

'Spare Room' at Elizabeth Bay House

Artists: Sue Pedley, Jayne Dyer and Susan Andrews

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Museums are significant sites of inspiration for artists who see the legacy of the past in contemporary life. Museums, such as Elizabeth Bay House, played a role in the colonial project of imperial powers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and have now become the place for engagements with its legacy. In that sense, we are now looking 'beyond the mausoleum' towards a more revelatory idea of the museum as a site for new ways of thinking and imagining life in the past; as a site for revealing how knowledge is created. Elizabeth Bay House is an artifact, a container for collections of cultural material and intangible cultural heritage and a museum. Its impact is evident beyond the actual site and period in which it originated, as we see in Spare Room and the installations of Sydney artists Jayne Dyer, Susan Andrews and Sue Pedley.

The artists have found conflicting voices in the history of Elizabeth Bay House. These voices include the nineteenth-century gentility of the Macleay family, the muted voices of the Macleay servants and now its museum voice. The installations respond to visual relationships between the landscape and the house, containment and the taxonomy of people and collections, the textiles of domestic life, and the significance of Elizabeth Bay House as a site of knowledge creation for and about the colony.

It is worth recounting a brief history of the house before considering the installations. Alexander Macleay arrived in Sydney with his wife and six daughters in 1826 to take up the post of Colonial Secretary of New South Wales. Macleay was retired from the British civil service and had been a member of leading British scientific bodies, the Linnean Society of London (of which he was Secretary, 1798-1825) and the Royal Society. Macleay brought one of the largest insect collections in Europe to Sydney and had extensive interests in botany and horticulture.

Macleay took possession of 54 acres at Elizabeth Bay in 1826 and began to develop it, at great expense, as a landscape garden with vistas across Sydney Harbour. The building of Elizabeth Bay House commenced in 1835 under the fashionable architect John Verge. It is a superb example of a Greek Revival villa whose interiors are notable for their detailing, particularly the quality of the cedar joinery, plaster and stonework. The saloon, with its elegant cantilevered stair, is regarded as the finest interior in Australian colonial architecture. In 1839, Alexander and Eliza Macleay moved into the incomplete house with their eldest son, William Sharp Macleay and unmarried daughter, Kennethina. Their eldest daughter, Fanny, who had been her father's assistant, illustrator of botanical specimens and William Sharp Macleay's correspondent on the building of the house, had died in 1836.

Macleay lost his position as Colonial Secretary in 1837 and with the Depression of the early 1840s, faced financial ruin. In 1845, William Sharp Macleay assumed ownership of the house in return for part payment of his father's debts. In the rift that followed Alexander and Eliza Macleay moved out of the house. William lived there alone until his death in 1865. Both he and the next resident, his cousin William John Macleay, added to the Macleay natural history collections. These were presented to the University of Sydney with an endowment for the Macleay Museum in 1888. In 1911 the Macleay family sold Elizabeth Bay House. (Carlin, 2000)

The significance of the site as central to a particular knowledge of the colony is the focus of Jayne Dyer's installations in the library. A massed jumble of books blocks the doorways leading from the drawing room and former preparation room. Here Dyer responds to the work and life of the one of the Macleays, a collector and ambitious taxonomist.

In c.1818, William Sharp Macleay, who later owned Elizabeth Bay House, ...believed that at any level of taxonomy, groups could be linked by a series of affinities into a circle of five elements, and the elements of one circle could be linked by analogy to the five elements of another circle. This became known as the Circular or Quinary System, and was for a time very influential in England ... [Before Darwin] the general belief was that species were fixed in their form and that the affinity of forms in the pattern of Nature was a reflection of the wisdom and order of God. (Stanbury and Holland, 1988: 22-23)

William Sharp Macleay's highly artificial Quinary System is an example of aesthetics rather than strict empirical science underpinning collecting. To Dyer it is a lost form of knowledge. This seems contrary to the basis upon which systems of categorisation later developed to rationally order the natural world.

A library is a repository of accumulated facts, hypotheses and conjecture. For Dyer, the library presents a strange disjuncture. When built in 1839, it was the largest room in an Australian house. Stripped bare of its 4,000 volumes (in 1845), it is a shell of Alexander Macleay's obsession with literature and natural history. Dyer uses the books as structures rather than as objects or compilations of text. A tower of books blocking the view to the drawing room and the bay beyond infers that their contents may also be restrictive. The collection of books is also symbolic of the house because it represents the transportation of a system of knowledge for the colony, held in a single house that is now a public institution. The house is the site of encyclopaedic ordering of the colony. Dyer's books appear as homage, yet unidentifiable, their spines blackened to conceal the titles, also suggesting a funereal reference to lost or forgotten books.

