

Only after reaching the bottom did we stop
And listen to the drifting echoes -
As long-dreaded farewells when words are lost to the worlds
In the embrace of death: of flesh and unimagined earth

Borrowing its title—*Lost to worlds*—from this fragment of a poem by Sydney writer Peter Skrzynecki, Anne Ferran's suite of photographic images looks down, at our feet or just beyond them, to the ground about to be walked. Nothing heroic about this view. No grand vistas or picturesque landmarks, just grass and a few desultory stones, scattered about before us. The grass rises and falls gently, hinting at impressions and hidden accumulations, a trace of buildings that may once have stood here, many years ago. A shadowy foreground accentuates these markings in the earth, and gives them a gravitas they might not otherwise warrant. Without horizons, this ground appears to stretch to infinity in all directions, cropped only by the camera's vacant gaze. The square format of these images adds to the impassivity of their look, refusing to give a shape to our view other than the one granted by an ideal geometry (a shape that therefore seems almost like a non-shape). All this helps to flatten out what we see, countering the pictorial recession implied by the movement of our eye from dark to light, and turning a naturalistic scene into an abstract, and therefore emblematic, one.

The large size and silvery monochrome of these images enhances this abstraction: one looks at the scene but one is also visually immersed by the scene;

these are pictures that fill the eye entirely. The photographer underlines this sense of artifice by sometimes adopting a diptych form more familiar in religious art, as if to imply that what is being pictured here is in fact sacred ground. But this pairing of images, each representing a slight shift in our line of sight, also insists that what we are looking at is a sign, an artistic fabrication rather than a faithful mirror of an outside world. As Ferran has suggested, 'Putting the two slightly different images together seems to loosely fit with the other kinds of displacement involved (transportation, incarceration). Something is created that isn't exactly *there*.'¹ Refusing to tell us anything about what we are seeing, to give us the explanatory information we crave, these photographs challenge us to bring our own knowledge and desires to them. They represent the ground of history itself, waiting to be inscribed with meaning.

These benign-looking landscapes are in fact all that remain of a prison for women convicts that was located in Ross, Tasmania. Such prisons, known as Female Houses of Correction or simply 'female factories', operated in Australia from 1828 onward, with the Ross Female Factory being put to this use from 1847 until 1854. There was also another even more inhospitable factory located in Hobart, under the shadow of Mt Wellington. Ferran offers us some blurred images of these buildings, as if they've been photographed with a primitive pinhole camera. These images are in fact details from historical albumen photographs taken by John Watt Beattie, who worked in Tasmania from 1878 onwards, re-photographed in 2000 by Ferran

through a magnifying loupe. This is what gives them their dream-like appearance, insubstantially wafting in and out of focus as if straining to reach us from some dim and distant past.

Not much is known about the personal lives of the women who were incarcerated in these factories, often for the crime of getting pregnant. Conditions were brutal—cold, wet and muddy—and infant mortality rates were very high, especially in Hobart, with hundreds of deceased babies being buried in unmarked graves on and around the site of the prison. With only a few archaeological fragments to remember them by, these women have become largely invisible to history, except in our imaginations. Ferran's photographs, by refusing to give the women up to us while nevertheless insisting on their presence, invite us to exercise that imagination. They bring past and present into communion in our mind's eye, asking for a momentary acknowledgment of the suffering and loss that has made our own comfortable lives possible.²

The evocative emptiness of *Lost to worlds*, embodied in the deadpan style of documentary photography Ferran has adopted, links this work to a long photographic tradition, but also to a problem central to the photographic medium. How can photography narrate an historical event, rather than just represent it? How can it bring the past back in touch with the present? Alexander Gardner recorded without flourish the vacant Civil War battlefield at Antietam in 1862, confident that his audience would be able to imagine the terrible things that had gone on there only days before. More recently, Martha Rosler conjured the

issue of homelessness by dispassionately showing only traces of where the homeless had once been, in *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* of 1974. Ferran's work is also reminiscent of Marion Hardman's photographs from the late 1970s of suburban Hobart, pictures that also look down at the ground to show us a transitional space, an emptied landscape nevertheless marked by struggle.³

