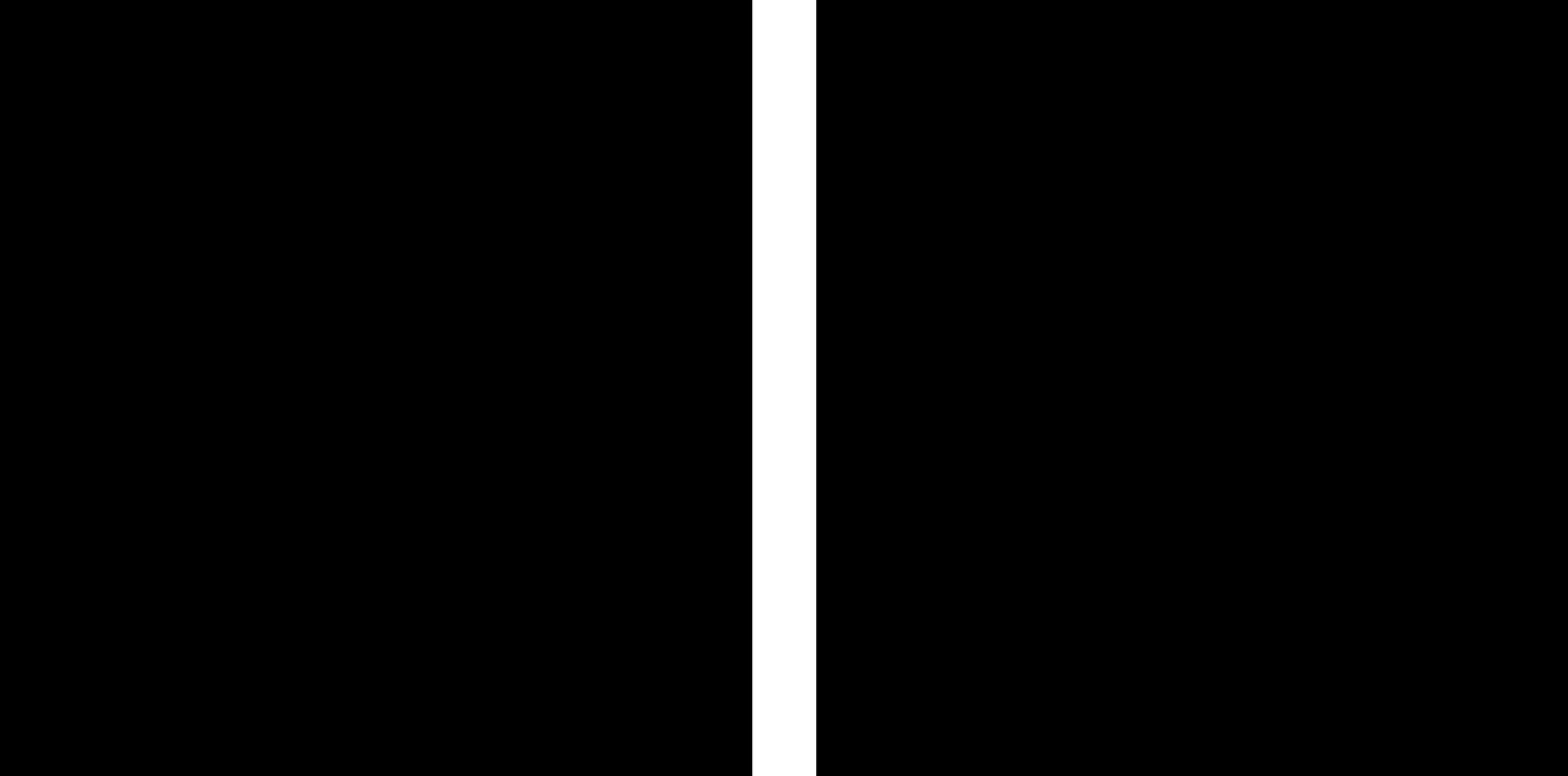




DEVONPORT  
REGIONAL  
GALLERY

**felt presence**



DEVONPORT  
REGIONAL  
GALLERY







felt presence

*Oh, it goes beyond sympathy. Sympathy is to understand what someone else feels, empathy is to project your imagination so that you actually feel what the other person is feeling. You put yourself in the other person's place.<sup>1</sup>*

