

Resurrection on the Shorelines: A Short Speculation on the Role of Islands as Metaphors in the Twenty-first Century

All mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated...As therefore the bell that rings to a sermon, calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to come: so this bell calls us all: but how much more me, who am brought so near the door by this sickness ...No man is an island, entire of itself...any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

John Donne (1572-1631), from *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, 'Meditation XVII'.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of the island as a metaphor has for many centuries provided an enduring focus for literature and art. It has been used in a range of ways – as a signifier of isolation, of loneliness, of being cut off from a broader community, and at other times as a microcosm of wider society, or again as a potentially perfect creation of community – as a utopia. In other ways, islands have also been used as sites from which to describe dystopias, places that breed cultures premised on conditions of oppression, deprivation and fear.

In any consideration of the impact of islands on our collective literary or metaphorical consciousness in the West, it is difficult not to start with John Donne, whose *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, 'Meditation XVII,' has proved to be an ongoing inspiration for so many writers and thinkers. Yet in this age of scepticism, where we're all so inured to quotations, it seems almost corny to quote Donne; all the more so in relation to a small sand island off the coast of Brisbane. And given that the world-view of Donne's time accepted myth and metaphor as valid means towards searching for ways of understanding the world, the potential of invoking Donne seems all the more bankrupt.

We live in times that understand the meaning of bankruptcy in an acute but perhaps narrowly focused way. The shock of the global financial collapse has also given rise to questions about whether we might be at the end of a significant phase of history, one that could be described as a post-enlightenment era. Even so, the enlightenment values that emphasise the importance of rationalism and quantifiable evidence have not yet been coaxed into re-admitting other methodologies that might include mythology and allegory, or even the creative imagination, as bedfellows that may be equally helpful means in attempts to 'make sense' of the world.

In terms of empirical values alone, Peel Island is remarkable for a number of reasons¹ – it survives as the only material evidence of enforced incarceration by the Australian Government for sufferers of Hansen's disease, better known as leprosy. Peel was established as a lazaret in 1907 (remaining open until 1959), and prior to this many of the Moreton Bay islands had also been annexed to house 'others' who did not fit governmental ideals of a healthy, well-controlled society. Inebriates, the old and infirm, paupers and the "badly disabled"² had also been removed from general society on the mainland to segregated colonies on the smaller islands off the coast in Moreton Bay, and in 1874 they were removed from the town of Dunwich on Stradbroke Island to the smaller island of Peel.

The idea of taking unsavoury persons and annexing them offshore had been, of course, part of Britain's plan in colonising Australia; it provided a model for incarceration that has endured in this country up until the present. And Britain has also been conscious of her status as an island, separate from the rest of Europe. Donne's own insular speculations had been influenced by those of Thomas More, whose *Utopia*, written in 1515, was a critique of British society that made a plea for social interdependence. It was the singular lack of social interdependence in Britain and the rest of Europe during More's time that led him to write his book, influencing later Renaissance writers such as Donne. However, More's imaginary Utopia was not an idealisation of a separate, self-sustaining island. Rather, it was a proposition that questioned the character of the 'civilisation' he knew to be riddled with corruption, deceit and expediency.

Donne's devotional tract emphasises the necessity of all men to feel conjoined to a greater social body. It is also an appeal to consider the continuities of our own communities with the communities of the past as much as it is about those who share time as well as space. It's an appeal that challenges the finality of death as a barrier against a sense of community that can transcend time. Donne's 'Meditation' interprets time as a continuum – as a single chapter that is translated and re-translated according to changes in the social and cultural context. In this sense history is something to be understood and re-invested, and so in turn it is possible to interpret the series of residencies that took place on Peel Island last year as one of those ongoing chapters of the re-translation of its history.

The following is a series of stories told to me by a group of artist-students, each of whom took part in a residency program at Peel Island during 2008. The residency was established in collaboration with Roland Dowling of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), who had been introduced to me by Rhonda Bryce and members of the organisation Friends of Peel Island (FOPI) – a group of people who, for various reasons including the personal and historical, remain committed to preserving Peel Island as a site that bears evidence of its former existence as a leper colony.

In the discussions and site visit that followed, it became clear that Peel would prove to be an ideal place for artists and art students to explore ideas about a sense of place through the island's history and its environment. The place itself was compelling enough; the environmental beauty of the island would have been sufficiently seductive to lure anyone to consider it the perfect place for a short residency; and the fact that large tracts of it are out of bounds without the authority of the EPA made it seem even more appealing: almost like a personal retreat.

But it is the legacy of the histories associated with the island that make this appeal all the more complex and compelling – its former role as a lazaret just off the coast of Brisbane seemed to be shrouded in myths and conjecture. Somehow the very idea of leprosy seems to be particularly un-Queensland; it's a word that still holds associations with biblical or medieval times, with images of the afflicted wrapped in filthy rags mournfully ringing a bell to warn everyone off. Such apparitions seemed oddly out of synch with the pristine white sands and (almost) pristine sea of a typical Queensland island. But the surface sheen of “beautiful one day, perfect the next”³ glosses over a wealth of contradictions and complexities, for much of Queensland's history – like much of Australia's in general – has been the subject of wilful amnesia, and even just a little digging often unearths a rich loam of surprising, frequently alarming stories.

