

forbidden Fiona Foley

MCA Learning Resource

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Purpose of this Resource

This Education Resource is designed to give secondary teachers an overview of the exhibition *Fiona Foley: Forbidden*. This presentation is the artist's most substantial exhibition to date, and represents an institutional partnership between the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney and The University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane. It will be presented on the MCA's Level 4 galleries from 12 November 2009 until 31 January 2010, and at UQ Art Museum from 19 February to 2 May 2010. It provides teachers with a comprehensive introduction to the artist and her work, and includes focus questions for critical analysis and practical ideas for class-based art making.

A glossary and list of references are included to enable further research into Foley's artistic development. Words in **bold** can be found in the glossary at the end of the resource.

Fiona Foley - Biography

Fiona Foley was born in Maryborough, Queensland, in 1964 and grew up in Hervey Bay and Sydney. Foley obtained a Certificate of Arts at East Sydney Technical College in 1983. In 1986 she received a Bachelor of Visual Arts from the Sydney College of the Arts, and 1987 a Diploma of Education at the University of Sydney.

In 1987 she co-founded the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative in Sydney, along with fellow urban-based artists Avril Quail, Michael Riley, Tracey Moffatt, Fernanda Martins, Jeffery Samuels and Raymond Meeks. She is currently Adjunct Professor at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, Brisbane.

Foley has an exhibition history of over twenty years. Her work has been shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions both in Australia and overseas. During 2004 Fiona undertook international exhibitions and residencies in New York and Ireland. In 2005 she was invited to create a new work for the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, Norwich, United Kingdom. In 2006 Foley held a solo exhibition at October Gallery, London, entitled *Strange Fruit*. She was also invited to participate in *Global Feminisms*, the inaugural exhibition at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Centre for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, New York, in 2007.

Her commissioned public art can be found in major cultural sites in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra and Brisbane. She is represented in a number of public and private collections nationally and internationally.

Overview of the Exhibition

'We can't keep placing Aboriginal art within romantic notions of the primitive, traditional or urban. These categories are no longer true or valid definitions.'¹
Fiona Foley.

Fiona Foley is one of the most important and challenging artists working in Australia today. Her diverse artistic practice includes painting, sculpture, installation, photography, pastels on paper, printmaking and video. She is well known for her public art commissions situated in major cultural sites in Melbourne, Sydney, Canberra and Brisbane.

Foley is a distinguished figure in the art world, making regular appearances as a public speaker, writer and curator. She has also developed an international profile, her work having been exhibited in the United Kingdom and the Americas. *Fiona Foley: Forbidden* is the first major solo exhibition of Foley's art. The exhibition showcases works in a range of media drawn from throughout her career.

Fiona Foley is an artist who is wary of labels, and her work transcends easy categorisation. Her body of work has the rare distinction of being profoundly political, but she is not only a political artist. An artist who produces work of great beauty and presence, her practice entails a profound commitment to the history of Aboriginal people and to exposing racism in both historical and contemporary culture. She claims the right to practice across institutional categories, refusing the limiting and disempowering tendencies of such distinctions.

Fiona's art brings to public consciousness the systemic violence of a colonial past toward Aboriginal nations, particularly in Queensland. Her artistic practice not only seeks to restore Aboriginal people to history but also critiques prevailing cultural assumptions about identity and belonging. She is an artist of great contemporary relevance, and as Louise Martin-Chew argues in the exhibition catalogue, her work helps us to 'make sense of the dysfunction in current events', whether they be the 2005 race riots in Cronulla, or the colonial legacies of disadvantage and lower life expectancy which continue to affect Aboriginal people to this day.²

1. Fiona Foley interviewed by Catriona Moore in Catriona Moore ed., *Dissonance: Feminism and the Arts 1970-1990*, St Leonards NSW, Allen and Unwin/Artspace, 1994, p.210.

2. Louise Martin-Chew, 'The guerilla operative in Fiona Foley's public art', *Fiona Foley: Forbidden*, MCA/UQ Art Museum 2009, p.94

In an artistic practice that bears witness to culture past and present, Fiona Foley is also part historian and part **anthropologist**. She produces work that is variously unflinching, witty, and possessed of quiet beauty. Whether in her paintings, photography or installations, Foley's characteristic approach is to create particular symbols or motifs that become vehicles for complex ideas. This technique is one that Benjamin Genocchio refers to as 'symbolic abstraction'.³



Thinking about it

Structural Frame

1. Research Fiona Foley's paintings. What symbols does she use to refer to Fraser Island and the Badtjala people?
2. What do you think Benjamin Genocchio means by the term 'symbolic abstraction'? Would you describe Fiona Foley's early pastel and painted work as abstract and why?