A significant of Alexander's collection of butterflies and moths is secured in specially fitted cabinets originally owned by Macleay and on loan to Elizabeth Bay House from the Macleay Museum. Here Dyer is curious about the only closed door in the library. Scientist, J. D. Hooker, who visited the house in 1841, noticed a distinct "smell of camphor and specimens" emanating from the preparation room. (Carlin, 2000:67) The doorway to this room, when slightly ajar, reveals a later brick wall blocking the entrance to the former preparation room. 3000 black butterflies are found scattered around the library as if released from the preparation room by Dyer. They swarm; attaching themselves to furniture and the floor, appearing as a shadowy revenge and a menacing presence in the room.

Like many artists, Dyer is also a collector. She has collected books published between 1835 and 2007, selecting titles to reflect the different uses of the house. Upstairs, unlike the nameless books downstairs her constructions operate as an open-ended, 'linguistic' production - in a state of flux, pointing towards an understanding of a narrative, but recognising that responses are momentary and individual.

As we wander around upstairs we see that the view from the house is also interrupted by Sue Pedley's cyanotypes. Two 1.4 metre wide cyanotypes hang in the north facing exhibition room, reproducing and mimicking the light and shadows coming through the windows. Cyanotypes, a nineteenth century photographic process used for creating architectural blueprints and later used for natural history recording, are here a reminder of both the technical history of photographic records and also our contemporary view from this house and the history that frames that view. Yet, while they show us light they mask our view, reminding us of how time situates our view.

Referencing the landscape beyond the windows, Pedley's cyanotypes recall William Henry Fox Talbot's early experiments in photography, using writing paper soaked first in sodium chloride and then sodium nitrate to create salt print images of a leaf, a feather and a piece of lace. These experiments led to the creation of Fox Talbot's first photograph, an oriel window at Lacock Abbey, Wiltshire in 1835. (Gray, Ollman, McCusker 2002: 12, 128) Pedley's cyanotypes make strange a common view that has been a reference point for displacement and place-making in nineteenth-century Australia.

The relatively common activity in the interior of the house also attracts Pedley's eye. On a visit to Elizabeth Bay House, she witnessed a guide pulling up a corner of the bedding from the principal bedroom's four-poster to show three mattresses; one stuffed with straw, one with horsehair and the top one with goose feathers. These have been meticulously recreated by the Historic Houses Trust following the instructions of the early nineteenth century domestic taxonomist, John Claudius Loudon, in his *Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture and Furniture* (London, 1833).

The common mattress is formed by stuffing a canvass case with flocks, wool, baked horse-hair, sea grass, technically called *U'vla marina*, or any other articles which when put together form an elastic body, and afterwards quilting it down and covering with a description of cloth called ticken. (Loudon, 1833-1869: sect.663)

The bed in the nineteenth century was as important a status symbol as it had been in medieval times. Comfort corresponded to one's wealth. Servants re-arranged the bedding on a daily basis. By way of contrast, William Sharp Macleay's manservant was provided with a humble wool flock mattress on his voyage to Sydney in 1839 and a similar mattress has been recreated for the maid's room. With insufficient care, a wool flock mattress would quickly mould itself to the steel straps supporting the bedding.

Pedley herself spent some years of her childhood sleeping on a horsehair mattress in a family cottage in northern Tasmania. Early in 2007, Pedley returned to the Tasmanian north coast and found detritus from the sea strewn on a local beach – sponges, weed, and fragile remnants of clothing encrusted with molluscs. These become her 'bedding', offering layered, poetic references to colonisation, an imported class system, and nineteenth century journeys of migration and scientific exploration. Pedley fuses and recycles different places, several cultures, and suggests that there is a link between lives here at the house and elsewhere.