Audrey Hepburn

When Anne Ferran was researching her project on the lives of convict women in the early 2000s she produced a photographic series titled *The Ground at Ross*, 2001, which included multiple photographs made at the Ross Female Factory. These silver gelatin photographs eerily portray what might be described as crime scenes – the ground where the Female Factory once stood is represented as empty, undulating spaces where the evidence of past ‘crimes’ may well be buried under layers of earth and regrowth. Claire Armstrong, former editor of *ART AsiaPacific*, noted that the subject of Ferran’s images, including selected objects, suggests ‘something of their role as witnesses to history, loaded with meaning which can only be imaginatively

penetrated.<sup>2</sup> Under Ferran's scrutiny these objects live and breathe: one wonders about the hands that have touched the walls at Cascade, and of what might be buried in the ground at Ross.<sup>3</sup>

Having viewed *The Ground at Ross* series at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in 2008, and remembering the impact it had on me at the time, I wanted to visit the Ross Female Factory and 're-live' that experience. Upon arriving at the site I spent a great deal of time walking over the uneven ground where stonewalled rooms once stood. As I moved across the landscape I too thought about what might lie beneath my feet – what was buried and out of sight. I was engulfed by an overwhelming sense of emptiness – so much had happened here and yet so much was missing. The ground, witness to the history of this place, openly colluded to bury the atrocities of the past. But despite this I imagined sounds of the past, voices of the dead, laughter and tears. I imagined footsteps that danced and tiptoed in the dark, stamped in anger or fled in fear.

Entering the stone cottage adjacent to the factory, I was struck by the 'picture perfect' state of the rooms – rustic and empty as if waiting to be photographed. Although absent of furniture and personal items, they spoke of security and comfort as opposed to the eerie emptiness of the factory site only a short distance away. I couldn't help but notice the various vantage points where I imagine the staff were able to view the factory building and any activity that took place outside it. Even the narrow gaps in a bolted wooden door, allowing light to enter, triggered my imagination as I envisaged spying eyes pressed against the dark wood.

In the 1800s, the conviction of a crime and ultimate sentence of enduring the long journey to Tasmania (then known as Van Diemen's Land) before being placed in servitude or a female factory, surely would have been one of mixed emotions, not least a sense of trepidation, displacement and fear of the unknown. A total of 86

ships transported female convicts to Van Diemen's Land equating for almost half of the 25,000 convict women transported to Australia.<sup>4</sup> Many of these women, and girls, were convicted of petty crimes such as stealing a loaf of bread to feed their family. The living conditions in England at the time even drove some women to go so far as ensuring they were 'caught in the act' of a crime in order to be transported away from the hardships they were experiencing.

These are 'facts' we know. We have certain knowledge of things past, present and to some extent future, and an ever increasing number of facts on almost every topic available to us. There are certainly recorded details of the lives and experiences of female convicts, but can these facts or stories help us feel the presence of a past – or empathise with the dead? If they can't, or can't fully, then how do we make sense of our past and how do we represent it in a way that is meaningful to our present?

An epistemic approach to history goes some way towards helping us understand our past and how it has shaped aspects of our present, but it cannot help us understand the nature of things – of feelings, thoughts or behaviour. It does not allow for creative and expressive modes of representation. Michael Roth observed that in *The Order of Things* Michel Foucault '...argues that culture speaks and thinks through different epistemes, and that these epistemes limit the possibilities of perception, cognition and expression'.<sup>5</sup> Forming opinions based on the *knowledge* of things rather than the *nature* of things is problematic, but just as problematic is an approach to the past where interpretations are endless and the legitimacy of those interpretations cannot be proved.

Any representation of the past – of 'histories' – is, by its very nature, a construct; interpretations of past events, people and places involve mediation on a range of issues including the meaning of the past in our present. Consequently, in researching *felt presence*, the question 'What can this exhibition bring to the viewer that a recorded history is unable to convey?' emerged.

Several female artists were invited to ponder this question by focusing on female convicts transported to Van Diemen's Land. Each artist delved into the stories and records of past female convicts – some focused on their namesake, while others looked more broadly at events that affected a number of female convicts. The resulting art works reflect varied responses – from the physical to the emotional, from presence to absence, from collective memory to personal memory – yet they all reside within an empathic space of a 'felt presence'.

