

Illuminating the past

A photographer has found a way to capture history that has been hidden and forgotten in overlooked spaces, writes **Kyla McFarlane**.

When photographer Anne Ferran began her artist's residency at Rouse Hill estate, a Historic Houses Trust property in New South Wales, there was no shortage of material for her to work with.

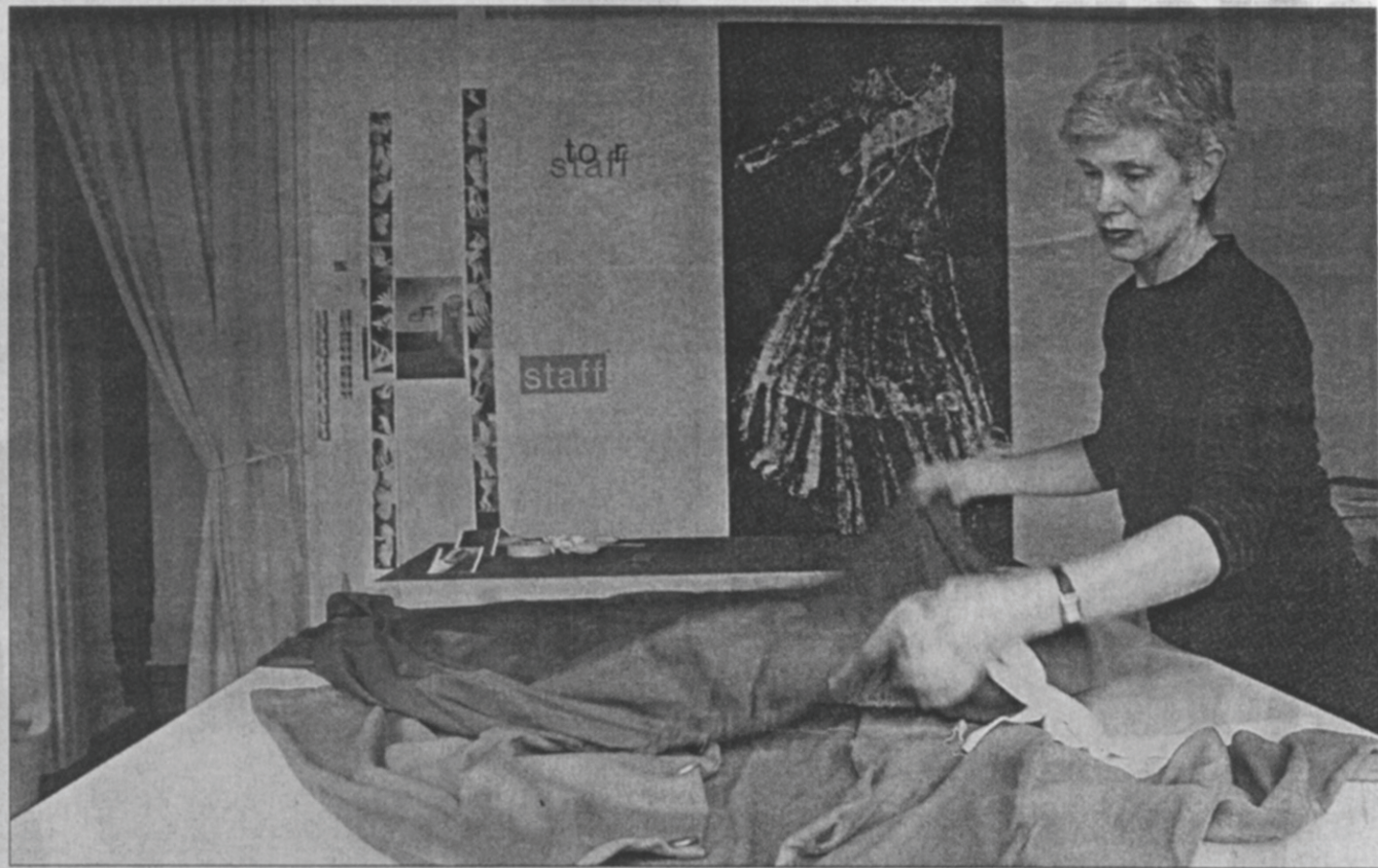
Previously owned by a family that was, she says, "very given to self-representation", the two-storey 19th-century house was packed with a range of personal items from an occupancy that spanned several generations.

