

LOCAL STUDIES: LEGEND AND LEGACY

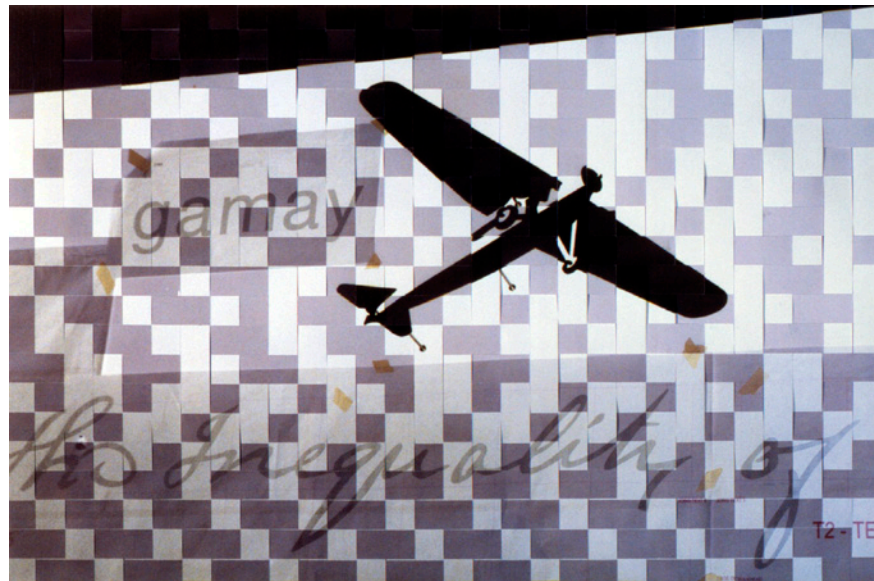
FIONA MACDONALD

Fiona MacDonald is known for her installations of bodies of work that draw on local cultural traditions, social and natural history. Neglected archives and personal collections, redolent of private meaning, graphic and decorative arts and crafts are often source for her work. Her installations take the form of conversations about undercurrents in social processes of inclusion and exclusion.

Her work has been seen in major contemporary exhibitions such as the Biennale of Sydney, Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art and Australian Perspecta. She has exhibited in Tokyo, Paris, London, Washington DC and New York.

Selected exhibitions and projects include *Local Studies*, *Global Reach: A View from Central Queensland Archives*, Artspace Mackay, Mackay; *Lobby, Fold, Spin* a suite of three exhibitions in New York at Pace University and Daneyal Mahmood Gallery, Chelsea (2007) created in collaboration with Ricky Subritzky; *Dream Home*, Gfineart, Washington DC, USA (2006); *Strangely Familiar*, UTS Gallery, University of Technology, Sydney (2005); *One Square Mile*, Museum of Brisbane, City Hall Brisbane (2003); *The Australia Projects: Federation Festival*, RMIT Gallery Melbourne (2001). Her concept for the *Sea of Hands* proposed to ANTaR by AAAR! proved a powerful tool for Australian Reconciliation.