Samantha Clark lives in Leith, Scotland. A few minutes away from her house is the wharf that served as the departure point for the ship that took Scottish women convicts to join the *Atwick* on the Thames. From there the *Atwick* sailed to the southern hemisphere in 1837, arriving in Hobart in 1838. In making the two drawings titled *Wake*, Clark became interested in 'the moment of leave-taking, of the women leaving everything they had ever known, and in the actual voyage, the long sea journey...suspended between the world they'd left behind and a totally unknown future'.<sup>6</sup>

Clark's drawings reflect on the 'wake' in two ways: as a track left by a ship as it passes, and its alternate meaning as the gathering of family and friends to mark the passing of loved ones. Clark discovered through her research that 'well-intentioned Quaker ladies boarded the prison ships before they departed, and gave the women packs of needles and pins, thread, and pieces of quilting fabric to develop skills in needlework that might be useful to them in Van Diemen's Land. Each woman was given a pack of 100 needles'.<sup>7</sup> Clark's two drawings mirror each other, reflecting the two interpretations of the wake, which ultimately signal a departure. Clark's 'wake' has been painstakingly drawn with a sewing needle whereby the paper is removed through the process of pricking thousands of tiny holes in the shape of a ship's wake. These tiny empty spaces scattered across the paper also symbolise the thousands of women taken away from their homeland and loved ones.

Like Clark's 'pin-hole' drawings, Rosemary O'Rourke's drawing process has been one of mapping out a space – only O'Rourke's map has no clear beginning or end. For O'Rourke, drawing is a way of feeling a presence and an absence. The cross has religious connotations but as a mark it can signal that something is wrong. The multiple crosses that make up the drawings join together to form a kind of net, a place of entrapment or its opposite – a safety net. The further O'Rourke explored the work in the making process, the more she began to think about the convict women standing at the washtub and 'the stains that won't come out physically and metaphorically'.<sup>8</sup> The drawings have been laboriously created, again a metaphor for the hard labour the women endured. To O'Rourke they represent a cloth that is heavily worked or stained at the bottom and cleaner at the top. Worked in charcoal, the crosses seem to suggest multiple gravesites – black markers that are both individual and at the same time representative of collective souls and emotions: security, fear, suffering and liberation.

The work of Irish artist Irene Murphy has been informed through research into female convicts born in West Cork in the early 1800s under her family name Murphy and the Christian names Mary and Hanna, which are the names of her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. *Potential Space* is an interactive installation incorporating images, objects and materials associated with the artist's search into a connected, yet disparate past. Murphy observes that 'memory is the domain of the individual, memory possesses a dimension of the experiential that is absent from the notion of history and the past'.<sup>9</sup>

In following this line of inquiry Murphy attempts to locate an era that predates recorded documents, such as writing or photography. By interacting with an automatic drawing tool made by Murphy and modelled off a drawing of an early device called a planchette, the viewer becomes implicit in the exploration of a past that belongs to us all. Yet the individual's response is as much a part of their own

history as it is a part of a broader history. As many females transported to Australia were illiterate, the primary source of their personal experiences was either relayed through oral history – much of which is lost – or penned by doctors and governors who recorded clinical and impersonal details. *Potential Space* allows the viewer to explore personal memory to establish links between their own experiences and people and events from our past.

Love tokens or 'leaden hearts' were small objects made by or for convicts. They were engraved or stippled with a message and usually included the name or initials of a convict and their loved one, the length of their sentence and some words of separation. Messages to loved ones were left on coins by scratching away the surface. On one side of the coin the King's head was erased – a criminal offence – and the coin became a keepsake, though many would never see their loved one again. Through the act of over-painting, masking and 'peeling back' to reveal words of love, hope and fear, Tasmanian artist Anne Morrison has employed a process that is symbolic of the female convicts' layers of experiences – some revealed, many impossible to see or know.