Another factor made the argument for the potential of this residency particularly persuasive – there was something extraordinary in the devotion of those people who had taken on the role of keeping the island's history alive. You couldn't help but be struck by their commitment to making sure the place would survive as a site that could 'speak' about so many complex issues that continue as part of Australian society today. Even the briefest visit to the site makes evident the devotion and care that has been exercised to hold off the eventual disappearance of the former lazaret.

Australia doesn't have many 'ruins' as such. The first invaders made a big mistake when they went looking for landmarks and monuments as markers of a sophisticated culture. For the level of sophistication of the cultures they found can be assessed by the ongoing refusal to *impose* cultural artefacts and practices on the country. Rather, what we now recognise are cultures that are all the more remarkable for working *with* the country; and part of the legacy of that custodianship lies in the ecological diversity that had been maintained for over 30,000 years – a diversity that has become threatened with the impact of less sympathetic practices of land management. The long continuous knowledge-base of indigenous peoples has been passed on from generation to generation through the need for ritual and storytelling and the honouring of shared symbolic orders and value systems.

Although indigenous cultures in Australia are diverse, they each value the importance of bringing history – or the past – into the present through processes of physical embodiment. Another way of saying this is that they value the need to 'press the flesh' – to celebrate together – to continually re-enact those rituals and performances central to their culture, and to re-invent them into new forms.

Other cultures have attempted to embody this need for the whole community to be present in order to remember specific events in particular places by erecting monuments. These monuments are often established by official bodies, and seem to be utilised as a substitute

for those acts whereby groups of people get together and 'call up the past into the present' by 're-membering' together. This word, re-membering, has a physicality to it – as if the act involves a bringing together of different parts of the body; in particular there's a sense of reconnection of the limbs to the body – of a kind of re-joining that would make that body active. It recalls the early self-understanding of the Christian Church, where the congregation is literally 'the body of the church.' That is, it's not the building itself but the people in it that made up the idea of the church. So this idea of a group of people getting together to re-member makes the process quite an organic thing; every time the past is called up into the present new relationships are potentially possible.

This is a process that gives the past 'more teeth,' because people actually learn to recognise the continuities and contingencies of aspects of the past in their daily lives. It's therefore a process that makes the past a little dangerous; when people recall the past together, the sense of community, and of belonging to a place, is strengthened. And that in turn gives people the power not only to learn from the mistakes of the past, but also to draw emotional and imaginative sustenance from the events of the past.

In Australia, we can readily visit the various rock art sites and the *bora* rings and important landmarks from Uluru to the islands of Moreton Bay, but the culture of those places comes alive most for us when the custodians of these sites, those who have the cultural authority, can pass appropriate information down to us. It is then that the sites come alive. It is during such encounters that the continuum between place and the people responsible for caring for that place becomes most meaningful.

And it's the same when those sites have non-indigenous histories – when we learn what went on before, we can have a much richer understanding of some of the tendencies and traits of our contemporary world. So the value of a place like Peel Island lies in its ability to give up some of the wisps and shards of memories about what it once was, and what it represents, and how its existence affected the lives of those who were forcibly incarcerated there. And how, in turn, their families were affected. And, in turn again, how we today become affected by the legacies of that past.

The members of the EPA and FOPI who have worked as custodians of Peel for some time realise all this. They have curated and coordinated and collected material, from which activity it is possible to bring the island's history into the future with a single-minded dedication. And they've involved a large number of other communities, too – the families of those who spent time on Peel, historians, politicians, the denizens of Moreton Bay, the curious, and now... members of an art college.

If this project is to be of real value, the time and resources offered generously by members of the EPA for artist-students to stay for a short residency on Peel should ideally cast light on the ways in which the history of such a place remains significant today. The following stories are not offered as an analysis – the time since the residencies occurred is much too short for that. And they are not meant as history – the history of Peel has been well documented in Peter Ludlow's book *Peel Island: Paradise or Prison?*⁴ and *The Leper Shall Dwell Alone: Peel Island Lazaret Conservation Plan*, by Thom Blake and Robert Riddel.⁵ Rather, they are presented to accompany a body of visual art that has resulted from these residencies, as a

background context that does not seek to explain the work but that might sit parallel with the visual works and extend them in some way.

Even at this stage of development of the residency program, it is possible to ascertain some overlaps and synergies that run through the experiences of individual participants. One of these lies in the fact that their experience of the island, and with it, their deeper understanding of its history, seems to have given some of the students insight into previously unearthed aspects of their own lives. This may be particularly true for filmmaker Teone Reinthal, who drew on her own experience as a thalidomide-affected person to create a deeper empathy with the story of patients who had been incarcerated there. Before her Peel residency, Teone had worked mainly through the matter-of-fact distancing necessary for documentary work; but the series she made after her time there was marked by a more poetic present.

