

**Jacqueline Millner**

**Under the Pier**

*In the gullies, where streams of water slide from pool to pool leaving beards of rusty algae on their sandstone lips; giant cabbage tree palms grew, their damp shade supporting a host of ferns and mosses. Yellow sprays of mimosa flashed in the sun along the ridges, and there were strands of black boy trees, their dry spear of a stalk shooting up from a drooping hackle frond.*  
*from The Fatal Shore by Robert Hughes*

With *Under the Pier*, Sue Pedley continues her research on the poetics of place. Her work comprises not so much a response to a specific site, as the very process of considering the relationship between art-making and place. The particularities of *this place*—Woolloomooloo, The Gunnery, the gallery—are explored through Pedley's experimentation with the materiality of plaster, sand and water, elements familiar from Pedley's past work but also the essential components of the built and 'natural' environment of the area. This material emphasis is counterposed with Pedley's investigation of the history and mapping of the site, with its inextricable metaphors of cultural imperialism and the imagined correspondence between the lived environment and representation. *Under the Pier* is a sub-

tle and perpetually evolving installation which quietly trains our attention to the organic qualities of recorded history and uninhabited architecture.

### **Water**

The foreshores along Woolloomooloo bear witness to a vanished history, having been reclaimed from the sea last century. As a historical account puts it, "the foreshores have long ago been *fixed* by dredgings and fillings, and by the building of retaining walls and wharves; the streamlets have been channeled underground; the slopes of the ridges have been *gentled* by cuttings and gradings; millions of tons of concrete have been poured to erect the pinnacled buildings which make the city's craggy skyline: yet all that architecture stops, as it must, at the water's edge". But *does* architecture stop at the water's edge? And, does the sea stop at the foreshore? These are some of the questions Pedley seeks to pose with her work, to compel the thinking through of a continuous dialogue between the minute mutabilities of site, history, architecture, art. That the terrain underneath the gallery should be suffused with wet memories, with a submerged life that is seeping into the building's very structure by stealth, these are the quiet invasions which Pedley's work evokes. The columns of the gallery, so often cursed for interfering with the integrity of the space, here become the pier's underwater supports, the plaster pieces created with the addition of sea water from Woolloomooloo Bay.

### **Plaster**

The first European settlers around Sydney could find no limestone with which to make plaster, a vital ingredient for the mortar used to hold bricks and stones together and to weatherproof buildings. After many false limestone 'finds', sea shells—made from the same chemical compound as limestone—provided the first plaster used in Australia. At first, sea shells were gathered from the beaches around Sydney Harbour by female convicts, but, as demand grew, gangs of

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male convicts searched by boat in the inlets around the harbour—including Woolloomooloo—for shells, which once gathered were burnt for lime. It was in this way that the Aboriginal shell middens in the waterways around Sydney were 'discovered', so that "the discarded refuse of the indigenous inhabitants came to provide an essential building material for the subsequent colonial settlers" (quoted from *The History of Plaster Work in Australia*). This intriguing irony, together with the desecration implicit in raiding traditional Aboriginal meeting places for industrial raw material (what middens survive today are regarded as valuable archeological sites), recontextualise Pedley's use of plaster on this site, to remind us of the pervading power of the colonial moment.

Plaster's mutability also is a quality important to Pedley's work. Plaster blue will gradually bleach to white in a gesture which renders visible the subtle change which architecture continuously undergoes, a return to an elemental condition, even. This *incarnation* of structure, and indeed, of time, is a persistent concern of Pedley's process-based installations. Time's passing is also gently teased out by the autumn leaves which have blown into the artist's studio during her residency here. Pedley has dipped them in plaster to create delicate pieces reminiscent of the plaster roses and cornices that adorned colonial ceilings, although Pedley has displaced them to the ground, reiterated their fallen quality.

### Grass

Pedley's intention was to access the foreshore between Garden Island Naval Base and Woolloomooloo Finger Wharf in order to substantially incorporate this aspect of the site into her work. After negotiations with the naval base, Pedley was ultimately granted only frustratingly limited access to the small grassy patch which sits directly opposite the gallery. While awaiting a final response, Pedley experimented with what access she had, photographing the area extensively at first, then taking cuttings from the plants growing on the foreshore through the wire fence which barred her entry. This she did furtively, for the interdictions of a military establishment

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cast an insidiously long shadow. The grass which the artist has used to construct her work necessarily bears traces of these inter-dictions, of boundaries both observed and flouted, both imagined and real. Entering the gallery in a highly mediated way—trimmed, gathered, tightly bound and sculpted—the grass underlines the distinction between the spaces internal and external to the gallery but at the same time creates a direct link between these spaces, in a sense extending the site of the work to the actual foreshore. Moreover, like the plaster, the grass is also perceptibly changing and decomposing in response to its environment, reinforcing the sense of an organic architecture.

#### **Sand and air**

Sand swills on the gallery floor like the trace of a tidal flow. The ground shifts and swirls, stable at one point but undermined at another. Simultaneously, sand creeps up a wall to usurp the wall itself. Sand and sandstone: not only the walls, but also the porous, seeping terrain underlying edifices, a confusion and conflation of ground and superstructure. By invoking this seething quality of sand and sandstone, Pedley further orchestrates her organic architecture. Pedley has also rendered the air thick and steamy, to give it body, a bodily presence. Even the air breathes; space is no longer uninhabited. History is seeping through the bricks and mortar and trickling down the walls. The once immobile floor and walls appear to sussurate and flow.

By externalising her process, Pedley presents the viewer with a complex web of relationships, between outside and inside, between ground and structure, between recorded history and the remnants of past endeavours. Her evocation of an organic architecture is an open and compelling working through of the intimacy between art-making and place.

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