

Female factories

Interview between Diane Dunbar and Anne Ferran, Launceston,

3rd May 2000

Anne Ferran is a photographer. When we look at her work we can see that there is an association between aspects of her practice and that of a fellow printmaker making a one-off printed image. A single image which can be hand manipulated to enhance both its meaning and its visual power. Ferran's recent photographs, with their symbiotic and immediate relationship between subject and matrix, are an example of this: the results of past residencies at the Hyde Park Barracks and at Rouse Hill, both in Sydney.

Within the last twelve months however, Ferran has commenced a new photographic project which now brings her regularly to Tasmania. It is a further development from her past work and incorporates a variety of different approaches to accessing a vanishing past.

Ferran comes to document two selected sites: the Female Factory* sites at Ross (in the middle of the island) and at South Hobart.

* Female Factories were, among other things, reform institutions established for female convicts who required refuge, (particularly during pregnancy), a temporary place of work or incarceration. (for further information see Kay Daniels, *Convict women*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1998)

see where the buildings have been. It was actually seeing those two things together. They seem to be such unyielding surfaces and yet from them, you have to try and arrive at everything you're going to learn about the site by visiting it.

In other words piecing together a history of human occupation and use from evidence which is purely material?

Yes, and unyielding. Those sites come into the history of my work which is still very much to do with women and with institutions. Because it's a female institution, it's of automatic interest to me. The Female Factory was the place where convict women had their babies. The infant mortality was enormous. The thing which gave me the idea for the project was how reduced in material form the site is, and that you can isolate these things which don't seem like they're going to respond to photography, but are going to have to.

You make them conform to an aesthetic discipline which you have in mind?

I think about it in terms of a formal structure because the

Anne Ferran

SOFT CAPS, 1995

gelatin silver

photographs

each 34.5 x 38 cm

Courtesy

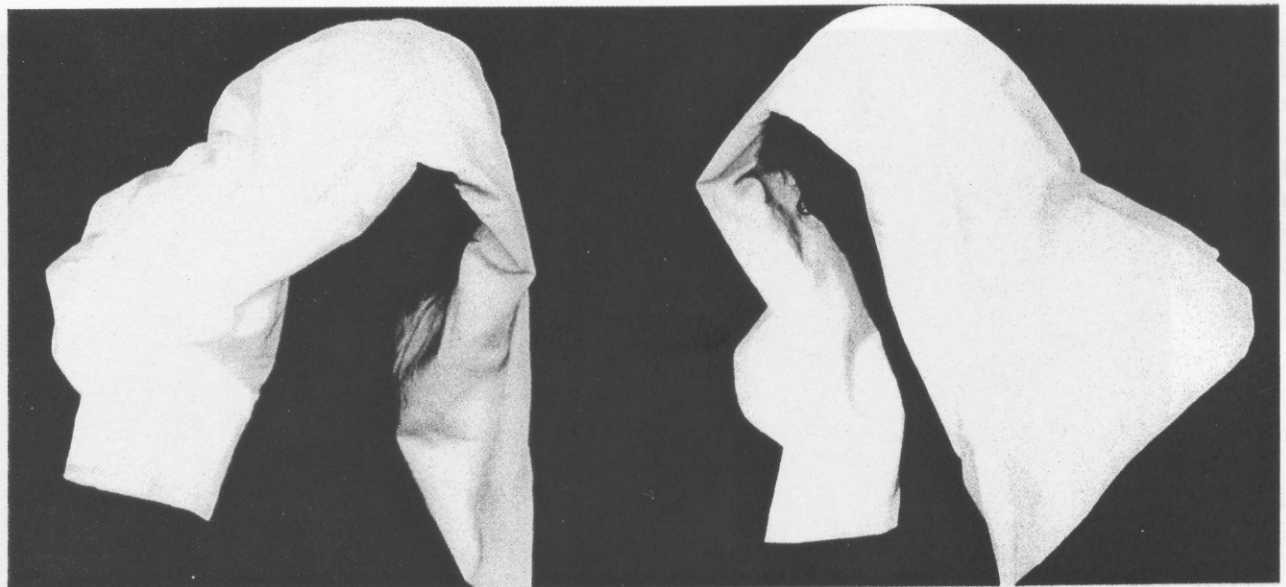
Sutton Gallery

Melbourne

and

Stills Gallery

Sydney



Perhaps a good place to start would be to ask you what led up to the body of work that you're currently in Tasmania to research?

The work that I've been doing for the last five years has to do in different ways with colonial Australian history and museum collections. More particularly, I had the idea for the project when I visited the two Female Factory sites, in the first instance, quite independently. It was only when I started to think about them together that they became a potential project. For me, the really active elements are the wall at South Hobart, the only building structure that remains there and, at Ross, the ground. There's one remnant building at the corner of the site, but everything else, every other trace of that period is in the ground. It is very uneven and there are lots of stony outcrops. You can quite clearly

fact of those sites existing and having an interesting history isn't, in itself, a starting point for me. It's interesting but it doesn't give me a way of proceeding and it was really thinking about the wall and the ground that was the key thing...

What have you made of the wall and the ground?

It's not easy. I've done what I originally thought I would do. I've spent hours photographing sections of the wall and sections of the ground. I haven't seen these photos yet. I just have rolls and rolls of film at the moment. I'm trying not to pre-empt what it is I can see. Something else will have to happen because that process alone is not enough. It is quite a problem in a way, but it's a very interesting problem. What I envisage at the moment is two large wall pieces representing both sites in which I enlarge these sections and bring them together and perhaps overlap

them. You end up seeing a very large and very detailed component of these surfaces. The idea is that they work as a kind of record, as a set of observations, but also they mean to have a metaphoric or symbolic aspect as well.