And for Natasha Cordasic, a growing understanding of the kind of prejudices that forced 'others' into outposts of rehabilitation in the past triggered her own childhood memories of being 'different.' She used these experiences of alienation to produce a number of works that go deep into her own family and cultural history in order to search for a contemporary agency that can join past to present and culture to culture.

The sense of the mistakes of the past being echoed in the present is especially evocative in the work of Dacchi Dang, whose experience in refugee camps haunted his time on Peel. However, the works he has produced are sympathetic and generous, and seem to call for ways of listening to the shards of material evidence we have left there that will allow a stronger recognition of what might be possible.

The demands of formal concerns and of materials and skills are paramount for all visual artists, and for some residents these constraints have interacted fruitfully with the subject matter of their work. This is true of both Miles Hall and Rikizo Nishina, whose works are as poetic as they are aesthetically inclined. However, their accounts also suggest that during their residencies the formal concerns of each artist also found ways of morphing into metaphorical potential; Miles speaks of 'containment' and the potential 'liberation' of the eye or imagination, and Rikizo's works seem to whisper about the power of the unseen in an aesthetic that draws as much from the culture of his native Japan as it does from the Australian landscape by which he is inspired.

The island's potential to evoke both seduction and repulsion has been remarked on in the writing of both Peter Ludlow and Thom Blake and Robert Riddel. Artist Jennie Jackson continues this theme in photographic works that are as disquieting as they are mesmerising. Jennie creates what she describes as 'imagined landscapes' by technological means, and invokes a 'de-natured, impossible nature' to suggest ideas about control and confinement that have such a strong legacy on Peel Island.

Other accounts underscore the value of the residency as an opportunity to spend extended periods of intimate time with fellow artists and with the members of the EPA who were present to assist residents. In Miles Hall's words, "the EPA guys were fantastic – their attentiveness and the way they were just there for us – telling us about the history of the place and filling us in with some of the history of the other islands nearby really added substance to the experience."

The accounts of Eric Rossi and Moe Louanjli highlight some of the lighter aspects of the residency and remind us of how valuable the resources of extended, uninterrupted time and relative solitude can be. These accounts highlight the contradictions of Peel Island's history, where imposed solitude was a curse sometimes worse than the affliction the patients had to endure. In his work, Jim Waller uses the island as an almost ideal metaphor for a post-modern dystopia, and explores this notion through drawings and paintings that evoke the complex and often contradictory overlays of historical and contemporary experiences of place.

It is possible to see all these residencies as a continuation of various aspects of Peel's legacy. One of its characteristics as a lazaret was the unusually international mix of its inhabitants; certainly a strong sense of internationalism is echoed in the cultural mix of artists who have attended the residency so far, and each has brought his or her rich and diverse experiences to bear on the totality of aesthetic responses to the island and its history.

Another continuing aspect is the experience of living on the island as simultaneously one of attraction and repulsion. Where the solitude and peacefulness offered by the romantic idea of islands is promised as an all-too-rare-luxury – a place where time can be enjoyed slowly and experiences can be reflective – imposed solitude metamorphoses into isolation, segregation and penance. The fact that those suffering Hansen's Disease were removed from their families and communities and forced by the government to live in a segregated compound brings home both the fragility and value of feeling part of a community and the times into which one is born.

And, perhaps predictably, there has been a strong appeal to the 'haunted' aspect of the environment at Peel. This is not unusual within representations of Australian landscape – the "weird melancholy" invoked by the writer Marcus Clarke⁶ to define the poetry of Adam Lindsay Gordon has been frequently cited in descriptions of European painting from the early colonial period onwards. The belief that indigenous peoples would 'die out' has been identified by art historians and critics as underlying the pervasive, mournful spirit in representations of place in Australia. However, even today, alongside recognition and celebration of the fact that indigenous cultures have not only survived but have created some of this country's most dynamic and influential contemporary cultural forms, the tendency to visualise the Australian landscape as unsettling, morose or strangely haunted persists in contemporary visual arts, film and literature. And it is especially true when artists seek out a sense of continuity with the past.

Certainly part of Peel's historical legacy lies in the tangible evidence of the failure of government to deal with 'difference.'⁷ And although it can be argued that, in part, the island's role as a lazaret was born of governmental attempts to protect its citizens from contamination, the entire enterprise was nevertheless marked by the blindness and stupidity of uninformed fears. The works of so many of these artist-students produced as a result of their experiences on Peel Island reflect sadness, or disappointment, or at times wry amusement at the blindness of such fears, and in so doing reinforce Peel's role as a reminder of the outcome of attitudes and tendencies that still continue through similar processes today; evidence that its role as an allegorical site may not yet be exhausted.

However, there is another very strange conundrum at play here: it involves the possibility that any reconsideration of the mythical potential of islands at this particular point of history may seem like an about-face. For it was on the shorelines of such islands in the Pacific Ocean that any lingering belief in the veracity of myths and metaphors as valid means for understanding the world were abandoned in favour of empiricism.