Conceptual Framework

3. Research the history of the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative, established in Sydney in the 1980s. Construct a timeline that chronicles the work of these artists, and the significant political and historical events that were taking place at the time.

3. Benjamin Genocchio, *Fiona Foley: Solitaire*, Annandale NSW: Piper Press, 2001, p.34.

1. History and Memory:

She speaks to the persistence of memory, to the burden of history. For her, time does not heal all wounds...⁴

History is intrinsic to Fiona Foley's art. On the one hand her art pays tribute to Aboriginal people and their prior occupation of the land. On the other it references colonial history and contemporary culture. Her art testifies to the racism inherent in our culture, challenging the public to understand the extent of the violence and injustice experienced by Australian Aboriginal people during our colonial past. Dealing with the difficult themes of dispossession, racial attitudes and frontier violence, Foley uses beauty as a lure to invoke forgotten acts of brutality. Her art educates and raises consciousness at the same time as it mourns our collective history.

In her work, Fiona Foley explores the ongoing vitality of the culture of her people, the **Badtjala** of Fraser Island. Foley's art integrates personal experience and the collective history of her forebears. Indeed Foley regards herself as both 'international artist and as custodian of her Badtjala heritage'.⁵

History of Fraser Island

The island of **K'gari** or **Thoorgine**, as it was known by its inhabitants, came to the attention of colonial Queenslanders with the ship wreck there in 1836 of the *Stirling Castle*. The wife of the ship's captain, **Eliza Fraser**, survived and subsequently lived in captivity for six months with the Aboriginal inhabitants. The island was (re)named in her husband's memory. The Badtjala people were subjugated to many colonial rules, acts of physical violence, introduced diseases and starvation, as were other Aboriginal peoples during the 19th Century; they were often massacred or **forcibly removed** from their ancestral land. Opened in 1897, the Fraser Island Aboriginal Reserve closed soon after, in 1904. Many Badtjala people were sent to mainland Queensland, to missions in Caboolture (north of Brisbane) and Yarrabah (outside of Cairns). Historians have noted the 20-year Badtjala resistance against colonial settlement. Raymond Evans says they used 'Fraser Island as a natural fortress from which to mount their persistent guerilla raids'.⁶

At art school Foley realised the necessity of making art that drew on her own cultural heritage, even if the totality of a traditional Badtjala society was now dismantled. Because little was recorded prior to the mission closing in 1904, many years later traditional Badtjala stories were published in *The Legends of Moonie Jarl* by her Great Uncle Wilfie and Great Auntie Olga.

4. Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game*, quoted in Louise Martin-Chew, 'The guerilla operative in Fiona Foley's public art', *Fiona Foley: Forbidden*, MCA/UQ Art Museum, 2009, p.98.

5. Djon Mundine, 'Fiona Foley', *The Eye of the Storm: Eight Contemporary Indigenous Artists*, NGA/MCA, 1997, p.65.

6. Raymond Evans, *Fighting Words*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1999, pp.111-112.

Employing an approach that has been described as ‘evidentiary aesthetics’⁸, Foley has developed a practice that exemplifies aspects of the culture of her forebears in a strikingly spare aesthetic, by building into her artworks elements collected from or representing Fraser Island and Hervey Bay. Artworks such as the painting *Dugong Bone VII* (2001) as well as the cast aluminium sculptural work *Nine Mangrove Pods* (2000) reveal an intimate knowledge of Fraser Island: its landforms, weather, flora and fauna.⁹ More than mementoes, these details reveal how Foley’s art explores her sense of identity through evidence of her forebears. She creates a personal iconography with which she imbues individual artworks.¹⁰ And at the same time her whole body of work represents one continuing strand of Badtjala culture.

Colonisation

A number of works recall specific events in the colonial history of Australia, including one completed whilst still at art school, *Annihilation of the blacks* (1986). A chilling sculptural installation it refers to a massacre of a number of Badtjala people that took place near Maryborough, along the Suan River in Queensland in 1861.



Nine Mangrove Pods

2000

cast aluminium, edition of 12
9 pieces, each 60 x 3 x 10 cm (irreg.)

