

Margaret Olley Art Trust Collection Room Residency

Artist in Residence Written Reflection

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I approached the application for the Margaret Collect Collection Room art residency just like one would seek to be accepted for a monastic retreat. This was December 2022. I had just experienced COVID 19 a few weeks before, I was physically diminished, exhausted from my commercial photographic work and stressed for all sorts of reason. Finding another way to be me had become absolutely vital. This opportunity to spend 4 weeks at RMOA felt like the lifeline I could hold onto.

It wouldn't be fair to say that desperation was what motivated me to apply. I had been told about the collection that was donated to RMOA by the now-defunct Queensland Centre for Photography and I had seen some samples from it in the past. I was intrigued by what the QCP collection may contain, and wanted to see how I could feed from other people's work and find out what I could possibly regurgitate.

Soon after my selection was announced, Tessa McIntosh and Emily Wakeling suggested a range of artworks based on what they knew of my practice. They got a lot of things right about what makes me tick: I'm mostly interested in humans and pretty much every image in the catalogue they compiled featured people. I selected only photographic work from the Collection and all connected with my interest in portraiture, storytelling, personal narratives and social history.

The start of the residency could not come soon enough. More than a monastic retreat, I was now approaching these 4 weeks as an escape, a chance to write a new narrative for myself. The therapeutic potential of making art, thinking and reading about it, surrounding oneself with art, cannot be underestimated.

I brought a lot of work in progress with me. My aim wasn't to use my time at RMOA to finish anything, but to channel into these projects some of the vitality and energy that comes from being surrounded by art. Making connections between what I have done, what other people have done, what I've not finished and what I want to do next seemed like a good goal already.

I'll categorise my residency into 4 areas of focus.

1. What is true?

Storytelling has played an increasing role in my photographic work in recent years. Whilst gathering personal testimonies for my portrait project *Sacrifice*, I've often wondered what role the notion of truth plays in photography. The artwork "First Jobs, Pineapple Cannery 1978" by Tracey Moffat was one of the artworks I selected precisely because it seemed to question whether documenting personal narratives should really be concerned with trying to tell a true story. Digging for more material about Moffat's work in the RMOA library led me to an interview she gave about her conceptual video piece, "The White Ghosts Sailed In", where she claimed that the footage shown was

filmed by Aboriginal people at the end of the 18th century. This bold statement, which seems humorous at first, made me envisage how storytelling and retelling of history through visual art can offer a perspective not concerned with facts but with the perception of historical events by protagonists and witnesses.

Moffat's approach would appear to be in direct opposition with the relentless search for truth Claude Lanzmann conducted over the 11 years it took him to film "Shoah". However, Lanzmann described his monumental film about the Holocaust as a "fiction of reality" ("fiction du réel"), acknowledging that his work as director, and the editing that followed, meant that it should not be approached as a documentary. This residency gave me the chance to see the entire film, which was released in 1985 in its nine-and-a-half-hour version, for the first time. "Shoah" is made up almost entirely of interviews given by survivors, perpetrators and bystanders who were direct witnesses of the systematic persecution in Jewish ghettos and the industrial-scale extermination in concentration camps, before and during the second world war. The use of contemporary footage and the absence of archival images reinforces the overwhelming sense of truth that emerges from the film.

My time at RMOA also gave me the chance to watch "Sugar Slaves", a documentary by Trevor Graham and Jean-Jacques Portail about blackbirding: the coercion, kidnapping, relocation and exploitation of Torres Strait and South Sea Islanders on Queensland sugar cane farms. I certainly don't intend to establish any parallel between the extermination of Jews and slavery in Australia. Watching both "Shoah" and "Sugar Slaves" was merely a means for me to research how complex stories based on historical events can be told in a direct, informative and engaging way. As part of this research, I had the opportunity to speak with Dr Melinda Mann, First Nations Arts Officer at RMOA, and to learn from her about blackbirding, and discuss how to best prepare for my upcoming residency in Bundaberg, where I will be collaborating with members of local Indigenous communities to create portraits and gather stories of sacrifice.

By coincidence, or unintentional design, I had selected a number of small 19th century "carte de visite" portraits from the Mackay family collection. As I learnt from Emily Wakeling, the family's fortune came in great parts from the sugar cane industry and their involvement in blackbirding was quite evident and well documented. I actually selected those portraits because, due to my commercial practice, I felt a connection with the elegant, yet stilted, conformist poses, and the "mises en scene" that are full of the elements not intentionally captured by the photographer but that nonetheless convey meaning, without invoking any recognisable symbolic system. This characteristic that is proper to photography, which Roland Barthes referred to as "punctum", can lead to a highly individual response that requires no contextual knowledge. My own lack of knowledge about the Mackay family and the way I couldn't connect the portrait photographs with historical facts, and yet found them highly engaging, seems to illustrate the point that a search for evidence of truth may not be essential when documenting personal narratives.

