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BETWEEN
ART & NATURE

106 Erskineville Road
Listening to Clara, Ethel and Ada

Sue Pedley

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Part of SCREAMING GREEN, curated by Angharad Wynne-Jones



Listening to Clara, Ethel and Ada

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Listening, the act of listening, is a sensitive and generous process. One must be acute, one must suspend something of one's egoism to do it well. It is a process which is inherently collective, about bringing one's awareness outside one's immediate comfort zone, to issues which perhaps one had previously ignored. To empathise with another's plight, to even see connections to one's own dilemmas, is to listen. Listening might also be a way of recording hidden histories, a manner of research whereby opinions are gathered to galvanise resistance.

Listening to Clara, Ethel and Ada is to listen to the often quelled stories of another generation, of another way of looking at the world. There is something nostalgic in these names, the names of elderly women with a storehouse of domestic collective memory, the names of three well-trod streets in the newly gentrified inner-city suburb of Erskineville. These names evoke the traditional values of home and hearth, of close-knit community where neighbours were on a first-name basis and doors remained open to the life of those living close, where maternal wisdom could breach any rift. Yet together with nostalgia, this emphasis on the process of listening reactivates ways of thinking undermined by the ascendancy of economic rationalism in public debate. It affirms a different sense of time, it valorises the ineffable qualities of human interaction, and acknowledges the often unexpressed need for community we all feel at some point.

Sue Pedley's project is concerned precisely with representing these issues. Her evolving installation, set up in a row of shops long vacant in the heart of Erskineville village, plays host to this different sense of time: a sense of suspended, slow time which seeks to elude the instrumentalism of the economic paradigms which are driving recent changes in her suburb, including the closure of essential regional services in the name of centralisation, efficiency, streamlining; the destruction of old industrial landmarks to clear the way for new housing developments; and the relentless encroachment by private property of public land.

Pedley evokes this non-instrumental time by focusing her attention on the laborious process of weaving. Not only is her three-dimensional wool-modelling painstaking and time-consuming, so it is in a sense never complete, always in a state of gradual change. Her project is not driven by the desire for a finished product; her work, rather, is comprised of the very process of making small, subtle connections between one thread and another, so that after time the connections begin to transform the room, organically evolving into a large, indomitable structure. It could be seen as a radically different building project.

Pedley's weaving takes a very specific pattern—it is modelled on the molecular structure of gypsum, the main component of her favoured material, plaster. Gypsum fragments are also methodically sewn into the floor of her working space. Pedley has long been investigating the subtle secrets of plaster, its architectural history as well as its chemical properties. In this installation, her rendering of plaster's unseen inner intricacies embodies an apt metaphor for the seemingly fragile, yet inherently strong, community ties in her neighbourhood. It also connects with the nostalgia for the suburb's early history, plaster being a material vital to the Victorian and Edwardian houses now being progressively destroyed; in one sense, plaster evokes a mourning of Erskineville's traditional architecture with its attendant social networks. Pedley's obsessive treatment of plaster is an obsession with the basics, with a simple yet infinitely fascinating building material, with plaster's sensuality, warmth and endless plasticity. (Indeed, these qualities are echoed in the dough objects Pedley has crafted in resonance with that icon of the community fundraiser and maternal hospitality, the scone.)

Pedley's project of 'listening' also entails a fast and loose documentation of the groundswell of community opposition to certain developments in her suburb, particularly the planned closure of Erskineville's Post Office, a symbol of the suburb's distinction from neighbouring and overwhelming King Street, Newtown. Her installation includes a barrage of snapshots of community protests and events, representing amongst others the stalwarts of community protests over the years, counterpoised with historical images of Erskineville village. Also displayed is a variety of placards which Pedley and her neighbours have painted and carried to local actions. With these photos and signs, Pedley's project plays the traditional galvanising role of community art, acting as a point of coalescence where the community sees its reflection, identifies with its history and political mission. Yet this more traditional role is inflected with the subtleties of Pedley's specific process-based installation art practice. This interplay grants the project a greater complexity, characterised by that sense of non-instrumental time which renders Pedley's studio/gallery/shopfront a place of respite from the exigencies of the economically driven, rational world.

Jacqueline Millner
July 1997

106 Erskineville Road/Listening to Clara, Ethel and Ada
1 Aug - 6 Sep 1997 at 106 - 112 Erskineville Rd, Erskineville.
Part of SCREAMING GREEN curated by Angharad Wynne-Jones.
Works by Rodney Berry and Mark Joseph can be seen at The Performance Space Gallery, 14 - 30 Aug at 199 Cleveland St, Redfern and performance by Julie-Anne Long in association with The Wilderness Society in various sites around Sydney.