Morrison's triptych, *The lost to sight...* is inspired by a story about the female convict Ann Maloney who left a penny for her loved one, 'WF', that was engraved with two hearts and two doves.<sup>10</sup> The work is also emblematic of the artists' personal history – growing up in the northern hemisphere and travelling to Australia as a young woman, before finally settling in Tasmania. Morrison is reflective about the completed work – she sees connections to different spaces in the shapes and texture of the work and is reminded of the first time she visited central Australia and experienced the vast openness and flatness of the continent, 'being amazed that I could see that curve of stars from one side of the land to the other...an unfamiliar sky. I think about the convicts' journey and whether they saw the night sky from the deck of the ship, its unfamiliar patterning in comparison to the one they left behind...what were they thinking and feeling?'.<sup>11</sup>

Rose Ann Burns was convicted for stealing clothes when she was 19. Her punishment was a sentence of seven years as a convict in Van Diemen's Land. Rose Ann Burns is the ancestor of Anita Dineen. Through her research, Dineen discovered that her ancestor spent most of her time at the Ross Female Factory before marrying and bearing 11 children. Dineen has created a cutlery set engraved with extracts from the log of the *Sea Queen*, the ship Rose Ann Burns was transported on. Reflected back at the viewer, rather than their own image, is an 'image' of the convict as recorded by the ship's doctor: name, hair colour, height and facial features.

The pendants Dineen has made include a recycled silver pocket watch. The concept of time is persistently recorded in journals and books from the 1800s - including the amount of time it took to transport convicts to Australia and the amount of time a convict had to serve in the factories. For Rose Ann Burns, free time must have been a luxury before her final departure from the Female Factory. Dineen's pieces represent small, precious gifts that acknowledge what was present, and absent, in Rose Ann Burns' life.

Tara Badcock's installation, comprising three separate yet connected works, draws attention to the secret life of a convict where hoarding and hiding objects provided hope of a better life beyond the stone walls of the factory. Badcock spent many hours stitching and embroidering text sourced from convict records onto coarse and delicate pieces of cloth, combining them with various materials including antique and found objects. *Trousseau* and *Hoard* represent Badcock's response to the notes written by historians of the period who observed that 'females gradually gathered together, and kept hidden, articles, objects and coins in readiness for their day of release from the penal system'.<sup>12</sup>

*Ticket of Leave* is a response to the overcrowding and deaths in the Female Factory nursery. Badcock has created 'a makeshift and fanciful escape method, similar

to the knotted sheet trick: an air balloon made from the bartered and pilfered scraps of fabric...anything to hand, as a symbolic gesture – liberty triumphing over circumstance...and everyone starting their life again needs a garden, for nourishment and sustenance!<sup>13</sup> Badcock's installation sets in train a narrative of entrapment, concealment, release and hope for a new life.

The opposing environments of the northern and southern hemispheres impacted on the way Claire Needham thought about and made her photographic series *Terra Australis Ignota*. Just as Anne Morrison pondered the night sky in central Australia, Needham wondered how convict women related to a new land as 'the very stars are different, with opposite constellations'<sup>14</sup> The 'night' photograph which represents the sky above a stone wall, suggests opposing sentiments of entrapment and freedom. Needham's photographs draw attention to a world of differing weather conditions, and differing flora and fauna. The photographic series form a broken narrative informed by imagined conditions, in combination with a conduct record of her namesake, convict Maria Needham. The conduct record is inconclusive – a broken narrative that suggests a possible marriage and a probable child born out of wedlock. The ambiguity of the record is reflected in Needham's photographs where the imagery is both focused and blurred.

Female factories were essentially built as workhouses. Within the walls of the factory women were involved in many tasks including washing, cleaning, sewing and cooking. Sharyn Woods' wall sculptures *Between the Strands* have been created in response to incidents and conditions that affected all convict women. When horsehair or other materials were unavailable for reinforcing plaster for walls and ceilings, the hair of convict women was used instead. Whether this was the same hair cut at the time of incarceration (all convicted females had their hair cut short) or whether it was cut when required to reinforce plaster is uncertain. Rather than using hair, Woods has combined copper wire with plaster and wood.

Copper wire, used as a structural material in the factories, was also used for items such as pins and thimbles used by the women while incarcerated.

The four pieces comprising *Between the Strands* possess a skeletal quality, revealing the raw materials of the structure: plaster, wood and copper wire. These minimal, yet complex objects suggest hard labour and discretion and indiscretion – the hidden and the revealed – and bring into question the role of convict women as objects of exploitation. The panels are analogically suggestive of the basic structure of rough plaster walls, yet each is subtly different revealing its handmade quality while symbolically acknowledging the unique qualities of the individual convict women.

Our view of the world is informed by a combination of many things, including our cultural heritage. Facts and emotions also play a role in the way we come to know and understand the world. *Felt presence* evolved from questions related to how we make sense of our past and how we represent it in a way that is meaningful to our present.