In combining the revelatory promise of documentary with the abstract repetition of conceptual art, Ferran's work draws on and extends this genealogy. But it also exemplifies the ambivalent character of much contemporary photographic art. For, in her judicious merger of the evidential and the poetic, Ferran's photography seems overtly sceptical of the medium's capacity for revealing truth while nevertheless totally dedicating itself to this same possibility.

As Ferran (who is also one of Australia's most acute writers on photography) has noted, she is one of a number of contemporary photographers whose pictures remain empty of identifiable subject matter:

"These photographs have something of that same in-between quality of not knowing what kind of thing they are. Vis-à-vis photography's traditional tasks—of capturing time, of bearing witness—they are at a loss. Rhetorically they are tight-lipped, even monosyllabic. Yet, for all that, they possess a formal assurance that says they are sure of something. Initiates into their own inadequacy is how I like to think of them, fully aware of their limitations. As such they might yet turn out to be the variant form of photography best suited to the times we are in."⁴

In this particular incarnation, *Lost to worlds* has been digitally applied to 30 sheets of aluminium, like so many metallic headstones. This process turns these pictures into a kind of permanent memorial, further exacerbating their refusal to choose between history and memory, something and nothing. Their obdurate there-ness, sitting indestructibly on the wall of the gallery, is complemented by the ethereal immateriality of Ferran's two related video projections, titled *In the ground, on the air* (2006–08). The background of her projected images comprise the same familiar diptychs of the ground at Ross, transforming and renewing themselves a number of times during the course of the work. In each video, names appear at the right side of the image and move in a steady procession across it, until most of them stop and then fade into the ground, like mist dissipating in the sunlight. These are the names of the hundreds of children who died before the age of two in the female factories at Ross and Hobart and who are buried nearby. Separated from their mothers and killed by official neglect as much as anything, they are known to us today only from impersonal archival records. These records also give us a matter-of-fact cause of death: bronchitis, convulsions, dysentery, pneumonia, and so on. As part of her exhibition, Ferran offers us 11 small blankets, reminders of convict issue clothing, woven from wool and inscribed with the first two letters of each cause of death. As she has said, her hieroglyphic blankets are obviously 'too light to be warm and too harsh to offer comfort'.⁵ Poignant substitutes for bodies that never made it to adulthood, they are yet another reminder

that these deaths were systematic, not accidental.

The tactility of Ferran's symbolic garments, enhanced by the grain of their weave, contrasts with the flickering light of her video projection and its inexorable flow of proper names. The length of time that each name appears in the video corresponds to the longevity of that child's life, giving the work its temporal and conceptual infrastructure. The video has no soundtrack, but with the placement of two small lecterns, the artist invites viewers to recite the names aloud, in what has become a traditional ritual for acknowledging the departed. Appearing, drifting, fading, disappearing, silent until bodied forth by our own voices—in Ferran's hands, these names have themselves become ghosts that haunt not only the Tasmanian landscape but Australian history in general. As she says: 'Australia's past is full of unacknowledged ghosts; by waking them up we can hope to wake ourselves as well. Recently I came across a line from the poet Marius Kociejowski that seemed both simple and mysterious, "A ghost is not a ghost until it has a living audience". I have been reflecting on it ever since, the relationship of the living audience to the ghost, and the ghost to the living audience, of the living and the dead to one another.'⁶

Ferran's reflection has often taken the form of a probing for gaps and silences in Australia's historical record, especially as it concerns the lives of forgotten women and children. She has, for example, undertaken a number of projects utilising museum collections and photographic archives. Parts of those archives, as well as some of the detritus of her research, have been reconstituted here in vitrines, as befits an institutional

setting that is both museum and art gallery. Some of these bits and pieces come from work Ferran undertook in 1995 with fellow artist Anne Brennan in the collections of the Hyde Park Barracks Museum in Sydney.