8. Julie Ewington, *Pir'ri-Mangrove*, exhibition catalogue, Queensland Art Gallery, 2001, p.7.

9. Benjamin Genocchio, op cit.

10. Jeanette Hoorn, 'Black Cockatoo', *Art and Australia* vol.39, no.4, June-August 2002



Dugong Bone VII

2001
oil on canvas
150 x 112 cm



Annihilation of the Blacks

1986

wood, synthetic polymer paint, feathers, string

278 x 300 x 60 cm

Collection National Museum of Australia, Canberra

Image courtesy National Museum of Australia,

Canberra © the artist

Photograph: George Serras, National Museum of Australia

Land Deal (1995)

Land Deal is an installation consisting partly of a large spiral of flour on the museum floor. Adjacent to this on the wall is a series of items: a grey blanket, knives, tomahawks, hand mirrors, bead, scissors, seven types of object in all. *Land Deal* originally featured in the National Gallery of Australia exhibition, *The Eye of the Storm*, which also travelled to New Delhi in 1996. It was presented at the MCA in early 1997.

The work refers to one of the few historical occasions in which a colonial official attempted to barter goods for land with the Aboriginal custodians. This particular instance was John Batman's attempt at negotiation prior to the founding of Melbourne. Batman wrote in his journal of the agreement reached with the locals to exchange 600,000 acres of land for: 'blankets, knives, looking glasses, tomahawks, beads, scissors, flour, etc, etc'.¹¹

A text panel which forms part of the work, references Batman's documentation of this exchange in his diary and reads:

Land deal: After a full explanation of what my object was, I purchased two large tracts of land from them – About 600,000 acres, more or less – and delivered over to them the blankets, knives, looking-glasses, tomahawks, beads, scissors, flour, etc., as payment for the land and also agreed to give them a tribute, or rent, yearly.

John Batman¹²

The installation exhibits a range of objects similar to those proffered, underlining the absurd inequality of the terms of exchange. The choice of flour for the work is symbolic in a number of ways: firstly of the loss of lifestyle and health which were the consequence of white settlement for Aboriginal people, and also by invoking the genocidal colonial practice of poisoning the flour given to Aboriginal people. In her catalogue essay, Rachel Kent refers to the symbolism referring to these histories as hovering 'beneath its surface, linking economies of exchange with those of destruction and death.'¹³

Foley also sees the spiral shape as a universal archetype, and refers to the African **Fante** flag as an example.¹⁴

11. Stuart Koop, 'Fiona Foley: Bare Bones', *Art Asia Pacific*, Issue 22, 1999, p.41.

12. Cited on <http://cs.nga.gov.au/Detail.cfm?IRN=7069>, accessed 28th October 2009

13. Rachel Kent, 'Invisible Histories' *Fiona Foley: Forbidden*, MCA / UQ Art Museum, 2009. p.69.

14. Avril Quail, 'Laced flour and tin boxes: The art of Fiona Foley' in *World of Dreamings*, National Gallery of Australia, 2000.



Land Deal

1995

installation view, Savode Gallery, Brisbane, 1995

mixed media, flour, found objects, text

dimensions variable

Collection National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Image courtesy the artist and National Gallery of Australia,
Canberra © the artist



Thinking about it

Cultural Frame

1. In the work of Fiona Foley, land is central as the site for exchange, corruption and betrayal. Examine the role of land in Foley's body of work and explore the various meanings she attributes to these political sites. Use specific examples to support your response.

2. Research the work of other artists who contest colonial history. You might look at Australian artists like Gordon Bennett or international artists, such as Yinka Shonibare.

Conceptual Framework

3. Investigate the role the physical context plays in Foley's work. In reference to her public installations, examine the artist's intentions in situating her work in particular environments.

4. Rachel Kent notes that through both *Land Deal* and *Lie of the Land*, 'Fiona Foley speaks to her audience, placing history squarely at their feet'.¹⁵ What does Kent mean by this statement? Examine the relationship between the artwork and the audience and discuss how the artist has used this technique to add meaning to the work.

15. Rachel Kent, 'Invisible Histories', *Fiona Foley: Forbidden*, MCA /UQ Art Museum, 2009, p.70

Lie of the Land (1997).

Lie of the Land (1997) is a public installation that was commissioned by the Melbourne City Council and was installed as a temporary work during the course of the National Reconciliation Convention. It too recalls John Batman's founding of Melbourne and the deal he attempted to strike with Aboriginal custodians of the land in question. Foley placed a series of huge sandstone blocks in front of the Melbourne Town Hall, each etched with the name of the goods identified in exchange for the land.