The decision to approach only female artists was a deliberate one. In a sense, they have inhabited the empty space of the convict woman or women they have been researching. They have presented diverse interpretations of the past that are both self-critical and reflective, providing the viewer with alternative ways of thinking about and understanding the past as a 'felt' presence.

Returning again to the Ross Female Factory site, I watched the tourists come and go, walking past the factory site to get to the cottage where their cameras clicked from room to room capturing the look of a past era. I watched them leave, walking past the

empty field, once full of the sound of female voices. Glancing at the expanse of pale, dry grass they chose not to venture further and returning to their cars they drove off. I walked into the cottage. Now that summer was coming to a close the light that shone through the bolted wooden door was softer than before, and a faint breeze crept into the space. A presence felt; a presence left.

Dr Ellie Ray, 2013

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Hepburn, Audrey in conversation with Fred Astaire in *Funny Face*
- 2 Armstrong, Claire: 'Anne Ferran', *Art and Australia*, vol 39, no 3, 2002, p. 436
- 3 Armstrong, Claire: 'Anne Ferran', *Art and Australia*, vol 39, no 3, 2002, p. 436
- 4 Female Convicts Research Centre Inc., <[www.femaleconvicts.org.au](http://www.femaleconvicts.org.au)>, 2012 - 2013
- 5 Roth, Michael S. 'The Ironist's Cage: Memory, Trauma, and the Construction of History', Columbia University Press, New York, 1995, p. 79
- 6 Email correspondence with Samantha Clark, January, 2013
- 7 Email correspondence with Samantha Clark, January, 2013
- 8 Email correspondence with Rosemary O'Rourke, January, 2013
- 9 Email correspondence with Irene Murphy, February, 2013
- 10 Swiss, Deborah J. *The Tin Ticket: The Heroic Journey of Australia's Convict Women*, Penguin Group, Berkley, USA
- 11 Email correspondence with Anne Morrison, January, 2013
- 12 Email correspondence with Tara Badcock, February, 2013
- 13 Email correspondence with Tara Badcock, February, 2013
- 14 Email correspondence with Claire Needham, February, 2013

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- Frost, Lucy (ed) *Convict Lives at the Ross Female Factory*, Female Convicts Research Group (Tasmania). First published 2011 by Convict Women's Press Inc. Female Convicts Research Group, Tasmania
- Frost, Lucy *Abandoned Women: Scottish Convicts Exiled Beyond the Seas*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2012
- Female Convicts Research Centre Inc., <[www.femaleconvicts.org.au](http://www.femaleconvicts.org.au)>

TARA BADCOCK

*Hoard (Savings and Chattels)*, detail 2013

2 Wrapping cloths and 'precious' items

Assemblage of hand embroidered linen, hemp, cotton, string, ceramic, metal, glass, found objects, hair (horse and human), beeswax, ink.

