

## **Brigita Ozolins**

### **Competing Histories**

For Julie Gough's solo exhibition, *Rivers Run*, Cairns Regional Gallery, 2010

*History needs to forget as much as fiction needs to remember and in that intersection there should be ample space to build an open house – a monument, if you like – of competing narratives.*<sup>i</sup>

Julie Gough retells history through art. Tackling her projects by combining the skills of an archivist with those of detective, she challenges our understanding of officially recorded history and encourages us to reinterpret the past. Her art practice extends far beyond the task of making - it is inextricably linked to researching Tasmanian history, to locating, reading, and transcribing unpublished archival records that relate to her Tasmanian Aboriginal heritage, and to exploring the Tasmanian landscape. Both her research and her physical engagement with the land become springboards for works of art that question the authority of commonly accepted historical accounts. Through her art, Gough becomes a creator of alternative narratives.

To tell her stories, Gough uses two interconnected strategies. The first is the result of obsessive collecting and involves finding and transforming existing artefacts or natural materials such as furniture, clothing, shells, lengths of tea-tree and seaweed. Gough travels far and wide in search of materials that evoke, for her, some essential aspect of the history she aims to make manifest. The results are post-produced artefacts that test our reading of their original meaning and invite us to engage with new stories embedded within their form.

In more recent works, however, the search for materials has almost become secondary to the *experience* of locating and spending time in sites where significant past events have occurred. In the exhibition *Rivers Run*, this tendency is reflected in a style that relies on strategies associated with documentary practices. Rather than being bound by materials, Gough has focused on conveying actions: her journeying across

Tasmania in search of the physical locations of stories uncovered in journals and archives, and her attempts to access places that once were borderless and have now become 'private property'. *Rivers Run* incorporates work that employs both ways of working: there are two videos, a series of postcards and a filmic row of photographs that reflect a more documentary and performative approach, while a new work made entirely of timber planking reinforces the power of reworking existing materials in combination with text. But no matter what strategy is used, each work in the exhibition conveys a potent story about Gough's individual relationship to the past and to place as well as questioning the broader links between history, truth and authority.

*We ran/I am*, 2007, exemplifies Gough's ability to re-narrate a fragment of history. The work responds to a statement made by George Augustus Robinson, Conciliator of Aborigines in Van Diemen's Land during the 1830s. Having distributed calico trousers to the Aborigines, he records in his journal: 'The people all seem satisfied with their clothes. Trousers is excellent things and confines their legs so they cannot run.'<sup>ii</sup> This remarkable statement becomes the impetus for *We ran/I am*, which combines documentary photography and mixed media to create a powerful narrative about the links between past and present. The work consists of a map of Tasmania, a series of black and white photographs of the artist running desperately through the Tasmanian bush, and seven pairs of calico trousers she wore as she ran. The images were taken as Gough passed through specific sites marked on the map of Tasmania that were part of the notorious 'Black Line' of 1831, (a military operation that moved from south to north along an imaginary line, aiming to systematically remove all the indigenous inhabitants of Tasmania). Beneath the images of Gough running through the landscape, the calico trousers are neatly pinned to the gallery wall, each pair stained with remnants of mud, grass and dirt. The elements of *We ran/I am* present us with photographic and material evidence of the artist's challenging performance, evidence that enables us to piece together a disturbing narrative about the ever-presence of the past and its persistent impact on current generations of Aboriginal Australia.

*Driving Black Home 1*, 2000, was also developed as the result of physically engaging with the land (and the physical is inextricably linked to the

psychological). The work consists of sixteen colour postcards, propped on a mantelpiece, that feature signs of Tasmanian places names that include the terms 'black', 'native' or 'nigger' and were found by Gough during a 1,200 km drive around the island: Black Bobs Rivulet, Blackmans Bay, Nigger Head, Native Plains Road, Black Mary's Hill... Gough comments on the bizarre irony of these names - rather than disavowing the presence of her ancestors, they reinscribe and reinforce the presence of Indigenous Tasmanians. The drive to locate the signs thus became, for Gough, an act of remembering.

*Driving Black Home 2*, 2009, shifts from postcard to video to document a road trip through all the counties of Van Diemen's Land. But, as with *Driving Black Home 1*, Gough's journey into the countryside is much more significant than a pleasant holiday adventure around the island – the footage of the trip is subtitled with the names of 3,125 colonial land grantees who disinherited the indigenous Tasmanians of their homelands. The film is nearly four hours long, an unbearable duration for the average gallery visitor to sit through, but its length reflects the time it actually took to visit all counties and reinforces the excess of land gifting that took place in colonial times.

In a second video work, *Rivers Run*, 2009, Gough takes to kayaking down Tasmanian rivers, recording her view of colonial homesteads as she paddles by. Scrolling over this footage is text from 'the Depredations' or CSO1/316-332 file 7578, correspondence to Governor Arthur 1824 - 36 relating to the Tasmanian Aborigines. What might otherwise be a leisurely paddle down the river is overlaid with texts that document skirmishes along riverbanks between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Both *Rivers Run* and *Driving Black Home 2*, are potent reminders that our relationship to land - and to a sense of place in Tasmania - is never innocent, but is always underscored by the shadow of colonization.

In the new work, *Trespass*, 2010, the concepts of ownership and sense of place are further explored in a crazy fence-like structure made from whitened planks stenciled with the names of properties from before and after the Black Line campaign of the 1830s. The fence-like form of the work implies enclosure and the stamp of private property, while its raft-like appearance references Gough's ironic role as 'trespasser'

as she attempted to access land that once belonged to her ancestors by kayaking down its waterways (as evident in *Rivers Run 2*). By 1830, more than 3,000 land grants were distributed to the colonizers - in 2010, most are fully fenced. *Trespass* is about the replacement of original Aboriginal place names with those of English pastoral arcadias and reflects Gough's frustration at not being able to access what once was fenceless and borderless.

*Rivers Run* offers a powerful statement about Gough's determination to retell the past through the experience of engaging with place. Whatever medium or style she employs to create her work, Gough consistently conveys a deep personal desire to connect with and make sense of the fragmented history of her Tasmanian heritage. It is a history that demands revisiting and re-examining. When Gough retells the stories of her ancestors, she not only gains a clearer picture of her own past, but also takes us a few steps closer to understanding the complexities of a history that belongs to us all.

Brigita Ozolins, 2009

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Shakespeare, Nicholas, 'Remembering and forgetting', in Lake, Marilyn (ed) *Memory, monuments and museums: the past in the present*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2006, p 37- 40.

<sup>ii</sup> Robinson, George Augustus, Journal entry for 3 November 1830, Swan Island, north-east Tasmania, in Plomley, N.J.B. (ed.), *Friendly mission: The Tasmanian journals and papers of George Augustus Robinson, 1829-1834*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1966, p. 266.

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