In his book *Writing the New World: Imaginary Voyages and Utopias of the Great Southern Land*,⁸ David Fausett describes how the final European 'discovery' of that much-anticipated great southern landmass we now call Australia killed off, by default, an entire historical legacy of imaginative and speculative literature and art. For in the end (the end of all those centuries of exploration), the 'discovery' of that greatest of southern islands sunk all those rafts and flotillas of imaginary mythology that had proved such rich flotation devices for moral and ethical speculation. What Fausett has defined as the "austral theme" had been spawned through the interrelationship of geographical discovery and literature, and can be traced from Ancient Greece in a number of meandering trails that encompass the adventures of Marco Polo through to Renaissance sojourns in the 'far East,' and include accounts of Portuguese explorations beyond the Spice Islands and secretive Dutch journeys south of the equator. It was a theme that provided rich ground for experimenting with ideas of identity and otherness, for trialling belief-systems and assumptions, and for speculating about the value of the prevailing ideas and perceptions of the time.

But as Fausett notes, once the rich source of imagery suggested by the imaginary realm of *terra australis incognita* had run aground against the tangible data of geospatial empirical evidence, "utopian writing in its original (geospatial) sense"⁹ foundered as the value of empirical knowledge gained epistemological precedence. Fausett describes how the allegories spawned by the "austral theme" had been forged from a fruitful interaction between mythical and empirical knowledge. But as commercial expansion continued to surge forward into what had previously been territories of the imagination alone, the role of mythical knowledge gradually came to be associated with "the dogma and chicanery with which state and church connived to prop up the remnants of feudal society."¹⁰ Empirical knowledge, on the other hand, came to be associated with challenges to the old order.

However, there is more than one way of keeping control of geospatial territories as well as the territories of the imagination. And it may well be that the detritus of the order we find ourselves standing amidst today is the residue of values established on unflinching belief in the benefits of rationality and all things quantifiable. Strangely, the will to myth and allegory continues even during times when the value of such methodologies is held in disrepute. And as sites for the imagination, islands survive as fertile beds in which to plant seeds for new myths and allegories, ones which draw sustenance from bodies of 'rational' knowledge that have grown from such pursuits as socio-political enquiry, history or environmental understanding. It may well be that the kind of critical, self-reflexive utopian writing whose demise was lamented by Fausett is in fact undergoing a process of regeneration into a myriad of expressions from the very shorelines of the islands where the genre was thought to have expired.

ARTISTS

— Miles Hall

Much of Miles Hall's work is centred on the material substances from which paintings are constructed – the paint itself; its viscosity and the way it drips and runs and smears; or the surfaces on which that paint is smeared – the way in which canvas or board or aluminium holds and clings onto the paint. The forms and marks and fields of colour laid onto these surfaces often act as records of the motions and actions that produced them – of dipping, smearing or spreading.

They are, more often than not, very self-consciously beautiful works – works that celebrate the way in which art can exist within a more or less separate aesthetic realm, one where the references in the work are directed back to the history and 'pedigree' of art itself. There is, therefore, a strong sense that the work of this artist draws deeply from a modernist tradition in which art is, by and large, about art itself. Given this aesthetic orientation, it may seem odd that such an artist would seek inspiration in a place like Peel Island.

The series of drawings he produced there are no less formalist or modernist in motivation than his work produced in the studio environment, and yet a more prolonged scrutiny of the subtle, sensuous surfaces the artist creates not only bears evidence of what appealed to him there, but also suggests ways in which these drawings are evidence of explorations of a kind of visual emancipation within an enforced containment.

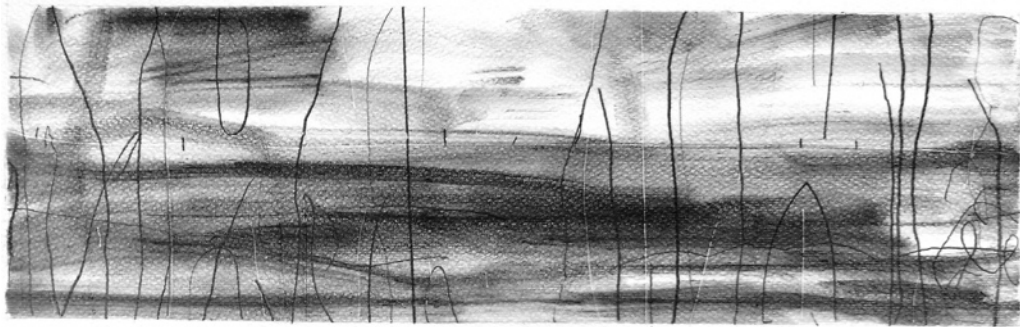


Figure 1: Miles Hall, 2008, *Untitled #3*, graphite on paper, 35 x 42cm.

