

Dream Home – Exhibition Notes

Fiona MacDonald & Susan Norrie

Curator: Ricky Subritzky

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In the passage-way of this *Dream Home* exhibition there's a work titled *Log Cabin*. Using the Amish quilt pattern of the same name, Fiona MacDonald has woven together two aerial photographs of the man-made James Cook Island in Sylvania Waters, New South Wales, Australia. Cook is to Australia what Columbus is to America, lauded by some as a great explorer and discoverer, and considered by others as an imperial invader.

James Cook Island is a dense site. The C of this cul-de-sac was dredged from Gwawley Bay in the 1960s and compacted and retained by concrete walls. Only a short distance from Cook's first encounter with the "natives of New Holland" on a beach at Botany Bay in 1770, this housing development does away with the contested spaces of shorelines. Here the tide simply rises and falls¹.

These radiant houses on this artificial island suggest to me a circle of wagons. People arrive, spread out and set up camps. They make homes and they secure them. This seems perfectly reasonable. We all do it, and have done it, to one degree or another. However new worlds to some were mostly already old to others, and in the development of new world orders, someone's comfort usually leads to someone else's terror.

In Susan Norrie's *Twilight* we see something of these complicated relationships between possessions and dispossessions played out. This work documents the Aboriginal Tent Embassy that protests about Aboriginal land rights and sovereignty on the front lawn of Australia's Provisional Parliament House. When Cook named and claimed Australia for the British Empire he did so under the legal doctrine of *Terra Nullius* – "land owned by no-body". This bastardry was partially overturned by Australia's High Court in 1992, but only with respect to native title on pockets of unoccupied Crown Land.

Thinking about unoccupied and occupied Australia it becomes hard to know which parts of the country this ruling actually refers to. In secured boom time 1950s, the breeding ground for contemporary dreamhomes, the British returned to Australia's 'empty' centre to test atomic bombs. Thousands of 'no-bodies', Maralinga, Pitjantjatjara and Kokatha people, were saved and delivered from their own lands, yet again, thanks to their forced removal by "Aboriginal Protectors".

Home making, and collection and consumption is also made problematic in *American Raptors*. A grid of 50 paper shopping bags, a bag-flag, is silhouetted and terrorised with stately birds of prey drawn from *Audubon's Birds of America*. In their first rendering, somewhat perversely, Audubon did away with the unpredictability of his subjects by killing them, and then arranging them to look life-like.

Aspects of this disquieting suspended animation are also captured in *FallWall*. In this domestic tableau a rocking chair and light shade merge in a wallpapered flurry of falling leaves and ascending war-planes. The leaves, like the bags, were gathered in Detroit in 2002. As the leaves fell, and shoppers went about their business, refuelling planes departed from a nearby airfield to rendezvous with Afghanistan-bound US bombers over the Atlantic.

Today the repetitive patterns and architectures of localised and globalised domestic politics, and the terrible fall-outs of progress and prosperity become ever more intricate. We are cosseted and enfolded in haunted domesticities where the insidious after-shadows of imperialisms recede into obscenely decorous backgrounds.

Crusade (B-1B) repeats a geophysical survey of lurid magnetic intensity data (deposits of uranium in New Guinea) to form a drape's ground. As the data refracts kaleidoscopically, a crucifix emerges as

part of the pattern, and the banal prettiness of a crystalline motif disguises B-1B bombers in the soft furnishings of folds.

Elsewhere *Liberty* uses US one dollar bills to form a ground for an illustration of America's last Liberty Tree, which was felled in 1999 at St John's College in Annapolis, due to its instability. Trees were of course useful to settlers everywhere, and in America even appeared on the first unofficial colonial coinage. But in the American colonies Liberty Trees were used as rallying points for revolutionary settlers. As part of their attempt to quell popular uprising, the British often 'censored' these trees by chopping them down.

Liberty was inspired by the contemporary grassroots American protest phenomena of "Georgers" and "Bush Bills". These practices see disenchanted Americans writing and stamping messages of protest on currency and then, virally, spending them back into circulation.

In the middle of this *Dream Home* is a flickering image machine. A mass produced lamp repurposed into a zoetrope. Zoetropes are early precursors to cinema, and were initially called daedalums, meaning "wheel of the devil", but later became named for the "wheel of life". Much like the flickering televisions we each have at home in our lounge rooms the zoetrope spins relentlessly, animating the flight of a common crow round and round a maelstrom.

Back in the passage-way to this exhibition the warp and weft of *Log Cabin's* weave has rented the dense development of James Cook Island. And it seems that this artificial island named for a man involved in the attempt to extinguish the entire Aboriginal population, has again been reclaimed. Only this time by the life force of the Wandjina.

Ricky Subritzky