

The Convict and The Jew – marks, gestures, sounds and maps

Sue Pedley and Tess Horwitz have made an exhibition about their families' pasts. Both have extraordinary family histories. There are the kinds of stories which are the stuff of settler narratives: the convict-settlers who mastered adversity and lived to found a wealthy grazier dynasty; the son of a Ukrainian rabbi whose life of displacement in different guises around the world remained a mystery to the family he established in Australia; the Spaniard whose schemes to make his fortune in mining ventures in South America foundered, and who settled in Sydney, surrounded by the relics of his dreams.

These are the stories, told and re-told within families, which sometimes enter the public arena of a nation's history. As extraordinary as they are, they are also exclusionary. They grow out of an anxiety to fill the blank pages of history, to reassure ourselves that there is nothing else to tell. Sue Pedley and Tess Horwitz's work resists this kind of story-telling. Instead, it forms an accumulation - or possibly an archive - of traces, marks and relics, with all of the archive's capacity to unfold a multiplicity of narratives. It surrenders itself to you when you bend close to examine a surface or take pleasure in a detail. This is a body of work which demands that the viewer enter it.

Sue and Tess turn the garment of history inside out, making visible the seams, the patches, the stains, left by the vanished inhabitants of the past. This work is eloquent with the sense of loss which relics invoke. It does not try to fill the spaces of loss with information but simply lets them be, allowing room for an imaginative engagement with the past.

In this accumulation of traces is an acknowledgment that memory is sculpted by forgetting; that recollection is precisely that: a re-collection of the random moments, objects, sensations which have survived the remorseless seas of amnesia which batter human experience. The archive is always poignant, since relics and traces do not constitute a coherent or comprehensive document of the past, they simply announce "this is all that could be found".

This work acknowledges that there is a paradox inherent in the act of remembering. Memory is not synonymous with the past, it is always experienced in the present. Each remembered moment describes the gulf between ourselves now and the things which have gone before, and the impossibility of ever returning to that original moment. Our connection to the past is one-way, through a fragile chain of minute events - a chain of breaths drawn, of steps taken, of food prepared, of words read, of scents inhaled, of tears shed, of dreams dreamed.

The purpose of Sue and Tess' project is not to make easily decipherable objects, or to offer a coherent chronological narrative, but to lay bare the language of process. In this sense, the work is about duration. Making these lamps, river-systems and family trees involves repetition: the restatement of a gesture, a mark, a process over and over again until the work is brought into being. Inside the work, a memory of this span of time is buried: not simply the time of the work's making, but the pauses in which the minutiae of everyday life has intervened.

The open-endedness of Tess and Sue's project makes visible its durational space, and, in doing so, is able to invoke the durational space of memory itself. The marks, names, gestures, sounds and maps refer not simply to the duration of time between the artists in the present and their disparate pasts, but to the pasts of others whose memory is more elusive.

Thinking about the work, I am left with the memory of sounds - the scrabbling, scratching and chipping noises which haunt the gallery space. I think of the sounds of making - the little insubstantial gestures through which the work has been built up. I think beyond that to the sounds of all of those lost moments of everyday life, vanished forever into forgetfulness. I think, too, of the sounds of the lives of those over whose histories the anxious narratives of settlement have been inscribed. I think of the processes which they used to shape their experience: the chipping of stone, the firing of the bush, the middens and marks on the land itself. In spite of the irreconcilable separation between past and present, I am consoled by the eloquence of the voice of the past in our daily experience.

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