The drawings Miles produced from his residency have silky skeins of graphite rubbed over and into the thick porous paper. These surfaces have then been erased back into, and etched by fine, sharp lines. The images are responses to the water and the horizon; there is evidence of the verticals of trees and scratchy bushland, and of passages of light reflecting off water; for although the forms are abstracted, a strong sense of landscape remains. There are details of the undergrowth running along the bottom of some of the picture planes, yet at other times these references to aspects of landscape operate as a play of marks and gestures contained by the geometric space defined by the edge of the drawing. There's a feeling of chance in these works – an intimation that has been kept by the self-consciously random nature of the

marks, and there is an overall appeal that comes from the implication that the image has arisen into being without too much effort.

Even in the most apparently formal of Miles' descriptions of his work there is evidence of another kind of empathy – an urge to think through the material and formal qualities of the work into a more internal understanding of how those who came before him on the island might also have found ways of interpreting their time and place.

— Natasha Cordasic

One of the videos Natasha Cordasic produced for her residency depicts a still grove of fir trees. The filtering process through which the image has been screened transforms the colours into an unearthly psychedelia, and the trunks of the trees appear to crawl with pixels as the light flickers through the leaf canopy. The accompanying soundscape emerges as a kind of parallel universe, complete with the familiar noises of everyday insects – the drone of a 'mozzie' increases to a maddening pitch until you are overwhelmed by the need to slap it, and then disappears. A cicada trills; a cricket chirps, and then a crow calls. Within the ring of the grove a figure seems to be performing an arcane ritual. It is not clear what is happening – the figure dissolves into the circle of trees and then re-emerges distinct from them. It is as if there is a kind of gathering taking place. Slowly it becomes apparent that things are being harvested from the trees – simple, straight shapes – objects oddly out of place amidst the organic shapes of the grove.

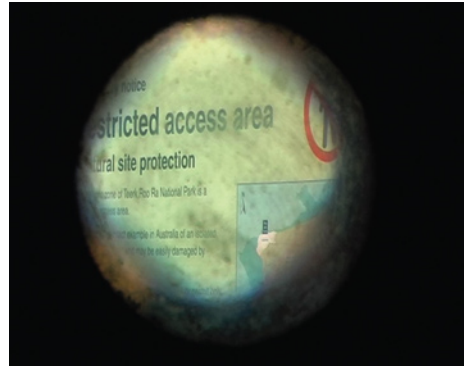


Figure 2: Natasha Cordasic, 2008, *Rest Ashore*, digital video still.

And it also becomes apparent that the figure is that of a woman. It is a shaky, hesitant observation. The shapes are tenuous. The sounds of the bush seem to come from a place that is timeless in comparison to the actions of the ritual. Although it is not fully apparent in the video, the objects that are being incongruously harvested from the trees are fluorescent tubes. Yet despite the difficulty in determining their identity, the incongruity of their presence in the bush lends a whimsical, poignant aspect to the video – the implied futility of having sowed and then reaped fruits that are incommensurable with their context.

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In another video made by Natasha she performs a simple everyday ritual in the interior of the former Catholic Church on the island. The scene opens on an almost monochromatic still-life – an enamel bowl and a huge, chipped jug on a wash-stand; the clarity of slanted light falls and flickers onto the vertical striations of veejays behind. The arrangement is as timeless as a Delft still-life and resembles the original set-up of the rooms in the white compound of the lazaret. There are very few props for this ritual – an apple and a small bouquet of weeds that has been gathered from the grounds that surround the church.

A young woman appears. She pours water into the bowl from the heavy jug and washes her face in the water to which these ingredients have been added. The act is a purifying one – a moment of intimacy that we watch as outsiders. The light dances across the vertical boards. The shadows are soft. From time to time the crisp clarity of the sounds outside perforates the stillness inside as occasional insects swoop in and then retreat. She dries her face with a towel. The act is over.

What are we to make of this simple video? When I ask Natasha what motivated her to create such works there – in that time – she is hesitant. However, it is as if in that room, in that simple act, it may yet be possible to thread together a whole range of relationships and overlays and interpretations that might lead us forward into the future.

— Jennie Jackson

When I ask Jennie the question about what motivated the work she produced on Peel, she replies that she is interested in “making the invisible visible” – she notes that she is, in part, producing *imagined* landscapes as much as she is describing aspects of what she experienced there.

She talks about how the dual responses of attraction and repulsion identified in Peter Ludlow’s *Peel Island: Paradise or Prison?* continue into the present. Jennie describes the bushland that surrounds the fringes of the settlement and continues through to the centre as having a kind of monotony – much of which derives from an undergrowth that has evolved since the banning of the regular controlled burnings that were part of indigenous land management in this country. Without it the diversity of coastal forest dwindles and, as current non-indigenous management programs are focused on protecting what remains of the lazarret buildings, a dilemma is set up –how to manage the vegetation of the island while maintaining its cultural heritage?



Figure 3: Jennie Jackson, 2009, *A Hereditary Explanation*, digital photographic print, 30cm x 120 cm.

Jennie’s photographically manipulated images have been taken from the forest edges just beyond the settlement and the graveyard. Using the photographic technique of splicing, she focuses on individual aspects of those spaces and duplicates them. The result is the sensation that architectonic forms are being manifested from within the riotous organic growth. It is as if steeples and archways and tentative monuments have formed themselves through intertwined branches and patterns of light without any human industry. Jennie speaks of ‘a presence’ in the landscape. “You do have a sense of the spirits of people who might have lived there...a

sense you are in a place with a history, and that it's not necessarily a happy history. In that sense it's like a ghost town.”

