

Longer than life.

ANNE FERRAN

In 1997 I approached the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales with a request that they give me access to Rouse Hill House. I proposed to carry out a metaphorical 'x-ray' of this nineteenth-century building on the outskirts of Sydney, a family dwelling since 1813, now a repository for that family's accumulated belongings and a material record of its history.

Although the New South Wales government took over the house in 1978, family members continued to live there. Surrounded by the possessions of more than a century and a half's occupation, they went on finding new places and uses for things, inventing new arrangements and hierarchies. Consequently, while aspects of that record are easily deciphered, there are others that the observer is hard pressed to make sense of. I wanted to use the resources of photography to probe some of the more obscure aspects of the house and to penetrate the air of self-containment that seemed always to surround it.

At the time of my proposal Rouse Hill Estate (the house, garden, grounds and farm buildings) was closed to the public. That situation has changed since, but back then a monthly group tour was the full extent of its public accessibility. Trees, gates and warning signs shielded the house from curious passers-by. They in turn could not have begun to imagine the abundance and diversity of the contents. (This was a family that, for whatever reason, seems to have thrown nothing away.)

At that stage I thought there would be any number of forms of 'x-ray' I could use, all of them in some way photographic. It would help to have more than one because there was more than one kind of invisibility I wanted to probe: the layered fabric of the house itself, the result of many renovations and deteriorations; the profusion of contents, many of them not on view; and the chronicle of events, some of it on record and some of it lost to time. Instead, I spent six months working with a single technique, producing dozens of photograms in colour and black and white of the mainly nineteenth-century women's and children's clothing.

I had worked with colonial clothing before, in 1995 at Hyde Park Barracks. That project was a collaborative residency with artist Anne Brennan. Our subjects then were the nineteenth-century asylum women and immigrant girls, inhabitants of the Barracks during the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Part of their appeal to us as subjects was their invisibility, especially in the case of the asylum women. Even the official records relating to them, brief entries in registers and daybooks, were tantalisingly incomplete. The other principal source of information, the Barracks' archaeological collection, was even less forthcoming. Those dirty, matted scraps of cloth, recovered from inside the walls and floors of the building, formed a chaotic pulverised 'record' that begged (and defied) interpretation.

Among the few relatively intact items in that collection was a woman's bonnet or cap of soft cloth, made to cover the head and shoulders and shade the face. Such a cap also appeared in a few photographs of the period, worn by women in humble circumstances, servants or the inmates of one or other of the asylums. It was the most ordinary kind of head covering, hardly more than a semicircle of cloth, yet it had (for me) the most desirable quality of shifting shape with every change of position of the person wearing it. Looking at the cluster of white caps and darkened faces in one of the old photographs and the variety of shapes they made, I thought I saw a way to recall what was most absent of all, the actual physical presence of these women.

The photographs I produced showed the caps exactly as they would have looked when worn, but with black voids where the faces should have been. I made them in the style of portraits to convey the idea that these had been individual women despite the uniformity of the caps and the institutional life they led. And I made six images because in the asylum photographs the women always appeared as a group (see *Soft Caps*, 1995).

It was this work that established for me the capacity of clothing to evoke a physical human presence without in any way denying or trying to remedy the fact of its absence. (It is perhaps worth pointing out that the asylum women were absent twice over, both from the present day and from the historical record.) My work would not be an attempt at closing the gap, more an effort carefully to trace around its exact dimensions.

There's also something to say here about beginning to take pleasure in the rhythm of working inside a museum, with a museum collection, a pleasure in the amount of time it was possible to spend looking at these things, handling them, turning them around, thinking them over. The nature of this particular collection, its resistance – to put it mildly – to interpretation did nothing to diminish my interest. Instead it enhanced it. I began to develop and be conscious of developing a preference for subject matter that had not been worked on, interpreted by someone else before me. The more mute and invisible the material, the better.