The context of the work forms part of its power and presence, situated as it was in front of the Melbourne City Council, a politically ironic location. In this arresting work, the stone tablets with their rough hewn sides and smooth front surface resemble giant headstones.¹⁶ These seem to testify to the damning history lying concealed beneath the grandeur of the historic public architecture.

Dispersed (2008) is an installation of giant letters made from charred laminated wood and aluminium, one D pitted with .303 inch calibre bullets. A text work, it provides a physical inscription of its theme: the way in which dispossession of Aboriginal people was achieved by violent and frequently fatal means, invariably papered over by the use of euphemistic terms used in official reports to government.¹⁷

16. Chris Healy 'Fiona Foley. Silent Witness?' <http://www.anu.edu.au/hrc/research/WtoS/Healy.pdf> accessed 4 November, 2009

17. See Fiona Nicoll's excellent discussion of this theme in the exhibition catalogue: 'No Substitute: Political art against the opiate of the colonizing euphemism'



Lie of the Land

1997

This page and previous:
installation view, Melbourne Town Hall, Melbourne
engraved sandstone
300 x 100 x 50 cm



Dispersed

2008

charred laminated wood, aluminium, .303 inch calibre
bullets, edition of 3
9 parts, each 52 x 32 x 25 cm

2. Politics and Identity

‘No one teaches the methodology toward becoming a political artist, even at art school. However, as my career developed it was a label that others used increasingly to describe the art that I make. Personally, I prefer the term subversive.’¹⁸ Fiona Foley

Visibility

There is a haunting play of presence and absence in Fiona Foley’s art. The political import of her work may not only be found in its subject matter but also in its physical context. Her public artworks bear witness to the prior Aboriginal occupation of place, the sandstone blocks in *Lie of the Land* (1997) keeping watch on the land and its current configuration – at once a testimony of social injustice as well as a political intervention.

Witnessing to Silence (2004) is a sculptural work that was commissioned for the new Brisbane Magistrate’s Court and installed in 2004. The installation consists of a water feature of cast bronze lotus lilies, stainless steel columns embedded with ash in laminated glass, and etched place names in granite pavers. During the planning phases Foley intimated that the work referred to Australian bush fires and floods. Once the work was in place, however, she revealed to *The Australian* that this piece was actually a memorial to the many massacres of Aboriginal people which had taken place, during the colonial settlement and expansion of Queensland in the early 19th Century.

A trenchant critic of colonial policies and practices, Foley employs a number of artistic strategies to convey her political themes. *Witnessing to Silence* as a public installation acts as a memorial to those massacred in the state of Queensland. Remnants of cultural practice are also suggested through the use of symbols. The element of fire and water belie the common practice of covering up the evidence by getting rid of the bodies. Other works exhibit alternative artistic strategies. These include inverted racism; the referencing of historical events through form or through the use of text; the insertion of her own image into the picture frame, and finally irony and humour.

18. Fiona Foley, ‘On the Power and Beauty of Political Art’, *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 209, May 2008, p.22.



Witnessing to Silence

2004

This page and over page:
installation view, Brisbane Magistrates Court,
Brisbane, 2004

lotus stems: cast bronze, etched pavers
180 x 140 cm diameter

water feature: stainless steel, laminated glass
5 pillars, 210–350 x 25 x 25 cm

Images courtesy the artist and Urban Art Projects,
Brisbane. Photograph over page, bottom left:
Melanie Cook © the artist

Inverting racism

Fiona Foley is interested in reversing ideas of race, identity, and history. In the series *Signpost* (2006) and *HHH* (2004) we see examples of Foley's ironic and humorous inverting of racism. *Signpost 2* (2006) comprises a photograph taken on one of the pristine beaches of Fraser Island with the confronting text reading 'white trash' marked out in the sand with 'op shop' clothes. Drawn as if to be seen from afar, or from the air, it is a comment on a poor white underclass, prevalent, often seen and yet not often spoken about in regional Australian towns.

HHH (2004) is a confronting series of photographic works featuring images of groups or individuals wearing costumes that invoke the dress of the KKK or **Ku Klux Klan**. *HHH* stands for Hedonistic Honky Haters, supposedly a cult group in contemporary America, 'honky' being a slang term for 'white'. The KKK was an infamous white **vigilante** society of the American deep south which, for much of the 20th Century, promoted racism under cover of anonymity. It was responsible for the murder of a great number of African-American people. An image from *HHH* was included in the exhibition *Global Feminisms* at the Brooklyn Museum in the USA in 2007.