The architectonic forms that appear in Jennie's photographs seem captured in a state of emergence – it is as if the bush is renegotiating terms for the places it is currently in the process of destroying. Jennie describes how the bush has reclaimed many of the old lazaret buildings; large trees have grown through collapsed buildings and termites have almost completely destroyed most of the buildings that had not already been demolished. When the lazaret was closed, most of the buildings were dismantled and the timbers stacked in piles waiting collection by the demolisher who would take them to the mainland. However, it is said that the unlucky salvager lost his boat in the first trip, and as a consequence the stacks of timber are still standing awaiting removal, each part marked with Roman numerals as a guide for their reconstruction on the mainland. Many timbers are now little more than frail painted surfaces, the inner wood reduced to dust by termites. They exist as insubstantial ghosts; fragile exoskeletons of things that still seem to be awaiting another life on the mainland.

— Dacchi Dang

Dacchi Dang first arrived in Australia as an asylum seeker from Vietnam in November 1982. He escaped from Vietnam by boat and arrived in Malaysia in March 1982 where he spent time in an internment camp waiting to be granted refugee status. After nine months' internment he was accepted into Australia as a refugee and became a citizen in 1984.

Dacchi speaks with wonder about the fact that so few of the patients tried to escape from Peel, especially given the fact that Stradbroke Island and the mainland are so visible from the shorelines. He recalls how no land was visible from the island of Pulau Bidong, where he was interned, and surmises that if it had been, people would have set off in droves by whatever means they could. He talks about his feelings of isolation, desperation and despair on Pulau Bidong, and wonders how much longer he could have borne the weight of such feelings. He wonders also about the lifetime of such emotions that must have been harboured by so many of the patients on Peel.

Dacchi works in a number of media, but on his second trip back to Peel he chose a pinhole camera with which to make his images. With pinhole cameras, images are produced by a very



Figure 4: Dacchi Dang, 2008, *Lost*, black and white silver gelatin, 27.9 x 35.6 cm.

simple process: the image does not pass through a series of lenses, resulting in a reduced depth of field compared with a more tightly focused camera. Because the pinhole lacks the rapid fire-shutter speeds of more sophisticated cameras, the images produced are blurred and soft – there is a dreamy feeling to them that Dacchi feels was particularly appropriate for recording his images on Peel. There is a simplicity and immediacy to the technique that is also appealing to this artist, which he explains in a lyrical way – the simplicity of the image often seems to convey an immediacy that seems less reconstructed than that of other forms of photography and, partly because of this, the dreamlike quality of the images can have a veracity that is unnerving.

Dacchi's pinhole images are of the huts in the men's and women's compounds and the landscape around these areas. The ghostly quality of some of these works is suggestive of other presences beyond the material – or perhaps of the potential of particular materials to evoke a range of associations.

Dacchi is hoping that his next trip to the island will involve turning one of the 10' x 12' x 12' huts into a huge pinhole camera that will capture the view beyond. The dimensions of the huts are almost a perfect scaled-up version of Dacchi's own pinhole. He estimates the exposure time at somewhere between five and ten minutes, and says that, like the patients in those huts, the process will be about waiting time. There is something peculiarly evocative about converting one of these huts into its own recording device; transforming it into a simple invention for capturing the same scene it's looked out on for so many seasons. It's rather like giving the hut a kind of agency through which to speak; like giving the very walls the power to write or to create their own imagery.

— Moe Louanjli

Moe applied to take up the Peel Island residency five weeks after his arrival from Paris, where he had been studying at the Sorbonne and the ENSBA. Originally from Casablanca, Morocco, Moe has lived most of his life in Paris but had also spent some years in Perth, where he continued his education.

Moe's art practice has utilised a number of media. He is interested in different ways of mapping, and also in the way in which dreams of utopia can affect such undertakings as urban planning. So, the lazaret was interesting as a kind of dystopian model. During his time there Moe produced a large number of photographic images, each of which bear traces of the ways in which the inhabitants of the island interacted with the environment. Several material aspects of life on the island emerge as important to this documentation.

One of these is concrete. This is the subject of one of Moe's images that has been taken from inside one of the huts reserved for indigenous inmates at floor level, revealing a concrete floor that lies broken up and destroyed. Tendrils of vegetation are pushing their way through the cracks, and the dark doorway frames the simple form of another indigenous hut beyond. Moe describes the long-term struggle that had to be undertaken before the indigenous inmates were given the rights to have concrete in their vestigial dwellings. He calls upon historical evidence that details the bare earth of the flooring of accommodation in which four inmates were expected to dwell at a time. This series also details the corrugated iron of



Figure 5: Moe Louanjli, 2008, *Veranda*, photographic digital print (ultrachrome on Ilford Smooth Pearl), 61 x 61 cm.

which the huts were constructed, and the artist talks about how these materials bear evidence of power and struggle; the metal huts of the indigenous dwellings made for infinitely more severe experiences of weather than did the wooden buildings of the white patients and the workers.