2. Wear good shoes

Although producing new work was not a requirement of the residency, the research and exploration I did over the first 2 weeks gave me an immense energy that I needed to channel into producing something tangible. Much of my time was therefore spent trying to make use of the vast number images I had captured over the previous few

months by combining a CCTV lens and a digital camera not designed for its use. This method produces circular images that are imprecise and evoke a sense of otherworldliness and alienation.

The initial motivation for this work was to interpret the word “Revivre”, French for “to live again” / “to be rejuvenated” and explore its connection with notion of aging, memory, neuro-cognitive disorders and altered state of perception. The work of Henry van Noordenburg and of Kim Demuth, both featured in the QCP Collection held at RMOA, had a major influence on the way I approached the images I had collected and stored for later use. Both artists use photography in ways that challenge the notion that it is the medium of the Real. Demuth often uses partly translucent material to alter the visibility and perception of the work, or plays with framing conventions by cutting prints into irregular shapes and turning them into three-dimensional objects. Van Noordenburg approaches the photograph as a starting point for physical interactions with its printed form, using the ancient sun print technique (cyanotype) to produce a “canvas” that can be altered by etching, scratching, toning, etc. Thanks to this research, I quickly came to the realisation that my weird round images should be used through a variety of visual devices in order to explore the broad notion of altered perception of reality.

Subsequently, I experimented with the production of prints and “object art” based on the cyanotype technique, integrating the use of video frames, ink transfer and performative elements to literally exploit the photographic material I had gathered. The actual production of cyanotype prints at RMOA involved preparing the sensitive paper and inter-negative in low light on the first floor, taking the lot outside to expose it to the sun for a few minutes, and taking in back to the first floor for developing. This happened countless times during the hours when the sun was high and unobstructed. It somehow gave a performative aspect to my residency that I had not previously envisaged, and did a lot of good for my physical fitness!

3. Vernacular (words on paper)

Although I could not select it to hang in the Collection Room due to its imposing size, “Confessions”, by Richard Lewer, had an immense effect on me when I first saw it at RMOA and I consider it a part of my selection for this residency. Lewer’s artwork, which is made of words and sentences boldly painted on pegboard, deals with universal themes of guilt, grief, shame, inadequacy and feels viscerally honest. I love the seemingly crude and naive technique Lewer uses and I felt the need to channel this spontaneous use of language in my practice. One of the other artworks I selected, “Self portrait #3” by William Yang, used words on photographs to contextualise and develop narratives, but I felt that the word alone was all I needed.

I embarked on an exploration of text-based cyanotypes, delving into various methods to block UV light, with water-soluble graphite pen, sunscreen and masking compound suggested by PNE Art & Framing (I visited them often during the residency!). I crafted a collection of samples, envisioning them as a deck of “word cards” simply called “Vernacular”, similar in form to Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt’s “Oblique Strategies”. The ongoing compilation of words for this deck serves as an invitation for reflection, encouraging contemplation of their meanings. These words, pulled from multiple languages (Latin, French, German, English, Spanish...) are loosely connected with my personal experiences before, during, and after the residency. They are obsessive little

mental loops impacted by song lyrics, novels, films, and artworks encountered during my research, thrown down onto the page to get rid of them. They bear elusive connotations, leaving the users to ponder how the inscriptions on the cards resonate with their own individual encounters.

4. Collaborations

I have found that collaborating with members of the public through informal conversations can be a transformative and enlightening process. These conversations provide unique insights, personal narratives, and diverse perspectives that enrich and expand my artistic vision. The many samples from my research that I had pinned onto the walls of the Margaret Olley Art Trust Collection Room (using gallery grade magnets!) acted as catalyst for conversations with visitors of RMOA who had either wandered into the room or were there for the weekly open studio sessions. By actively listening to the stories and perspectives of others, I felt encouraged to delve deeper into the complexities of visual interpretations of themes such as memory, aging, and dementia, which I had only just started to touch upon with work from my “Revivre” series mentioned above.

By engaging with individuals who have personal experiences or connections to these themes, I gained access to a wealth of untapped knowledge and emotional depth. Sharing my creative ideas and concepts with others allowed me to gauge their resonance and impact and see how they could resonate with a broader audience. I felt an immense sense of validation from being able to explain projects I feel passionate about, to people who are used to seeing works of arts, but don't always get information about the process behind their creation. This is very significant for me right now. I am moving away from a commercial practice of photography, an activity that is all about the outcome, to a life focussed on creative processes, but without the overbearing obsession with the outcome that has been a feature of my career so far.

Needless to say, I feel that my residency at Rockhampton Museum of Art was a critical moment in my progression towards being a full-time visual artist. What has already come out of it is that I now have the confidence to see the process of making art as the vital part of being an artist regardless of what form the outcome might take. This may sound like an obvious observation for some, but for me it was not an accepted fact until now.