Thinking about it

Structural Frame

1. Investigate the significance of text in Foley's work. Cite specific artworks as examples in your response.

Cultural Frame

1. What are the connotations of the phrase 'white trash'? Why do you think Foley has used this phrase in her work?
2. Identify and discuss the ways in which Foley uses humour in *HHH* to convey the political subject matter.
3. What does 'inverting' mean? How is Foley inverting racism in both the *Signpost* series and *HHH*?
4. Research the cultural and historical context of the KKK. Read *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, or *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. How have race relations been explored in these texts? How does Foley investigate these ideas in the *HHH* series?

Postmodern Frame

1. In what ways has Foley used postmodern techniques in her *HHH* series? Explore the layers of **postcolonial** meaning present in this body of work.

Artist's Practice

1. Why do you think Fiona Foley avoids being characterised as a 'political artist' or an 'urban artist'? Why she is suspicious of such labels?



Signpost 1

2006
ultrachrome print on paper, edition of 15
100 x 100 cm
Photograph: Jo Anne Driessens



Signpost 2

2006
ultrachrome print on paper, edition of 15
100 x 100 cm
Photograph: Jo Anne Driessens



HHH

2004
HHH #1 2004
76 x 101 cm
ultrachrome print on paper, edition of 15
Photographs: Dennis Cowley

Representation and colonial sexuality

Black Velvet (1996) and *Stud Gins* (2003) are two installations in the exhibition which combine the symbolic found object, the crafted object and/or text to explore colonialism and inter-racial sexual relations. The works refer to the way colonial sexual practices promoted the dehumanisation of Aboriginal women along with their sexual objectification. In discussion about her work, Foley has cited Coco Fusco's claim that 'women of colour' are invisible, and refers to the historic tendency to see Aboriginal women as sexual objects but not as marriageable people.¹⁹

Black Velvet comprises a series of cotton dilly bags hung on the museum wall, each with an elliptical red and black motif stitched in cotton appliqué. The symbol refers to female genitalia, and the title recalls the sexual term that white men used during the early colonial period to refer to Aboriginal women collectively. The work offsets the utility of the traditional dilly bags, used by Aboriginal women to carry food when hunting and collecting, with the racist reductionism of the title.

Stud Gins, again utilising blankets, also refers to colonial sexual and social practices, with each blanket displaying a word [Aboriginal; Women; Property; Defiled; Ravished; Shared; Discarded]. The title invokes the euphemisms with which black/white sexual relations were described, indicative of the ways in which colonial power relations were reinforced through everyday vernacular.²⁰



Thinking about it

Structural Frame

1. Analyse the installation *Stud Gins*. What is the significance of using blankets in this work?
2. Fiona Foley often uses repetition and text in her work to communicate her ideas. Discuss how text has been used in *Stud Gins*, and examine the intention of the artist.

Postmodern Frame

1. In what ways has Foley explored the subject of sexual politics through a **postcolonial** lens?

Cultural Frame

1. The term 'gin' was a derogatory term used to describe Aboriginal women by non-Aboriginal people during the last century. Why do you think Foley is referencing this language in her work? What might she be suggesting about race relations in Australia today?

19. Louise Martin-Chew, 'Fiona Foley: Sea of Love' *Eyeline*, no. 66, p 57.

20. Fiona Foley, 'On the Power and Beauty of Political Art', op cit.



Black Velvet

1996

cotton fabric with cotton applique

9 bags, each 99 x 20 cm

Collection Queensland Art Gallery, purchased 2001,
Queensland Art Gallery Foundation Grant

Image courtesy the artist and Queensland Art Gallery,
Brisbane © the artist



Stud Gins

2003

installation view, Casula Powerhouse, 2006,
Massacre Site (2006) visible in the foreground
silkscreen-printed text on blankets

7 blankets, each 190 x 148 cm (irreg.), overall
dimensions variable

Performance and ethnography

There is another type of presence at play, that of the artist herself, in several of Foley's photographic series from the mid-1990s. Performance and role-play by artists is a recurrent artistic strategy in contemporary art. Cindy Sherman is perhaps the best known exponent of this practice. Australian artists Tracey Moffatt and Julie Rrap also frequently insert themselves into the frame of their work, to different ends.

By posing in her photographic work and staging different ethnic identities, Foley employs what Stuart Koop calls a 'strategic, situational shifting of identity'.²¹ The effect of this is to unsettle assumptions and overturn expectations about collective and historical identity in a world of geo-politics and population movement.