Dimensions variable, installation approximately 1m x 50cm x 40cm



SAMANTHA CLARK

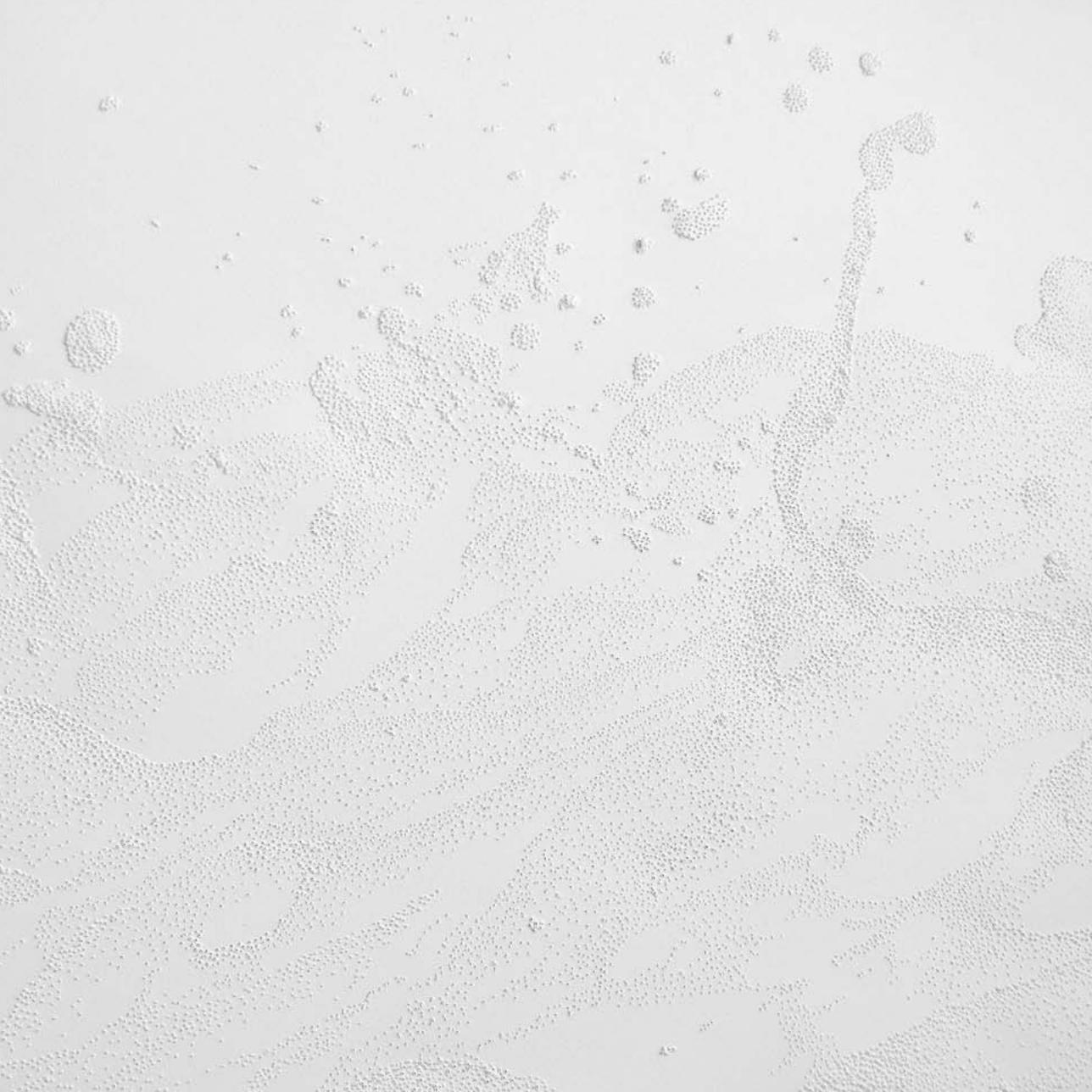
*Wake*, detail 2013

Paper, needle-holes

Diptych

77 x 224cm

Photo credit: Michael Wolchover



ANITA DINEEN

*Find*, 2013

Pendant of gold alloy and sterling silver

30 x 30mm (approx)



ANNE MORRISON

*Tho lost to sight...*, one of three paintings, 2013

Acrylic and water colour on paper

Triptych

87 x 87cm each (unframed)