Many of Moe's images focus on the deterioration of surfaces – the rust on enamel pots and implements, the highly textured bark of a tree, the pitting on metal implements, and the patina on an abandoned cicada shell. He speaks of the settlement as a place where everything is falling apart – the buildings, the implements, the history, the memories. He speaks also of the slow deterioration of the human body as the effects of Hansen's Disease gradually took hold.

English is the third language in which Moe is proficient, and it is perhaps partly for this reason that he finds such interest in the ways in which things are described in the historical accounts of Peel Island. There is evidence enough of ironies in such language. He is interested in the fact that the historical literature refers to "the patients," who seem in fact to be treated more like inmates. He is also interested in the battle for including "kitchenettes" in each of the women's huts – a term that seems so feminised and dainty – the battle for which had been started by the infamous Rose Donovan who "was always misbehaving." The success of this struggle meant that the women were able to – and from then on were expected to – eat on their own; in the end, perhaps a kind of Pyrrhic victory in a place where isolation was so profound. Moe's interest in such contradictions is seen when his images are exhibited as series; the relationships between the individual works suggest the tension that exists between the will to exist and perform as an individual and the drive to be part of humanity as a whole.

— Eric Rossi

Eric describes his experience on the island as generating responses in him that he found surprising. He has produced a three-screen video in response to his residency on Peel – three image-sets that seem very unrelated at first sight. One features two shots of huts on Peel – one of corrugated iron for indigenous patients, and one of the wooden huts built for white patients. On another screen he has photographed the surface of a block of evaporating dry ice, and the third screen features images of a helicopter. Eric describes how so much of his work has focused on memory and gravity, and when asked about the relationship between these three images, he talks about disappearing knowledge, dissipating energies, and the struggle of ideas and memories to become airborne. There is no direct connection between



Figures (from top):

Figure 6: Eric Rossi, 2008, *Helicopter Shot 1: Memory and Gravity* (*Gravity Evasion Screen*), video still (in-flight).

Figure 7: Eric Rossi, 2008, *Ice Shot 2: Memory and Gravity* (*Dissipation Screen*), video still (close-up).

Figure 8: Eric Rossi, 2008, *Helicopter Shot 4: Memory and Gravity* (*Gravity Evasion Screen*), video still (rotors in-flight).

these images, but the stark white-on-black of the dry ice cube melting into air is a metaphorical reminder of transience. The helicopter images, on the other hand, are reminders of the effort and energy it takes to get man-made inventions off the ground. Flanked by these images of movement through and into air, the stillness of the huts seems all the more suffocating. Eric talks about the poetic associations of the word 'gravity' – the gravity of the situation in this place, and literally of its leaden pull. He talks of the importance memory must have played for those who were incarcerated on Peel – of how it would have served as an imaginary lifeline that could join them to the wider world from which they had been unwillingly extracted.

His own experience, by contrast, is remembered as one of strong camaraderie with the other artists. He speaks of feeling a sense of privilege at the opportunity to spend time there in such a unique situation. Eric's own boyhood was spent around the Bay, "mucking around in boats" – he has held a boating license since he was 15. He talks about the thrill of crossing the Southport bar when he was really young, standing at the wheel of his father's boat, and he tells of how many of the local kids around Runaway Bay had their own tinnies, and how they'd use them to explore the environment at Horseshoe Bay, a reserve where it was possible to come across such wonders as turtle bones, live starfish and full scallops at low tide. Some of Eric's strongest recollections of his time spent on Peel were of the meals the students shared; memories of shared meals and conversations run strong among those artists who have participated in the residencies. A particular piquancy is granted by the fact that such occasions are set amidst the almost tangible memories of other histories; histories that act as a reminder of the penalty of being forcibly removed from the community one has been a part of.

— Teone Reinthal

Since attending the residency on Peel Island, Teone has produced five experimental short film responses to Peel. Their titles are *The Tzaraath*, *Shadows and Refractions*, *Four Tribes*, *Aquarium* and *Cut Glass* (*Aquarium 2*).

Of these, *Aquarium* emerges as the most highly personal account. Although most of the images and historical references pertain to Peel, it is simultaneously a document about the artist's personal experiences and an investigation of the ways in which these experiences overlap with material documenting the emotional encounters of some of the patients of Peel.



Figure 9: Teone Reinthal, 2008, *Empties*, colour-treated photograph, 10 x 7.5 cm.

She describes how creative enquiry led her to experiment with ideas of 'narrative collaboration' involving her own personal experiences intertwined with accounts derived from Peter Ludlow's book *Paradise or Prison*, and subsequent readings from the Riddel report and other anecdotal accounts. One of her most memorable impressions came from one woman's account of a deep and profound feeling of calm that came over her after being diagnosed with Hansen's Disease and arriving on Peel Island. She described the feeling as a tremendous relief at her own worldly obliteration, her retirement from the expectations and pressures of society.