In *Badtjala Woman* (1994), *Native Blood* (1994) and *Modern Nomad* (1994) Foley recreates and re-stages pre-existing 19th century archival photographs. Old photographs such as these were **ethnographic** records, designed to be kept in museums, of peoples whose population at the time was in significant decline. Such images could also be found in an entirely different social context, in covert circulation due to their perceived eroticism, given that pictures of naked white women were regarded as pornography.²² Such photographs fell into the more general category of '**orientalist**' representation: that is, the Western tendency to create and regard representations of Eastern or first world people as the exotic and desirable 'other'.

In *Badtjala Woman*, photographed by Greg Weight, Foley reproduces an anonymous studio photograph of an unknown woman, entitled, 'Fraser Island woman' (the original is held in the John Oxley Library in Brisbane).²³ In what Foley calls a 're-enactment'²⁴, she poses as the unknown woman, bare-breasted, in traditional dress.

In the exhibition catalogue, Fiona Nicoll draws attention to the political nature of this artistic self-substitution. By putting herself in the frame - an independent forthright artist - Foley challenges the problematic assumptions about race and identity underlying the field of **ethnography**. She questions the ways anthropology and ethnography can make curiosities of people and cultures, situating them as passive objects of study. These sorts of assumptions can then make it acceptable for Aboriginal remains to be kept for 'scientific study'.

21. Stuart Koop, 'Your Place or Mine: Fiona Foley/Simryn Gill', Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2002, p.28.

22. Michele Helmrich, 'Looking at You Looking at Me: Performance and ethnography in Fiona Foley's Photographs', *Fiona Foley: Forbidden*, MCA/UQ Art Museum, 2009, p34

23. Stuart Koop, 'The Wrong Head on the Right Body', *Your Place or Mine: Fiona Foley/Simryn Gill*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2002, p.26.

24. Michele Helmrich, 'Looking at You Looking at Me: Performance and ethnography in Fiona Foley's Photographs', *Fiona Foley: Forbidden*, MCA/UQ Art Museum, 2009, p34



Native Blood

1994

type C photograph, edition of 14

50 x 40 cm

Photograph: Sandy Edwards

The practice of restaging older photographs is an immediate way of bridging the past and the present, and introducing the concepts of history and memory. It also brings into focus the issues of reception and the audience: who is looking at the shots and how do we 'read' images today. This may differ from the way people understood such images in the past. Shaun Wilson talks of the 'imbeddedness of memory in the copied image' and refers to the practice as a 'cultural remix', that is, a way of linking historical representation with contemporary cultural issues.²⁵

The work *Native Blood* (1994) is another instance of cultural remix. With a nod to Manet's *Olympia* (1863), Foley documents herself in traditional dress reclining on the floor.²⁶ Taking the place of the white woman in the original painting, she too wears shoes but in Foley's case they are contemporary shoes in the colours of the Aboriginal flag. The work expresses a complex interplay between ethnography, art history and Aboriginal politics, mediated by the image of a contemporary artist.



Thinking about it

Postmodern Frame

1. Identify some of the postmodern techniques Foley has used in *Native Blood*. What patterns of authority does she aim to challenge in this series of work?

Cultural Frame

1. How does Foley reference the ideas of 'orientalism' in this work? What is meant by the notion of the 'other'?

2. Look at Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863) and *Native Blood* (1994). Compare and contrast both works, paying close attention to representations of gender, race and class.



Making It

1. Design a newspaper page featuring one story of Fiona Foley's. How would you report the event? What images would you use to illustrate the story? How would you represent the various antagonist and protagonist characters?

Collect a range of media stories about one issue as represented by different media outlets. How can truth be distorted, misrepresented or biased? Record your findings in your Visual Arts Process Diary (VAPD).

2. Using a contemporary image of yourself use colour to recreate the image as though it was 100 years old.

You might use Sepia and vignette as tools to create the illusion.

Use this image as the basis for a piece of writing. Create a story surrounding this image.

25. Shaun Wilson, 'Remixing Memory: The copied image in Australian Photography', Photofile, no. pp 34-37.

26. Michele Helmrich, 'Looking at You Looking at Me: Performance and ethnography in Fiona Foley's Photographs' op cit, p34.

Race Relations

Opium (2008) and *Bliss* (2006) form part of a body of work developed by Foley around the history of opium in colonial Queensland. Opium, an addictive narcotic extracted from the bulb of the opium poppy, was widely available in Queensland in the 19th century, and was smoked or ingested mainly in opium dens. Both Chinese Australian's and white settlers profited from its importation and distribution, and the government itself derived revenue from the sale of licenses. The addiction of Aboriginal people to opium meant they were increasingly co-opted and exploited as **indentured labour**, and employers were known to distribute opium to workers to sedate their workforce and manipulate them into undertaking menial labour.