In response to this abundance of material, Ferran "had this kind of fantasy about how somehow I was going to make images in the hidden spaces, like the spaces between the walls. It was all about getting behind the surface and getting into the layers".

"So I suggested to them that I would do this project and it would be about x-raying the house," she says. "At the time, I thought one of the things I would do was make photograms of the clothing, because I knew they had a lot of mainly 19th century clothing that was all folded away in these cupboards and drawers, and that was of interest to me."

"So I went off to start the project and that was all I did for six months, because it was just a wonderful thing to do. It was also the first time I'd done a major clothing photogram project."

Ferran had worked with clothing in relation to colonial sites before, in another Historic Houses Trust residency held collaboratively with artist Anne Brennan at Sydney's Hyde Park Barracks in 1995. Here, she focused on a single item, a woman's bonnet, or soft cap,



Photographer Anne Ferran prepares a piece of clothing for a photogram.

PICTURE: JACKY GHOSSE

that was worn by women held in asylums or who worked as servants.

She produced a series of portrait-style photographs of the caps, which she folded to suggest the framing of a woman's face. The central void that appeared in the image where this face might have been suggested the absence from history of those who once wore such bonnets.

Ferran also made a few photograms of the soft cap by laying the object on some pieces of paper and exposing it to light. She was pleased with the result.

"I had a sense that this was quite a good combination of object and technique, so it would work, but I had no idea how those other images would come out," she says.

Ferran spent most of her time at Rouse Hill estate in the former schoolroom, which she converted into a makeshift darkroom. Due to their status as museum objects, she could not take the garments "anywhere you could conveniently make a photograph". So she had the windows sealed up, hung some curtains around the doors and got to work.

The production of each photogram was a repetitive, almost ritualistic, process. It began with Ferran delving into one of the many drawers full of clothes and delicately unpacking garments from their tissue paper. She would then bring an item into the darkened school-

room, carefully arranging it on a large sheet of photographic paper unrolled on to the floor. This was briefly exposed to light without the intervention of a camera.

The actual length of the exposure for each photogram was short, "five, 10 or 15 seconds, depending on how thick the fabric is, but it's not long and the light is very weak".

Once this was complete, Ferran rolled the paper up in the dark, put it into a light-proof container and sent it into the city to be commercially processed.

Under the exposure, the areas where light penetrated through the garment to the paper were darkened, in contrast to areas — such as along

the blackness. This attracted Ferran, who likens the process to an x-ray.

"It's an image made in light — you penetrate the object with light and that's how you get the image," she says.

Only the most delicate and intimate garments in the collection feature in the photograms, and only those worn by the women and children — babies dresses, delicately embroidered undershirts, petticoats and nightdresses. Conceptually, Ferran had always been interested in the unexplored, unknown or forgotten dimensions of women's lives but practical reasons also formed part of her selection.

"The process would not allow me to make photograms

and the hollowness is the space where you think about the body that's not there. The photograms do that very well."

This meant that the "ungiving" shapes of menswear were also excluded from Ferran's project.

"If you think about the shape of a shirt or a jacket, there's not a lot you can do with it," she says. "One of the things that I like about women's clothes is, because they have a certain fluidity, that lets you suggest the presence of somebody because there's a bit of movement."

Ferran also enjoyed focusing on such a humble aspect of the Rouse family's collection as their underwear. It amused her that "these patched and often very humble garments have become part of their historical record."

