal with the topic of the Coral Sea sphere of influence such as *Wake Naima* shown in the opening exhibition of Ngan Jila Centre Culturel Tjibaou in Noumea, New Caledonia (1998 not shown.) Globalisation is pulling entangled storylines tighter making local investigations of the lives of the poor, dispossessed and displaced more vital.



ABOVE: *Universally Respected, No. 4, 1993*, woven sepia photographs, 47.0 x 37.5 cm
SOURCE IMAGES: photographer Unknown portrait of Man and Woman, Clermont c.1890; publication Unknown George Fairbairn Jnr. 1891



ABOVE: *Tongue and Groove No. 6*, 2009, digital print on archival paper, 60 x 90cm

SOURCE IMAGES: Mercer Studio portraits left to right E Childs, Rockhampton, C J Ryan, Warwick, M W Philips, Rockhampton and P Scott, Comet c.1941

The recent chapter of *Local Studies* are manipulated works based on photographs taken by Central Queensland's legendary Mercer Photographic Studios, a collection of around 60,000 photographic negatives.² MacDonald's collages set out the impact of the Second World War on the dream life of an isolated rural town: suddenly everyone presents as a Hollywood star, what writer William Burroughs called a 'naked lunch' of consumption in the making, grandparents of today's *Australian Idol* hopefuls. The crazed images evoke the passing of time and a revelation. Several works are split into strips the width of 'tongue and groove' typical of Rockhampton's timber architecture to metaphorically form a haunted house. In one work, the home address given by the portrait sitter (legible on the surviving receipt) is photographed (by the artist's nephew) to form a predella below. The mosquito in their dreaming, their puncturing or undoing, is the persistent Frog, Louis Martin, whose vignettes of folly return to buzz around the sitters in the spirit and variety of his caricatures.

The closing words belong to another fellow Queenslander Joan Kerr: *Along with other contemporary artists, MacDonald has successfully relocated herself. She may live in Sydney but she knows what the world looks like from Boulia.*

Notes

- ¹ All Joan Kerr quotes from, 'Art Begins at Boulia' (1995) in *Joan Kerr, A Singular Voice, Essays on Australian Art and Architecture, 2009*.
- ² Terrence Mercer and his wife Beatrice ran the studio from 1919 followed by their son (Terrence II) until the digital age closed the studio in 1995. Source: telephone interview with Terry Mercer.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in Rockhampton and currently lives in Sydney, she keeps close ties with her family in Queensland. She is represented by The Cross Art Projects in Sydney and Gallerysmith in Melbourne.

LEFT: *Rockhampton Laughing Jackass*, published and illustrated by Louis Marcellin Martin, 1881

RIGHT: *Tongue and Groove No. 9*, 2009, digital print on archival paper, 50 x 61cm
SOURCE IMAGES: Mercer Studio portraits left to right J Gee Kee, Innisfail 1936 and H T Knowles, Jericho 1936



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FRONT PAGE: *Mosquito Divan No. 5*, 2009, digital print on archival paper, 50 x 61cm

SOURCE IMAGES: Mercer Studio portrait of J A MacDonald, Rockhampton 1941 and
Louis Marcellin Martin sketches of Bishop Nathaniel Dawes and Burke 1870



Australian Government



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Tongue and Groove No. 10

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