Designed in 1817 by transported architect Francis Greenway, the Barracks had originally been used to house convicts. However, from 1848 through 1886, the building was occupied by various groups of 'unprotected' women—orphans from famine-stricken Ireland, wives and families of convicts—as well as 'distressed' British needlewomen and other kindred female inmates deemed in need of an Asylum for the Aged, Infirm and Destitute. We now have only the most paltry records of most of these women, just lists of names and a few bureaucratic lines of description ('a good woman but an incorrigible drunkard'). However, the occupants of the Barracks inadvertently left behind a considerable amount of archaeological debris. This debris was discovered only in the early 1980s, during renovation of the building, when numerous soiled and tightly-woven bundles of material were discovered under the creaky floorboards. It seems that rats, once these women's constant companions, were also their most diligent registrars. These arbitrary, anonymous accumulations of dirt, scraps of cloth, fragments of tobacco pipes, disused menstrual belts, pins, and pieces of stitched fabric are the sole physical remnants of these women's lives in the Barracks.

Ferran has made photographs of some of these mute bundles, but also of some equally enigmatic white headdresses. In her researches she had come across a

photograph taken in about 1911 at nearby Newington Asylum of a group of aged women thought possibly to include some who once occupied the Barracks building. In the old photo, the women turn this way and that, carefully avoiding a direct confrontation with the camera's inquisitive stare, and offering instead a series of coy three-quarter views of their cloth-cowled heads. Accentuating this detail, Ferran has replicated a number of these protective soft caps and draped them on a live model—a close inspection of the prints reveals some stray hairs against the white cloth—under instruction to reproduce these same poses. Slightly under-exposed and over-developed (no digital manipulation here), all that is visible in the finished photographs are the bonnets themselves. Floating in an endless black space, they are without face or body and yet appear to be still occupied. The question is: by what?

Ferran's photographs restore these women to the attention of Australian history, and therefore to a certain degree of visibility. True to that history, though, it's a visibility that keeps their individual identities imperceptible. Declining to fully resurrect these women, Ferran bestows them instead with a speculative half-life, a kind of historical radioactivity (one of those radiations that is felt without being seen). Simultaneously present and absent, neither dead nor quite alive, these wraiths loom out of the darkness of our neglect, the bowed headdresses lending them a slightly ecclesiastical air, mute reminders of a contribution to Australian life hitherto forgotten. Photographed, but not exactly portrayed, these women

now demarcate a space to be filled with invented memories, perhaps even with our own projected selves. History is restaged rather than re-enacted, and all of us are called on by this work to perform a role.⁷

As Ferran and Brennan wrote in 1995, we are invited to share what has become 'a kind of imaginative connection' with these women, 'gradually and partially achieved'. But these artists demonstrate another level of connection again through the process of literally handling all this historical debris and then by making work with it, letting this debris speak of itself. Emulation may not be quite the right word, but it's getting close. Let's say an empathy has been forged, through and across time, and also 'by way of time: of the time it took to perform all the necessary actions—the time of thinking, turning the pages, writing, setting up the camera, inserting the film-holder, time spent in the darkroom, driving, talking... over time something of them has grown on us'.⁸