Pedley replaces the traditional bedding with a high mound of oyster shells for the Macleays' bed, a collection of seaweed and sponges gathered on a beach in Tasmania and

various found objects including cuttlefish, sea-washed clothing rags and fishing line found near Devonport for Kennethina's. The mattress in the maid's room, is replaced by the drying husks of corn, a reference to Pedley's convict and farming predecessors. The artist also draws on eating oysters and corn growing references from Kate Grenville's novel *The Secret River*, set on the Hawkesbury River in the first years of the nineteenth century. The livelihoods of recent arrivals, William Thornhill and his family, depend on the corn they struggle to grow on the banks of the Hawkesbury, to be milled and baked as dry cornbread. (Grenville, 2005: 225) They fail to recognize the food sources and significant places of the indigenous Australians living around and amongst them. Pedley and Grenville imagine the journey of settler cultures, both geographically and culturally.

Susan Andrew's installations recall her enduring a six-week journey by ship as a migrant to Australia. In an upstairs exhibition room and in the cellar, she alludes to the journey using fabric that reveals contact with the past. Hanging in this space is a piece measuring approximately "6 feet square", which was about the area that was a single berth aboard the transport ships in the nineteenth century. The discoloured and soiled hanging is divided roughly into the width of a shared sleeping "cot" aboard ship. Stitches map the personal space allocated for where sleeping bodies would lie. The fabric, layered and hung in the light of windows upstairs and down, shows traces of personal encroachment that were unavoidable in confined spaces.

One of the least visible rooms in the house is the linen closet. It too references fabric, showing traces of human contact through layering. This is an incidental space, a crossover point between the Macleay women and their servants. It was ordered and contained the laundered linen whose stains of everyday use are no longer discernible. Andrew's installations use evocative scents, book pages made from muslin, wax and chocolate thimbles, garish feather pincushions, and silk thread. The proximity of the linen closet to the morning room is indicative of the Macleay women's daily routine, taken up with 'plain work' or the supervision of servants' care of linen. In contrast, Sarah Wentworth of Vaucluse House, who enjoyed tremendous wealth but was excluded from colonial society as a fallen woman, employed needlewomen.

"They dress too with the utmost attention to uniformity" wrote George Boyes of the Macleay daughters in 1826, describing somewhat maliciously the women varying in age from their teens to their 40s clothed in the same pattern of dress made with an inappropriate gauzy material. (Chapman, 1981:255-6) By careful tending of their time the Macleay women almost certainly made their own undergarments, hemmed sheets and made soft furnishings. This was most likely a result of their father's precarious financial position but no doubt also reflected Protestant Evangelical values of thrift.

Within the Macleay family there was a division of labour. Fanny Macleay undertook natural history illustration for her father and brother, and their gentlemen scientist correspondents in various parts of the world. Kennethina Macleay was her mother's helper involved in plain sewing. The installations in Spare Room reflect this history of order and classification and make strange the everyday views from within a house that now stands as both an artifact a museum.

The artists have been drawn to the less public aspects of occupancy in Elizabeth Bay House, what they describe as the 'spare room'. They uncover its everyday life, and in that process reveal the workings of the house as both a home and a place of collecting and associated scholarship. In Spare Room, the artists engage with the associated histories of

the site, its occupants and staff, and the related material culture to reveal not only the legacy of imperial collecting practices, but another view of the house and how it has attained its significance. We see in Spare Room a contemporary response to the history of collecting in Australia and the daily lives and spaces of those who produced that history.

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Note:

'Spare Room' continues a distinguished series of contemporary art-based exhibitions at Elizabeth Bay House that has included Fiona Hall's *Paradisus Terrestris* series (1990); *Cyclopaedia* by Fiona Macdonald (1990); *Artists in the House!* guest curated by Michael Goldberg and featuring the work of Anne Graham, Jacqueline Clayton, Bonita Ely, Julie Rrap, Jackie Dunn, Tom Arthur, Adrian Hall, Aleks Danko, Nigel Helyer, Martin Sims, Chris Fortescue and Ken Unsworth (1997); *Magical Golland* by Alison Clouston (2001); *Cabinet of Curiosities, contemporary photography based on the Macleay natural history collections* by Robyn Stacey (2002); and *Ten[d]ancy*, guest curated by Sally Breen and Tania Doropoulos and featuring the work of Gary Carsley, Shaun Gladwell, Hannah Furnage, Jonathan Jones, Claire Healy, Sean Cordeiro, Martin Blum and Simone Fuchs (2006). Tracey Moffat's *Laudanum* series was filmed at Elizabeth Bay House and other venues in 1998.