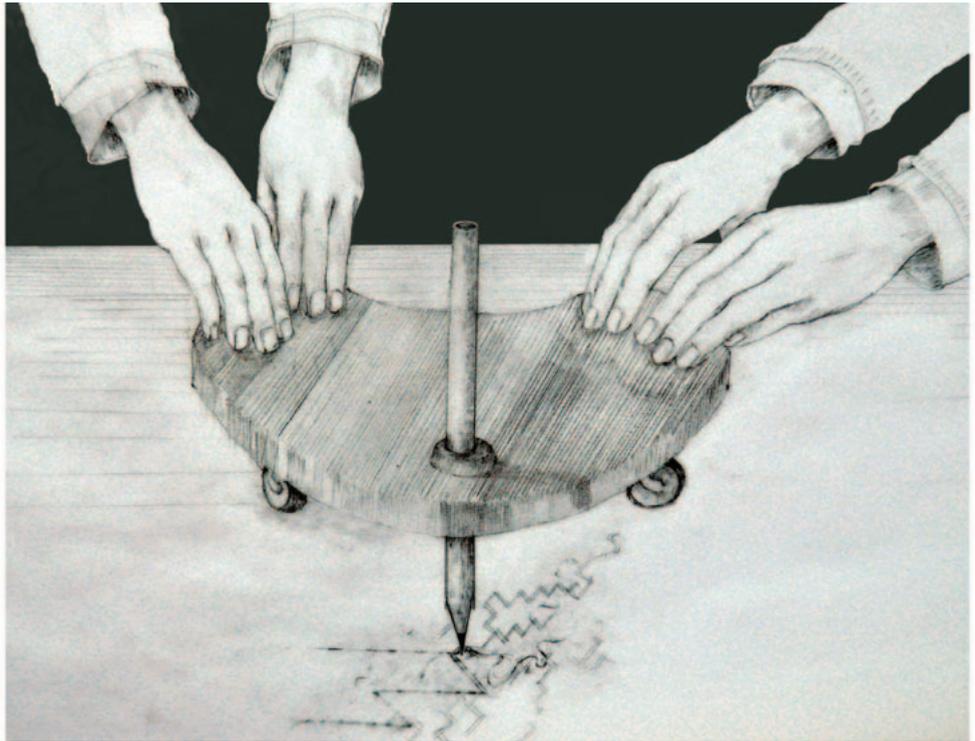


IRENE MURPHY

*Potential Space*, 2012

Pencil drawing

22 x 15cm



CLAIRE NEEDHAM

*Terra Australis Ignota Series, 2013*

*#7 Terra Australis Ignota, Out After Hours, detail*

Digital photograph

40 x 50cm



ROSEMARY O'ROURKE

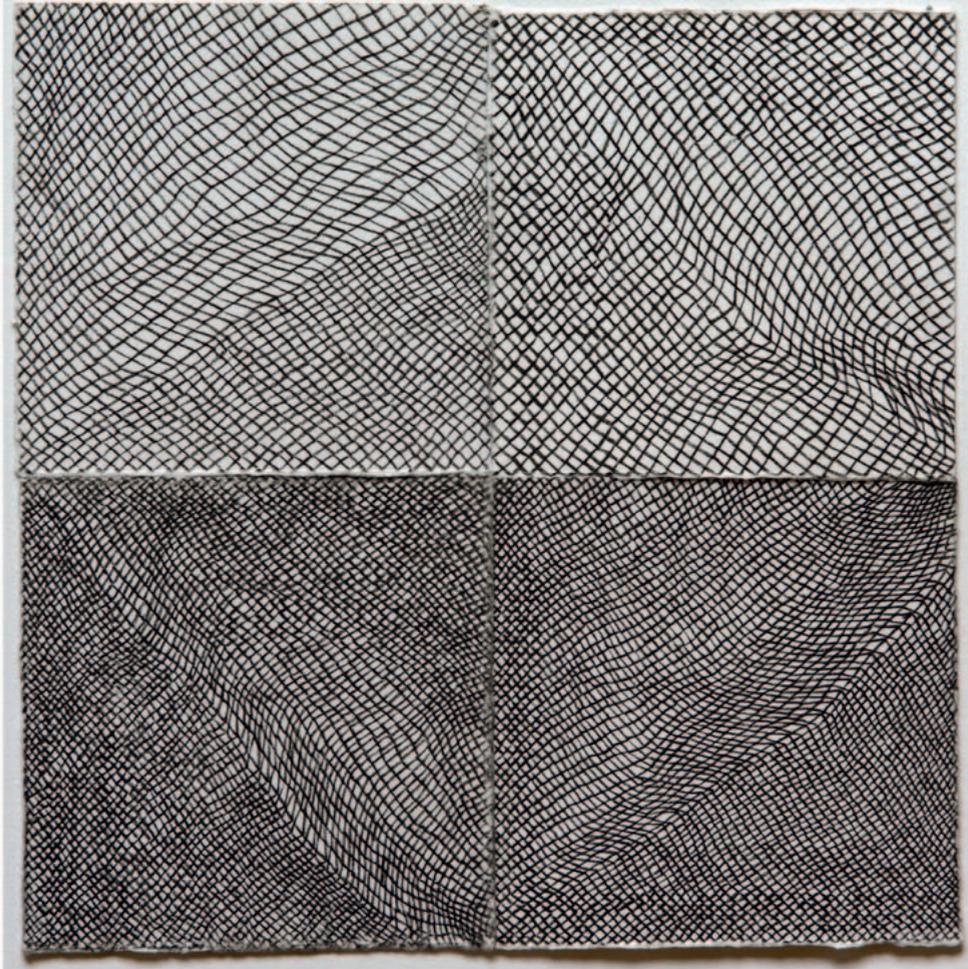
*Cloth for Margaret Fitzgerald 2*, detail 2013