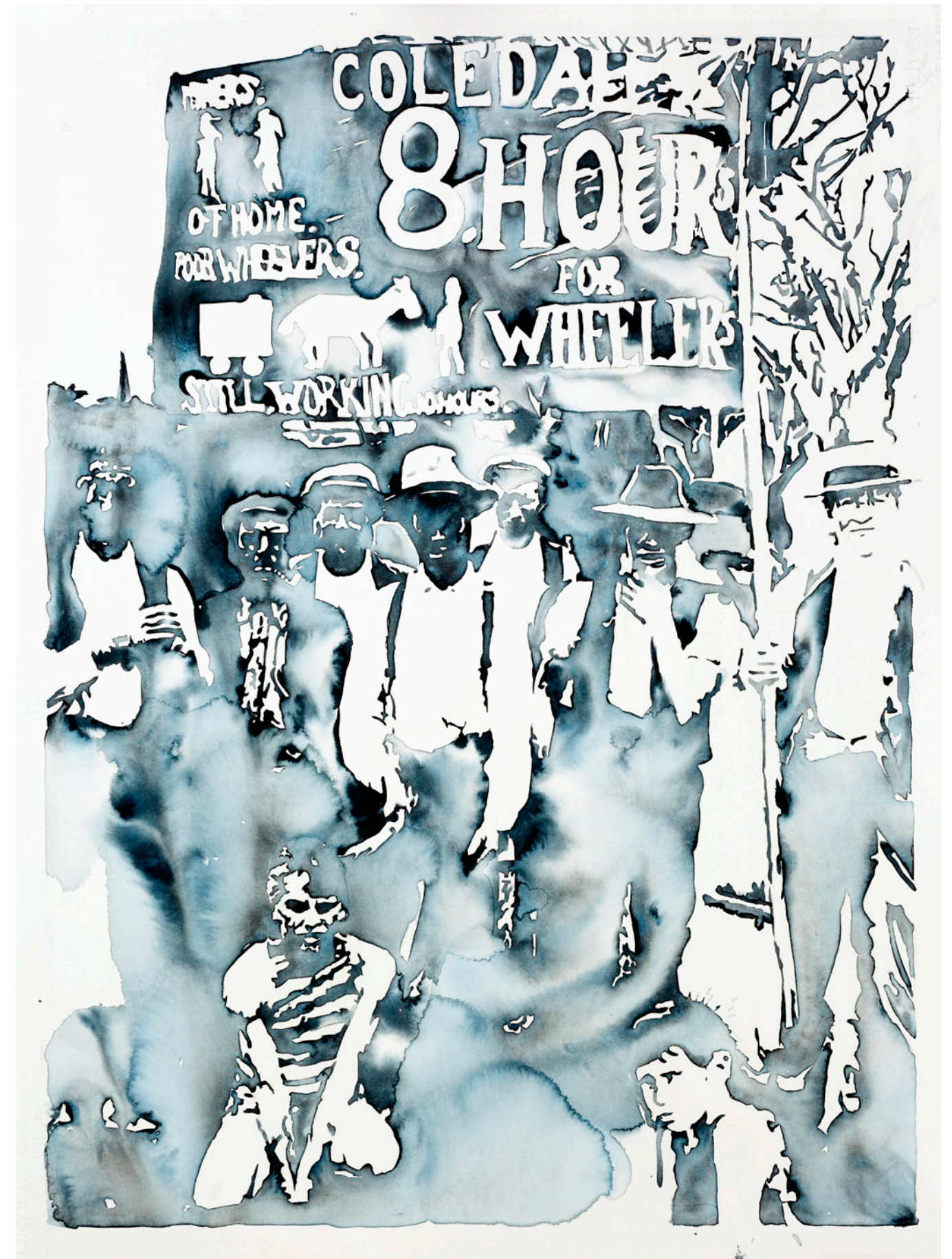
Fiona MacDonald is represented by The Cross Art Projects in Sydney and Gallerysmith in Melbourne.



Rewind No. 3, 2000, woven laser prints, 40 x 60cm.



Tongue and Groove No. 8, 2009, digital pigment print on watercolour paper, 50 x 60cm



Wollongong City Gallery
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Acknowledgements

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Exhibition Lenders

Patrick Corrigan, Alison Crisp and Andrew Putt



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weekends 12.00noon - 4.00pm

Wollongong City Gallery is a service of Wollongong City Council and receives assistance from the NSW Government through Arts NSW.



FOREWORD

Fiona McDonald is Wollongong City Gallery's 19th resident artist since 1991. Although originally conceived as a program to assist and provide professional development opportunities for local artists a decision was made to expand and diversify the program in 2009 to include more established artists as well as artists from outside the Gallery's regional boundaries.

In 2009 Fiona McDonald was the first artist to be invited to participate in the residency program. Fiona's art practice straddles the local/regional and the metropolitan/global. Often using historical/archival material as the springboard for her work the artist focuses close attention on the local to create art that speaks of broader concerns. During her time as resident artist in the Wollongong City Gallery she has created a suite of watercolours that focuses on community activism in the Illawarra. The exhibition, juxtaposes these works with selected work about place and identity.

Wollongong City Gallery would like to thank the Friends of Wollongong City Gallery who provide financial support for this important Gallery program. I would also like to acknowledge and thank Jo Holder for her invaluable contribution as curator of this exhibition and of course Fiona McDonald for her enthusiastic participation and engagement with all aspects of the residency.

John Monteleone
Program Director

Cover image: *Local Studies No. 3 (Strike for Eight Hours Bank to Bank, 1916)*, 2009, watercolour on archival paper, 73 x 53cm, photograph by Bernie Fischer.

Local Studies No. 11 (Merv Nixon in May Day, 1972), 2009, watercolour on archival paper, 53 x 73cm.



Local Studies No. 6 (a meeting at Shellharbour), 2009, watercolour on archival paper, 73 x 53cm.

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There was a Time of organised mass movement. Miners marched, students stormed, people protested, unions built cultural institutes and co-ops resourced communities. 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 stay-in against pit closures. After disasters pay was docked for plaques remembering their names.

There was a Space for these events in modern civic life: the workplace, town centre, meeting hall, local park. These public spaces resonate with memories of symbolic as well as everyday uses and practices. It grounds Wollongong's civic history. 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, whose vocabulary and kinks it makes use of, and whose code it embodies?" However Lefebvre also cautioned that new social relations demand new spaces, and vice-versa. The Cold War and affluence effectively compressed the space of old-style, radical public debate and civic action. As pioneer labour historian Brian Fitzpatrick worried in 1964, "(this) sphere is contracting ... it may not be so influential in the future as in the past."