Opium – and other addictive substances, such as tobacco – was used as a controlling mechanism, to ensure a compliant work force²⁷. As Rosalind Kidd says, '...local groups were seduced by white men "of position and reputation" who used opium to snare servile workers and submissive sexual partners'²⁸. Kidd also states: 'For many employers narcotic dependency was a far cheaper means of keeping a regular Aboriginal workforce. It was a common practice to entice men and women with bribes of tobacco, adulterated liquor or opium dregs.'²⁹

Official concern about addiction and its effects on the Aboriginal community led to the drafting of legislation to address the problems. The 'Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act' was passed in 1897, and this is the document that has influenced Foley in the production of this particular body of work. The Act effectively enabled the Queensland government to strictly regulate and manage every aspect of the lives of Queensland Aboriginal people. Consisting of thirty-three provisions, the Act outlines the extent of the control exercised over people who could also be legally segregated on reserves, but were unable to work or move about without obtaining a permit.

In a move reminiscent of some of her earlier works in pastel on paper, where she celebrates the flora and fauna of Fraser Island, in *Opium* (2008) Foley has makes the opium poppy the visual basis for a series of **etchings** on paper inspired by the history of opium use in Queensland.

In *Opium* (2008), the title of each print contains a single word, which read in sequence are, 'Queensland', 'Government', 'Aboriginal', 'Indentured', 'Labour', 'Shackled'. Five of the prints consist of depictions of one or more poppies against a rust red background, reminiscent of the colour of dried blood. The second consists of the word 'government' in red, as if stamped officially, surrounded by an ominous spray of red dots. By means of these few symbolic images, Foley is able to allude to the collusion between employers,

27. Michele Helmrich, email correspondence, 20th November 2009.

28. Rosalind Kidd, *The Way We Civilize*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia 1999, p.44

29. Op cit p.34

those involved with the supply of drugs and the government that produced a helplessly dependent and servile workforce.

These prints form part of a larger body of work Fiona has made around the theme of opium and the 1897 Act, and includes the site-specific work, *Black Opium* (2006) in the Queensland State Library. Suspended from the ceiling, it is made from 777 cast aluminium poppies clustered in the shape of an infinity symbol.



The DVD *Bliss* (2006) is likewise part of this thematic. A study of cultivated poppies, the landscape is filmed at different depths of field; it is interspersed with quotes from Rosalind Kidd's book *The Way We Civilise* (1997). It is a meditative work, one which at first glance visually belies the darkness of the themes it invokes and the loaded symbolism of the Opium poppy.

Thinking about it

Cultural Frame

1. Given Foley's interest in making subversive comments through her subject matter, and her ability to use beauty as a lure, why might she have chosen to create a body of work on the opium poppy?

Structural Frame

1. The work on exhibition in *Fiona Foley: Forbidden* documents the artist's extensive practice across a diverse range of media. Her recent body of work investigating opium includes etchings, video and sculpture. Examine the choices the artist has made in using these materials to explore her chosen subject matter.



Conceptual Framework

1. How does this series of work relate to the other artworks in this exhibition? What themes is Fiona Foley investigating in this body of work?

Making It

1. Research the plant genus "digitalis". What is the plant used for in medicinal practice? Using scratch foam or lino create a relief print based on the "digitalis" plant. Incorporate into your design the pharmaceutical version of the plant as well as its natural form.

In your diary record similarities between your work and the investigation of the poppy by Fiona Foley.



Opium

2008
 etchings on paper, edition of 20
 29 x 20 cm
 Printer: Michael Kempson

Left to right, top to bottom: *Opium#1-Queensland*,
Opium#2-Government, *Opium#3-Aboriginal*, *Opium#4-*
Indentured, *Opium#5-Labour*, *Opium#6-Shackled*
 Opposite: *Opium#5-Labour* (detail)



Bliss

(video stills, details) 2006

DVD, edition of 100

11 minutes

Videography: Troy Melville, Move Media

Cultural Remix

The photographic series *Nulla 4 eva* (2009) acts in part as a companion piece to the Opium series. Here Foley revisits themes of interracial engagement or tension in a series of images in which she constructs a contemporary **tableau** of figures in staged shots. Such images recall the colonial practice of studio photography. The imagined scenario for Foley, though, is a cultural remix, where she has created a contemporary inter-ethnic social grouping. The series can be seen as a riposte to colonial anxieties about ‘a nightmare of inter-racial sexual and social relations’.³⁰