Charcoal on paper

36 Panels

60 x 60cm overall

Photo credit: Matthew Newton



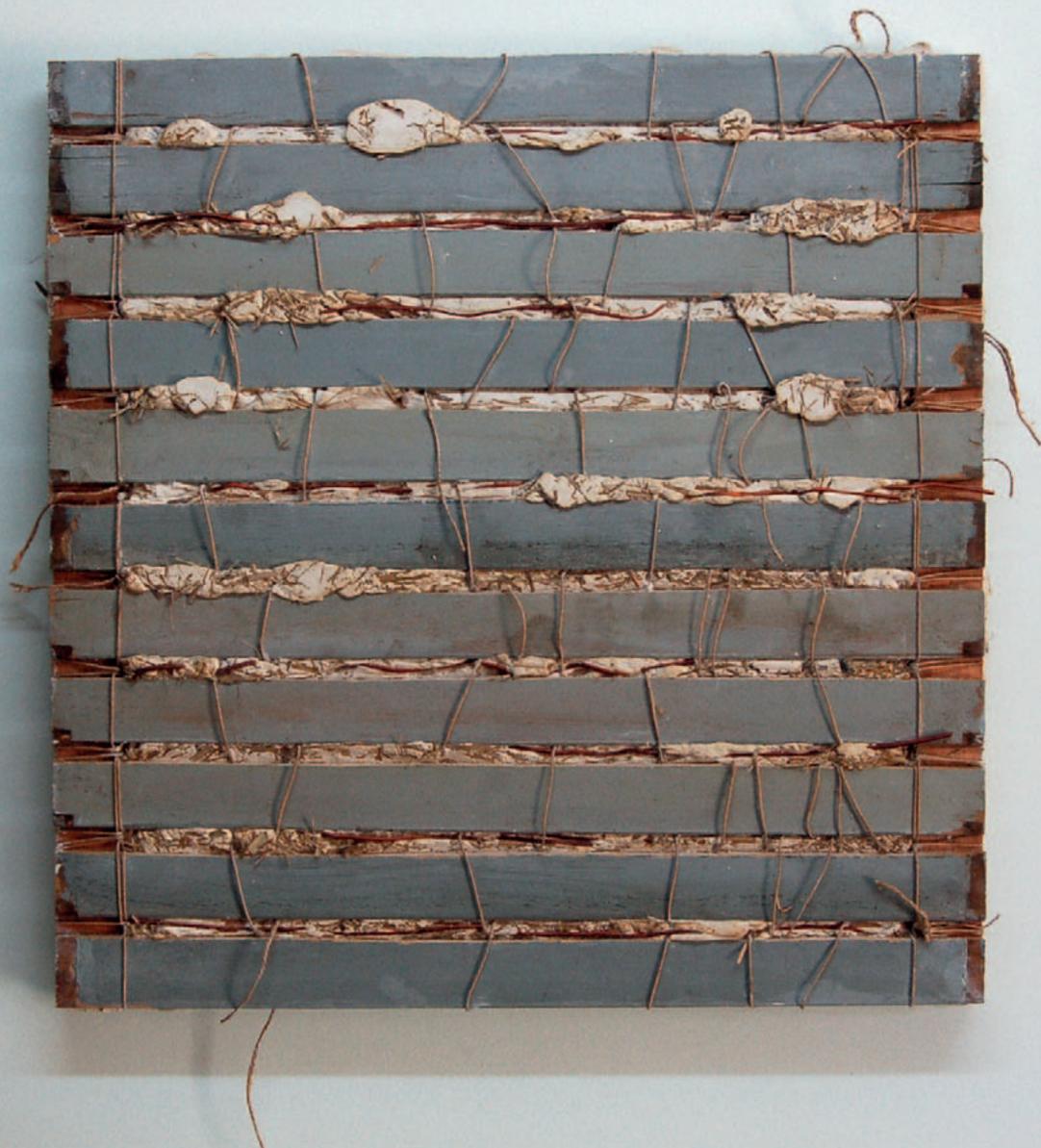
SHARYN WOODS

*Between the Strands, 2013*

Wood, plaster, copper, straw, string

One of four panels

50 x 50cm



















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**Ten**      ● **Tasmania's**      ● **15 - 24**  
**Days on**      ● **International**      ● **March**  
**the Island**      ● **Arts Festival**      ● **2013**

