

*ANNE
FERRAN'S
BIRDS
IN
SPACE*

The past can only be created (not recreated).

Allan Kaprow, 1957¹

Over the past year Anne Ferran has worked with performers Tess de Quincey, Victoria Hunt and Linda Luke to make 'Box of Birds' (2013), a series of 47 pigment prints. The performers were deployed as mounts or supports for roughly manufactured brown, grey and blue lengths of felt reminiscent of blankets used in nineteenth and early twentieth-century sites of incarceration: asylums, prisons and hospitals. Originally exhibited at Stills Gallery, Sydney,² 38 of the works in 'Box of Birds' are titled *Chorus*; the remaining nine images are fancifully and poetically named by the artist. Works such as *Slender-throated warbler* provide a counterpoint to the more hieratic and formal qualities of *Chorus*.

The ritualistic gravity of the various poses in 'Box of Birds' underlines, in an entirely new way, some of the leitmotifs that have run through Ferran's three-decade photographic practice: the gendered mutability of the archive in history; the representation of confinement or collapse and its effects, with a particular reference to the erasure of feminine identity and the power relations that sustain such conditions. The studio lighting enhances the unusual physicality of the fabric and the live models to give the works funky echoes of Rei Kawakubo, Hélio Oiticica's *Parengolés* and the tension of Hannah Höch collages. Surprisingly, with such serious art historical backdrops, the exhibition revealed a lightness of touch and an intriguing energy – entirely appropriate given the idiomatic meaning of the title.

Four months following the exhibition, in November 2013, a new Tess de Quincey/Anne Ferran collaboration, also named *Box of Birds*, was staged for Performance Space at Carriageworks, Sydney.³ In the shifting eddies of the audience, I was struck by the different tone the performance created.

The artist claimed that her involvement was minimal, but it was clear that the original series of photographs, with Ferran as the playful/wilful auteur, provided the seeds for the later live event. Nonetheless, De Quincey took a darker path to examine some of the aforementioned Ferran tropes. The work embraced Carriageworks's

preloved industrial spaces and new shiny concrete architectural interventions to invoke a heady mélange of neo-medieval Spain or Japan, Goya, Edgar Allan Poe and Antonin Artaud. Performers were encased in Ferran's felt 'blankets' – some resembled oversized oven mitts, others deformed birds or cult members – complete with tics and screams that meticulously marked out the boundaries of body, site and space.

At times the stitched and bound forms intersected with projections of Ferran's two 2003 series '1-38' and 'INSULA', the performers' gestures repeating the tense and fearful details revealed in the earlier work, an examination of an archive of photographs of residents of Sydney's Gladesville Mental Hospital in 1948. Indeed, the new super-saturated *Box of Birds* provided resonances and associations previously unexperienced in my long engagement with Ferran's work. A fruitful collaborative outcome, it adds another layer of interpretation to an already complex and expansive practice. Evident is an artist in complete command of a visual language or terrain, carefully developed with an almost forensic methodology over the last 30 years.

The recent staging of *Box of Birds* also interestingly sets the scene for what is the artist's first comprehensive retrospective. Curated by Felicity Johnston for the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia, and the 2014 Perth International Arts Festival, 'Anne Ferran: Shadow Land' encompasses work from 1984 to the present, including video.⁴ The exhibition is also accompanied by a major publication with texts by Johnston, Susan Best and an interview with the artist by Thierry de Duve.

Ferran first came to notice in the mid-1980s with a subversive take on the postmodern taste or strategy for exhumation and restitution. In the 1986 series 'Scenes on the Death of Nature', Ferran, like some female Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden (1856–1931), posed young women in drapery to conjure an artificial past, with the camp, the carnal and the chaste coexisting in perfect stasis. History is Ferran's beastly and ever-powerful plaything, and her work examines the imperfections of this

2 'Box of Birds', Stills Gallery, Sydney, 26 June – 27 July 2013.

3 De Quincey Co., *Box of Birds*, Carriageworks, Sydney, 20–24 November 2013.

4 'Anne Ferran: Shadow Land', Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia, Perth, 8 February – 19 April 2014.

ever-contested field. Indeed, in a recent interview she stated that one of her main projects has been 'the portraiture of anonymity': the recognition and representation of individual subjectivity otherwise excluded from the purview of official records and histories.⁵

5 Quoted from an interview with the artist by Thierry de Duve, *Anne Ferran: Shadow Land*, exhibition catalogue, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, Perth, and Power Publications, Sydney, 2014.

Ferran makes art that re-populates and re-activates terrains. She enjoys long periods of research, of archival inhabitation, in order to achieve this quality of confounded historical verisimilitude and critical rupture. The late art historian Joan Kerr (1938–2004) and theorist Geoffrey Batchen are important role models for Ferran in this process. In an image from her 2000 series 'Lost to Worlds: Female House of Correction (after J. W. Beattie)', Ferran brings into consciousness an extraneous detail, a mistake in the original nineteenth-century print by J. W. Beattie (1859–1930) of what was then regarded as a picturesque tourist destination. This 'ye olde' ruin from the (very recent) uncivilised past of Tasmania (named Van Diemen's Land until 1856) was destined to be a postcard image. The enlarged, blurred and vaguely telescopic image reveals a man driving a buggy into Beattie's composition to open a series of narrative arcs to further problematise the documentary content and commercial purpose of the original. This emblematic shadow is just one in a galaxy of the anonymous.

Such a challenge to history is also evident in a number of other series, including 'Soft Caps' (1995), 'Rydalmere Vertical' (1997) and 'Lost to Worlds' (2008). The latter comprises 30 digital images printed on aluminium that echo the visual effects and precious keepsake nature of the daguerreotype. But rather than depicting people, vistas or objects, Ferran deflects our gaze to the ground, to reveal shadows and hollows that are the remains of buildings that used to be there, the only physical remains of female convicts. The shimmering surfaces confuse and make more poignant the recognition of those life stories and experiences otherwise lost.

For her 2014 retrospective in Perth, Ferran has made a small, limited-edition artist book, *Prison Library*, inviting readers to enter a previously overlooked institutional space, the now-disbanded Fremantle Prison Library (1868–1991). There are historical photographs and recent images by the art-

ist of the large room at the end of the main prison cell block, twice as high as the cells. From the extant structures, Ferran has sought out any repository that might yield information, poring over lists and photographing books that were once housed there. She notes how, unlike in prisons today, inmates under escort could choose what they read, and she admires the record-keeping skills of former prison librarian Bob Hind:

*Looking around the Library and reading the reports, I think how my father, with his habits of making-do and mending anything that could conceivably be mended, would have appreciated this place; the shelving units, metal bookends, circulation desks, display units, shelf labels and notices were all made by prisoners working under Bob Hind's direction.*⁶

Quoted from 6
Anne Ferran, *Prison Library*, 2014.

Circling the centre of *Prison Library* is a photograph of seagulls set against blue sky. Birds, as we have seen previously in Ferran's work, are symbols of freedom and imagination, and here they flag another 'lost world' that history has preferred to keep hidden from view. At present the library is not part of the official guided tour of the site, but once again through Ferran's insistent, inhabiting gaze, we are thoughtfully ushered in.

TEXT BY CRAIG JUDD