Nulla 4 eva #1 is a shot of young people dressed in a mix of contemporary and traditional Chinese clothing, posed in front of a building that is reminiscent of a Queensland house. The architecture in this image makes reference to oriental influences, a result of the large number of Chinese immigrants in Queensland in the late 1800’s. The second image reveals the possible interior of an opium den where people from various racial backgrounds sit at a table and play mahjong or recline on a couch smoking opium. One figure, who Foley identifies as an anthropologist, sits on the couch taking notes.³¹ The inclusion of this figure is interesting, implying that this student of culture may be the symbolic link between the paternalistic anthropologist of the past, and Foley herself, given that her artistic practice involves a kind of radical ethnography where she studies contemporary culture and stages various images of cultural remix.

This impression is reinforced in the subsequent images in the series, shot in Cronulla itself, where Aussie beach stereotypes are wittily confounded. ‘Nulla’ is derived from (the Sydney suburb of) Cronulla, and like many of Sydney’s eastern beach names, it is an Aboriginal word, meaning ‘land of pink shells’^{32/33}. The series was inspired in part by the Cronulla riots of 2005, which involved clashes between young people of Anglo-Celtic background and those of Lebanese and Middle Eastern descent about beach access and ownership. Foley draws on themes of exclusion and belonging to explore ways in which the dominant culture continues to repress difference. In the remaining images, Foley provides a more contemporary take on interracial politics, focusing in on the ongoing tensions to be found in multicultural Australia as well as the continuing marginalisation of Aboriginal people.

30. Fiona Nicoll, op.cit. 2009

31. See Michelle Helmrigh, op cit 2009, p.40

32. Cited on <http://about.nsw.gov.au/view/suburb/Cronulla/>, accessed 28th October 2009

33. Djon Mundine, ‘Invisible Woman–Invisible People’, *Fiona Foley: Nulla 4 eva*, Richmond: Niagara Publishing, 2009, p.4.



Thinking about it

Structural Frame

1. Foley has employed a tableau technique in constructing the subject matter in her *Nulla 4 eva* series. Find examples of other artists who use tableau. Why do you think she has employed this technique and to what effect?
2. Research the events surrounding the 2005 Cronulla riots. Use the internet to search for press and related articles. Who would you include in a tableau if you were reconstructing these events?

Cultural Frame

1. Why do you think the artist has continued the theme relating to opium in the series *Nulla 4 eva*?



Writing about it

1. Imagine you are the anthropologist in *Nulla 4 eva #1*, what would you be writing down at the moment captured here? Construct your response as a monologue and stage a reading in class.



Nulla 4 eva

2009

ultrachrome prints on Hahnemühle paper, edition of 15

Photographs: Carl Warner

Nulla 4 eva III 2009

80 x 120 cm

Nulla 4 eva IV 2009

Glossary

Anthropology: the study of the culture and development of humankind

Badtjala: the language group of the Aboriginal people of Fraser Island and the Hervey Bay region

Eliza Fraser: A Scottish woman who was shipwrecked off the Queensland coast and lived with the Aboriginal people on Fraser Island until found by escaped convict John Graham

Ethnography: a branch of anthropology concerned with the scientific study of racial and cultural difference

Etching: the process of making a design on a metal plate by means of acid. The print taken from the plate

Fante: one of the first self-rule movements in Africa, in the region which is now Ghana.

Forcibly removed: unwilling absence from a homeland or place of residence

Indigeneity: the concept of being native to a place

K'gari: Badtjala name for Fraser Island

Ku Klux Klan: a race hate organisation of the USA, whose members dressed in white robes, masks and conical hats

Indentured labour: an employment practice that developed after the abolition of slavery but which still maintained the colonial practice of shipping labourers from poorer countries to colonial powers. Such workers were under contract and were paid but were poorly treated

Midden: ancient collection of shellfish and other debris from Aboriginal feasting site; the Aboriginal equivalent of an archeological dig

museological: pertaining to the science of museums

Orientalism: depictions of the East by Western artists and writers

Postcolonial: a set of political theories, or study, dealing with the legacy of 19th century European colonial rule, the impact of this rule on the landscape and Indigenous peoples, and the dilemmas of developing a national identity in the wake of colonial rule

Tableau (plural: tableaux): a still scene arranged in painting, photography or theatre

Thoorgine: Badtjala name for Fraser Island

Vigilante: a citizen who punishes lawbreakers rather than rely on legal authorities

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