I'm also doing quite a bit of writing because I'm finding that the whole project seems to be about the different ways of accessing a vanished past. How do you actually think about these things and deal with them? I'm trying to balance a sense of the rational and the critical with an imaginative, almost passionate embrace of what you want to see or what you want to feel. It needs both.

I've also been researching the infant mortality. I'm collecting all of the entries in the Register of Deaths that refer to these babies. I may go back and actually photocopy these pages so that I have the image of the writing because there's something there that's quite useful.

I'm interested too in what's happening on the sites at the present moment: the way people use them and the way they come and go. Their presence does very much re-animate the site for the brief moment they're there. So I'm thinking now about a video element. One of the things I'm doing with these wall sections is photographing them so that when I print them they will be printed in negative. You need to know

What do you do about that?

I think I have to try and preserve that quality. It's not an easy thing to do because it fights with your need to resolve things formally. Ideally that provisional aspect of every element should be respected, if you could do it. That is always a difficult thing to do and usually you end up making a compromise in the interests of the integrated result you want to end up with.

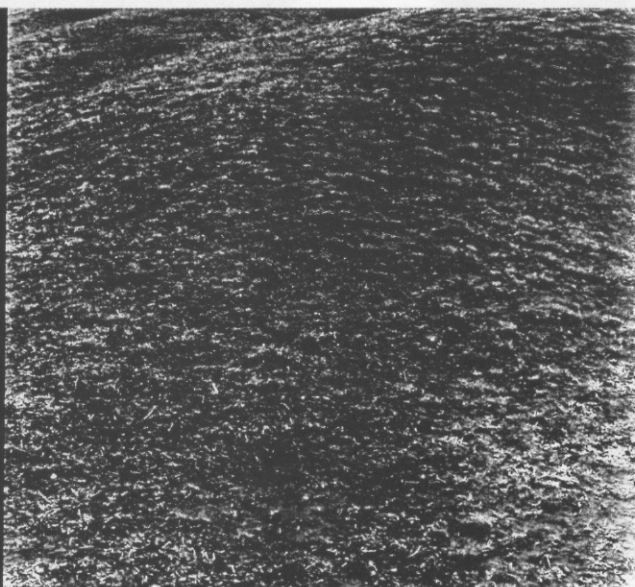
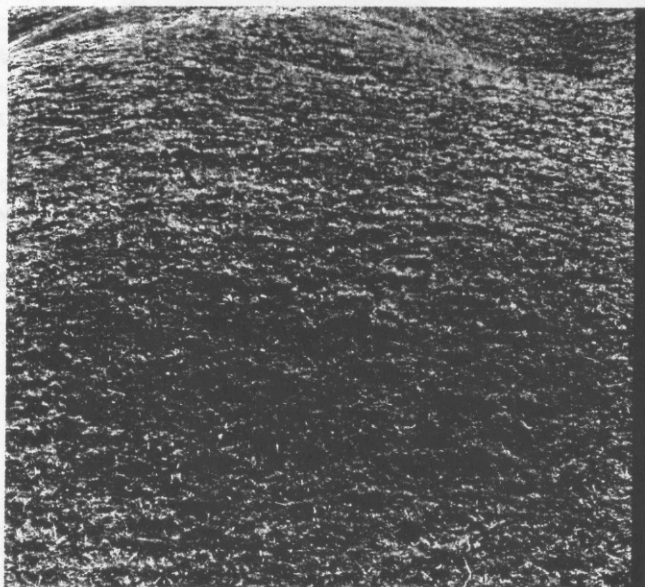
It seems to me that behind your attraction to this kind of work is a strong identification with past histories.

That's part of it, but it's not all of it. I can imagine that somebody else would have a greater sense of identification with the people than I do. The most powerful things and the hardest to ignore for me are those which separate, finally and irrevocably, one group of people, or one person from another. Infant mortality, because we lose them. They're lost from our knowledge, our remembrance. That affects me more than trying to imagine the details of their day to day lives.

Surely, within that though is an incredible poignancy?

There's no way that it can be avoided. It's the powerful poignancy of past lives and of loss.

Yes, but what I seem to have the strongest connection with is their mortality, rather than their vitality.



Anne Ferran
THE GROUND AT
ROSS — work in
progress, 2000
gelatin silver
photographs
each 100 x 100 cm

that you're looking at an actual material surface but also that you're looking at something else. That's easier to do with the ground because it already has a form but the wall does not. I can also shoot the video in negative with a digital camera. It's a way of dematerialising something. It becomes like an x-ray and loses some of its physical substance.

And in doing so takes on this beautiful aesthetic quality, detaching the viewer from its existence as an object and yet maintaining the relationship. The balance exists there between record and symbol.

Yes. Every time I try and factor in a new element I find that every single thing in itself is inadequate. There's either too little of it, it's too far removed in time or nobody knows if it really belongs there or not. Everything is either compromised or undone the moment I try to use it to shore up this whole thing.

What isn't there as opposed to what is there?

Yes. That's a constant in the work for me. It is the sense of one's own separation from them.

I think the sense of continuity with past lives is very important because it sustains us. If we thought that there was nobody who'd gone before and there was nobody who was coming after, we'd just pull the rug over our heads. It would make no sense at all. Why it is that I keep obsessively circling around this thing, where you don't make connections or you can't make connections or the connections are ruptured, I don't know. I'm just not interested in the places in the historical record where all the information is there.

Diane Dunbar
curator and writer