Fig.2, Anne Ferran, *Soft Caps*, 1995, photograms, each 34.5 x 38 cm, Historic Houses Trust of NSW; National Gallery of Australia, reproduced courtesy of Anne Ferran



Eventually Anne Brennan and I came to feel that this time and these actions added up to what it was we were looking for, which was simply a stronger awareness of those women and some sense (tenuous but that did not matter) of what their lives were like. It was not a case of knowing more. We had a little more information about them by the end, but not much. It was rather that the hands-on experiences we ourselves were having slowly amounted to something akin to an experience of them.

It took time to arrive at that realisation and longer still to try to articulate it. History as emulation, an art historian friend called it. The phrase appealed but yet did not quite ring true. Our activities were not the ones the old women engaged in. At best they had something of the same rhythm and persistence. A change did occur in us during the process of trying to trace them, but it was of a kind not easily described or conveyed. If the metaphor is a journey, then this was a section where the way diverged. One path, the one we were aware of, ran along the surface, and one ducked underground. When they met up again something had happened, things were different, but it was impossible to say more than that.

In Rouse Hill House there is an abundance of clothing, nearly all of it stored in drawers and cupboards in the main bedroom. Most drawers are full to overflowing with dresses, bodices, skirts, petticoats, collars, cuffs, ribbons, jackets, nightdresses – the elaborately fashioned and trimmed garments of the nineteenth century. A few are in pristine condition but the majority show signs of wear. All the babies' dresses, for instance, are yellowed in a semicircle at the neck, while the women's bodices have been patched under the arms so many times that the repairs begin to look like constructions in themselves.

All the clothes have been catalogued. It was easy to imagine a curator at work in that room, examining then carefully wrapping each item in tissue before returning it to its original place in the drawer. Since that time I doubt if they have been disturbed on more than a few occasions. I liked to think that here were things which had been hidden for years and that the photogram process was about to release them briefly into the light.

Photograms are one of the earliest photographic processes (even today making a photogram is often a student's first experience of photography). My photograms were made in a room of the house that had been temporarily



lightproofed to serve as a simple darkroom/studio. There I would remove the garment from its tissue paper cocoon and lay it down on a sheet of photographic paper for a few seconds' exposure to light. Then it would be returned to its drawer and the paper taken away to be processed. In this way, over a period of six months, I made seventy to eighty images.

Every image came as a surprise. It would nearly always reveal some aspect of the garment I hadn't seen before. Details that were invisible to the eye would show up, as if there were a kind of code that passed secretly between cloth and paper. And while, in typical x-ray fashion, the light would penetrate the garment, showing both its sides, the one that seemed closer was always the underside, the side that had been in contact with the paper, turned away from the light.

Not only that – each meeting of garment and paper involved an element of chance. How the cloth brushed against the paper, where it touched the surface and where it was cushioned from it by air, how a collar was doubled over – these things determined what that image would be like. They also guaranteed that it could never be repeated. Where conventional photography can deliver many identical copies of the one image, a photogram is always unique, a one-off.

I had thought I knew about photograms but I had to begin making them in order really to understand what was involved. For instance, although the garments lie flat and still on the paper, the photogram can make them look three-dimensional, life-like, as if it has breathed air into them in the shape of a body. I was prepared for their luminosity but not for the effect the translucency would give, that it would seem like seeing through appearances, that the dissolving material could be like penetrating the veil.

I learned something new about the interdependence of process and subject. There were only certain clothes I was able to use to make an image. Anything too sheer or too thick had to be avoided. This meant no tulle or lace, nothing multi-layered, dense, or dark-coloured. It eliminated most of the men's clothing, which is relatively scarce in the collection anyway, and a lot of the more elaborate and impressive women's clothes. What it left in abundance was everyday wear – cotton undergarments, bodices, children's clothing, babies' dresses, unremarkable generic items.

This could have been a disappointment but in fact it was a plus because it gave the photography more to do. Its task became to take a worn, patched cotton garment and deliver it as something ethereal, almost numinous. And the multitude of similar bodices and nightdresses had something to say about daily life, its lived routines, that was more engaging to me than all the elaborate teagowns, hunting jackets, wedding dresses that I did not photograph.