In 1999 Ferran was awarded a New South Wales Women and Arts Fellowship to work on an archive of photographs of women psychiatric patients once incarcerated in Gladesville Hospital in Sydney. As with her other research subjects, these are women for whom records are now scarce; we don't know exactly what they suffered from and names or records can no longer be attached to them. Nor do we know the official purpose of the photographs, dated to 1948, copies of which are held in the Government Printing Office Archive in the State Library of New South Wales. Under the collective title *INSULA* (2003), Ferran made a series of four differently-sized books from this raw

material, each of them focusing our attention on a different detail of the original images. In one, for example, we see nothing but pictures of the midsection of each woman's body. Cloth gathered untidily at the waist, buttons partially undone (the mental illness of these women is implied most powerfully by their lack of care for their own appearance), hands clutching at seams or at each other, arms held awkwardly across or behind the body; page by page, we encounter enigmatic signs of their otherness. Another book shows only faces, isolated one to a page, covered by a fold of paper which has to be raised before the full image reveals itself. The faces are inscrutable, perhaps even uncomprehending; the women's hair is invariably badly cut and loosely held. Many look away from the camera; almost no-one smiles (the women who do are actually the most heart-rending). Two more books concentrate on hands, one dedicated to the hands of patients and the other to their nurses. These books fold out concertina style, offering a horizontal frieze of body parts frozen in small graceless gestures. It's surprising to see how many of these hands are anxiously holding onto something else, as if for emotional support.

Each of these books has a cover made of felt, the touch and scent of this soft compressed fur heralding a certain subdued state of mind as one looks through them. As befits the theme and sensitivity of the subject matter, Ferran has built a room within the gallery space, guarded by an attendant instructed to admit only three visitors at a time. The books are found inside, waiting quietly on three felt-covered tables

along with the requisite white gloves. Touch, smell, sound, sight, sequence, framing, isolation: each element has been carefully orchestrated for maximum effect. The implication of this series is that there is something to be learned from scrutinising these old photographs in this way, as if a careful comparison of faces or hands (first those of the patients, then those of the nurses) can offer us ethnographic insights into the nature of mental illness. Ferran counters this presumption with three colour photographs of these same books, made by briefly exposing each page of the relevant book onto a single sheet of film. These composite images, recalling the work of nineteenth-century eugenicist Francis Galton, put the *INSULA* project in motion, transforming Ferran's precious hand-crafted art objects into cheap flip-books that blur the women's faces into a single erased visage. This erasure, one senses, is the fate of these women if they are allowed to be consigned to History, a discourse notoriously disinterested in the marginal and the powerless.

Ferran's practice as an artist is about contesting this History by inventing another kind of historical discourse altogether. This other discourse, focusing on incidental details and overlooked subjects, combining the indexical authority of the photograph with the sensorial resonance of symbolic objects and materials, brings history up against itself, up against its desire to differentiate itself from the now. Ferran's work instead insists on confronting us with the past's tenacious persistence. Raising the dead via the magical medium of photography, she transforms Australia's history into a kind of *séance*, into a direct communion

of past and present to which we are all party. Turned into apparitional constellations of pictures and objects, of pictures *as* objects, history is thereby brought back to life, not as the truth of the past but as a ghostly presence that still haunts and entrances us today.

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NOTES

- 1 Anne Ferran, in email correspondence with the author, 21 May 2008.
- 2 These paragraphs have been adopted from my essay 'Creating Awareness, Challenging Thought' in *Deadpan: Photography, History, Politics* (exhibition catalogue, New York: CUNY Graduate Center, 2008), 4-5.
- 3 See the comments by Ross Gibson on Hardman's *Bonnet Hill* series in his review of the exhibition *New Landscapes: Photographs from Two Continents* in *Photofile*, 3: 3 (Spring 1985), 32.
- 4 Anne Ferran, 'Empty', *Photofile*, 66 (September 2002), 9.
- 5 Anne Ferran, from a lecture given at the 2008 Association of Art Historians conference in London.
- 6 *ibid.*
- 7 These paragraphs have been adopted from my essay 'History Remains: The Photographs of Anne Ferran', in Stuart Koop ed., *Value Added Goods: Essays on Contemporary Photography, Art & Ideas*, 2002, 141-142.
- 8 See Anne Brennan and Anne Ferran, *Secure the Shadow* exhibition catalogue (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1995).

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