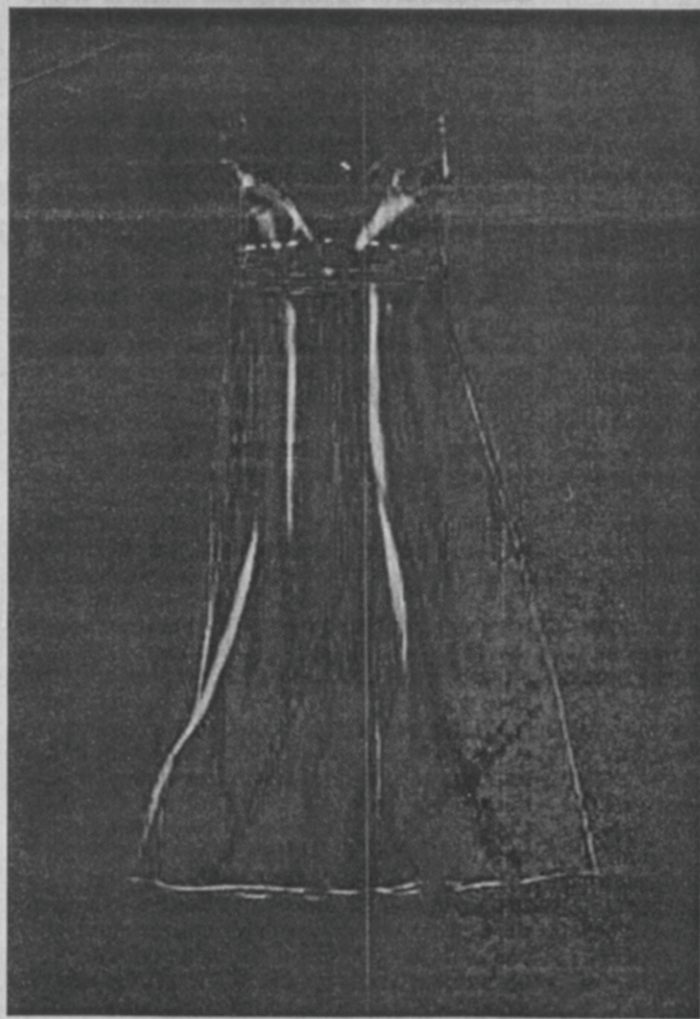
She also believes that, outside the context of the historic house, "these garments become very iconic and they're not even about anybody's past, they're just about the fact that we live and die and leave these things behind us. So it just moves into that other dimension. But I had to go through the whole process before I realised that."

Ferran's interest in forgotten history and overlooked spaces has taken her to a range of historic sites, archives and museums. Despite this close association with the past, she sees herself as "really different to a historian, or the way I understand a historian, who works with the record. For me, to work with the non-existent parts of the record, that's where I want to be".

Ferran is still fascinated by photograms. "I just got very involved in that whole process of seeing how those images turned out. There's a lot of surprise and mystery about that," she says.

Photograms from Anne Ferran's 1998 artist's residency at the Rouse Hill estate are included in the survey show *First Impressions: Contemporary Australian Photograms* at the Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia, Federation Square, until June 9.

Ferran's photograms of the clothing, below (Untitled 1998 [red dress]) and below right (Untitled 1998, [cardigan]), allude to the owner's absence.



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ANNE FERRAN, photographer

seams or folds — where the weight of the fabric prevented this. These remained white, or coloured, depending on whether black and white or coloured paper was used.

This direct connection between object, photographic paper and light resulted in ghostly images of solitary garments that seem to float against inky black backgrounds. Light also penetrated in unexpected places. In some images, the most delicate of embroidered hems and lace collars shine brightly, while in others, edges of skirts seem to fall away into

of the most elaborate or formal clothes at all, because they're too heavy," she says.

Thinner garments allowed light to penetrate more easily, so that both the front and back of the garment could be seen in the finished image. This enhanced the "x-ray" effect that Ferran was looking for.

"When I started working with these bodices, all of that 19th century underwear, almost the first thing I saw was there's this amazing illusion of three-dimensionality that comes about mainly because there's a kind of a gap between the front and the back (of the garment) and if I arrange it properly then the front is higher or lower than the back. When you look at the image you read that gap as depth."

"What was important was that I got the clothes to assume a very strong presence, because if you take a photograph of a piece of clothing, that's one kind of an image usually, to me, not very interesting. But this kind of image is this amazing transformation and the thing gets so much presence."

"The other thing that I really liked about that is this idea of a piece of clothing that's hollow