These images part company from conventional photography in more ways than one but the one I've thought about most often is how in a photogram the object actually contacts the paper. Photograms depend on touch. Any part of an object not actually in contact with the photographic paper at the moment of exposure loses its sharpness, and with it all the detail and texture. In a photogram the cloth and the photographic paper are so close it's as if no-one could come between them. No other kind of photograph comes as near to its subject as this – so close that it seems not to have a point of view on its subject at all. As for myself as photographer, whatever part I played (like putting the bodice down in a certain way) was something I did in the dark, without knowing.

In this sense photograms are the exact opposite of conventional photography which needs distance between the subject and the camera in order to form an image. Too much closeness and the lens can't focus. Closeness emerges as blur. I've never been able to think of camera-subject distance, or subject-object distance as anything other than trouble, as ground that needs to be covered, as a gap. The gap troubles me all the more when the subject is distant in time as well. Because of this, the fact that these photograms are made by actually brushing the cloth against the paper can seem like a kind of triumph.

Hyperbolic? Perhaps. In the dark, working alone, you drift. But more mundane questions surface as well. Like, what relationship do these photos have now with the people whose clothes they once were? (This is assuming they have one at all, since the images in themselves are silent on the subject.) What kind of connection are they making with the past? Where do they stand in relation to history?

It may be that these questions are difficult to answer because they are (literally) directed into the dark. When the light penetrates the cloth it also turns all the uncovered paper around it black. With no visual reference points to anchor it, the garment floats in empty space, it could be anywhere, or nowhere. Time is affected too. It stretches, becomes elastic. The effect is to shear the object of its historical context. (This is of course the same movement that opens it to other interpretations and imaginings.)

In this respect photograms are again very different to conventional photographs, which always have a background and foreground caught up in them, are full of clues to time and place, clues that aid interpretation. With no context to secure these images, it's left up to an audience to deal with visual effects that

Fig.3, Anne Ferran, Untitled (child's jacket) (detail), 1998, photogram. 85 x 100 cm, Historic Houses Trust of NSW, reproduced courtesy of Anne Ferran



seem to have arisen of their own accord, that are visually striking but in an odd, hermetic way. What to do with the clarity of the details? The translucency? The way the little arms are raised...?

I confess I don't always know myself. I'd almost venture to say that the beauty (and maybe even the point) of some images is that they spare you the effort of finding the right words; words are dissolved in them like tiny specks of matter whirling in a pool of light. It could be that the meaning of such an image is spread all over it like the wrinkles in a piece of cloth, present in a hundred different places.

These particular photos seem to me to be in the odd position of being full of facts, but facts of a kind that don't invite or admit abstraction, much less interpretation. This would seem to disqualify them as history. A second friend said to me, after she'd seen the images, that when she thought of them afterwards she imagined pressing her face into folds of cloth, and that struck me as surprisingly relevant to a lot of things I'd been thinking about them. Part of its aptness is that it's a child's image of something that happened between her and her mother, long ago.

If these images are resonating with any cultural phenomenon then it's probably the oft-expressed (and troublesome) longing for continuity, the unbroken cord. While I was making them the phrase 'living memory' kept coming to mind. Gradually I started to hear it as an echo, or reverberation, or refrain, of the process I was involved in. These clothes were worn by people whose names we could easily forget – it takes the whole paraphernalia of a museum to remind us. Forgetting them might not matter except that it would remind us of everything else that's already been forgotten or lost.

Perhaps this matters more in a country with a history of European occupation as short as this one, a history founded on that first rupture, the coming from there to here, to a country that doesn't remember or recognise us. Even as a child the Australian history I was taught felt paper-thin, like a skin laid over old bones. When I try to reflect on these images the two things I keep coming up with are these: on one hand the obdurate barrier, like a high wall or a range of distant mountains, of short memory/thin skin; and on the other the longing to close the gap, recover the past, cross touch with sight, or lose them in one another, to press up close to things, cloth against paper, skin against skin.

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Note

The photograms were shown in an exhibition called *First Light* at Sutton Gallery, Melbourne in April 1999; and at Stills Gallery, Sydney in August 1999 in an exhibition called *Longer than Life*.