Turn, Turn, Turn to locate today's mass movements. Those once-broad spaces of progressive industrial and civic life are squeezed by privatisation and shelved in a narrow seam of legend and ledger. Fiona MacDonald mines the archives of the Trades and Labour Council and local museums and turns the pages of the *Illawarra Mercury* to explore links between individuals and groups to historical time and place. Local archives become both artistic object and working method. Archival ordering is always arbitrary (chronological, alphabetical, Dewey system, genealogical, or the local historical society's own invention). This allows the artist to be equally selective and inventive in her artistic processes: drawing, collage, printmaking, weaving, watercolour, Photoshop.

Here in Wollongong MacDonald reinvents historical imagery to dramatise civic life both past and present. Abstracted drawing and restrained colour washes lend a bittersweet nostalgia to the Legend and Legacy series. Nostalgia — from the Greek, literally 'pain of home' — prompts uncomfortable memories of a home-town with a proudly independent, left-leaning political culture that is now ailing, its Labour Council and local government squeezed between unscrupulous business interests and Labor Party factions who call the shots and pre-selections from afar. Too broken to fix is the Sydney line. *Qui bono* or who benefits? The artist inks in sinister, silhouetted figures lifted from the *Illawarra Mercury* — politician (Mark Arbib), former national union boss (Bill Kelty) and transport magnate (Lindsay Fox) — grouped like the three graces for a photo-op on (safely-held) Shellharbour beach. The fix is in.

MacDonald also pays tribute to happier legends. Linking past and present images of grass-roots action, we appreciate this legacy in recent struggles to save pristine Water Catchment Special Areas from long-wall mining, Sandon Point from over-development and McMansions unchecked up and down the coast. A watercolour from an *Illawarra Mercury* photograph shows a tent blown by the elements at the 2009 Helensburgh Climate Camp. It remains a delicately ambiguous, oddly traumatic image. Another shows Merv Nixon, local hero and architect of the South Coast Labour Council's role in all the broad social movements of the 70s and 80s, marching

on with shirt-sleeves rolled. New times have demanded new spaces and new ways of organising. Focus has shifted to more democratic but sporadic campaigns by rainbow-coloured community action. A generation on, local trades hall leader Arthur Rorris calls this shape-shifter 'community unionism'. Today's organised actions are spatially dispersed and loosely led. Will they slip more quickly into the quiet backwaters of local archival memory?

Local Studies

Fiona MacDonald tells difficult archival stories — of local nobodies, worthies and outright bastards — who make regional Australia both singular and crushingly familiar. Her starting point is her hometown Rockhampton built by the world's richest goldmine at Mount Morgan. *School* (1996) interweaves photos of capital and workers, class and culture into a classical frieze around the gaping mine-head. *Tongue and Groove* (2009) abuts timber-width strips of photographic portraits like old timber Queenslanders, recycled from the Mercer Photographic Studio archives in Rockhampton. Vinegaring is eating at the old negatives, rendering a creepy-cracked veil over each sitter's face so that the series has the sad chill of clairvoyant or spirit photography. MacDonald's touch-ups further embalm the original artifice of these Hollywood fantasias, the detritus of long-forgotten, living-room mantelpieces.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, MacDonald makes an archival portrait of Botany Bay as white Australia's foundational site, an all-encompassing Ur-myth. In 1770, the *Endeavour* dropped anchor alongside local people fishing in bark canoes along a stretch of sand they called Kundull. The locality still wears the consequences of this extraordinary encounter and the ensuing contest for justice, ownership and management. *Rewind* (2000) and *Native and Stranger* (2010) revisit this still-fraught, archival space that the artist first charted in Millennium Tympanum a public art project for the Olympics at Sydney Airport (2000, with Jo Holder and Kathy Grant.) *Rewind* has the blurred and stretched look of home video. The artist cuts up images from the *Tympanum* installation, and re-edits the strips in an ambivalent, wonky cross-weave. By re-making the earlier project as an archival work, she reminds us that public art projects themselves do not guarantee monumentality or even permanence. In this case, the airport was sold after the Olympics to Macquarie Bank and the artworks removed for advertising. *Public Private* (2007) shows the Bay's shapes radically altered by globalisation and convenient planning deals.

Public spaces have always been contested and vulnerable. The dividing edge between land and sea is a frontier zone with a shared social dimension that alerts us to unequal relations but also the possibility of reciprocity and rights of reply. In the silhouetted caricatures of colonial class and race relations of *Native and Stranger* we trace the line of Enlightenment curiosity and colonial incursion, native and stranger in which the Botany Bay clans respond in Dharawal language 'Warra, warra, wai' or "go away".

As in her other local studies, MacDonald juxtaposes canon and caricature to re-file our darker historical narratives through witty collage. Her archival sweep retrieves more aberrant colonial moments through satirical images and maverick imagery. These dissonant and creative gestures are valuable, for we glimpse other viewpoints, a new take on home-town truths, generating change.

Catriona Moore and Jo Holder