Teone has predominantly worked as a filmmaker producing government-sponsored documentaries about indigenous communities, work that has required a matter-of-fact observational approach. This was the approach she used when she first undertook the residency on Peel but later on, as she was reviewing the footage she had accumulated, she was struck by the links between her images of a multitude of decaying surfaces and "our furiously human obsession to eradicate all signs of warts, infection, mould, decay." She adapted this more poetic approach to her subject matter in the film *The Tzaraath*. She explains the title as relating to a disease detailed in both Jewish writings (the Tanach) and biblical sources (Leviticus, chapters 13–14) that afflicts the skin in a way similar to leprosy. In each of these sources the affliction is associated with retribution for sin, and its influence is also described as extending to the material habitation of the victims.

For Teone, the continuities between these biblical descriptions and the rotting, decaying, corroded surfaces of so many parts of the island seemed profound, and her brief film with the Hebrew title focuses on the entire island as a microcosm of affliction.

Teone describes how the sound tracks for her films are integral; the music for *Shadows and Refractions*, titled *The Lazaret*, was composed *in situ* by her partner Steve Reinthal and

recorded direct to camera. The music for *Aquarium*, titled *Lorelei of Moreton*, was composed and recorded by Teone and alludes to the whispered songs of sorrow from hundreds of voices she imagines as having “drifted out on the tides and sea-mists, from deep inside the huts and the sheds on Peel...songs of yearning from the broken hearts of people deprived of touch, of affection, of love.”

When I ask Teone why she has chosen the title *Aquarium* for this work, she explains that, historically, Peel Island was a holding tank, an experimental observation station for the socially dangerous – it had been used successively as a quarantine station, an asylum for inebriates, and as a leprosarium. To this artist, the connected question as to whether she – or the audience for her work – identifies as either occupant or observer is one that hangs in the balance.

– Jim Waller



Figure 10: Jim Waller, 2008, *All Those Dreams Lost Here*, digital image.

At first glance, the paintings of Jim Waller seem to fall neatly within the traditional genre of figures in the landscape. However, a longer look reveals a kind of disjuncture at play – there is a sense of pastiche, where shards of observation and memory and data have been collaged together along with random facts to make some kind of contingent reality. This artist draws from the traditions of his practice in order to hold them up for closer scrutiny, as if to question the veracity of historical assumptions about the genre itself. This kind of self-doubt sets the work to one side of the typical modernist approach, and the deeply sceptical nature of this artist’s work is evident in the way in which highly traditional representations are reconfigured in new ways.

As with so many of the artists on this residency, Jim notes how the interaction with other participants triggered new ideas that often jostled with received ideas within their respective major research areas. In Jim’s case, his meeting with Dacchi Dang was instrumental in offering a first-hand

experience of the kinds of cultural disjunctions that are part of our daily understanding of place in Australia.

Jim estimates that during the residency he took approximately 900 'happy snaps' and made dozens of pen drawings – plenty of resource material from which to develop new work. He describes how these drawings already reveal a sense of hybrid environments – how the cleared lawns in the centre of the lazaret are surrounded by the unkempt character of the original environment that is gradually encroaching. He describes the site as having “a weird kind of out-of-placeness” about it – perhaps an evocation of that ‘weird melancholy’ that early colonial landscape artists identified as being associated with the Australian landscape. Jim does not see this space as an aspect of ‘a living history.’ Rather, he describes it as a history that has fallen into decay – with bits that have been lost, or broken or discontinued. And yet in his paintings disjuncture and discontinuity are the very subject of his work. It is as though the polyglot discontinuities of our contemporary experiences are used to re-form the picture-planes of a shared world-view that may have grown from the very will towards forgetting.

— Rikizo Nishina

When he arrived on Peel Island Rikizo found himself being drawn to the strong, flickering patterns of light and shade that filtered through the Australian vegetation. He was drawn to the fact that this light and patterning was so very different to that which he had experienced in Japan. Also, he was made more aware of the use of lighting in Japanese dwellings compared with those in Australia. In traditional Japanese houses, the use of *shoji* screens creates a diffused light that is then reflected off the simple *tatami* floor coverings; in general, the darker ceilings and lighter-coloured flooring is the reverse of home décor in Australia. Drawing inspiration from the celebrated essay on Japanese domestic aesthetics, *In Praise of Shadows*, by Jun’ichiro Tanizaki,¹⁴ Rikizo began a series of work that drew from his experience on Peel and extended that experience to his observations of other aspects of the Australian landscape during his residency here.



Figure 11, Rikizo Nishina, 2008, *Ksana*, video still.

Central to this body of work is a slow-moving video where forms of trees slowly emerge and then seem to evaporate, as if in a mist or perhaps a dream. The moving images of trees were taken from the veranda of one of the residences at night through a simple animation process that articulates single shots frame by frame. Rikizo used a torch to ‘draw with light’ on the landscape while the shutter of the camera was open, and the result is a tonally reduced field

that seems to be drawn more by hand than produced by technology. It appears like a forest of ghosts; a place where solid forms drift and melt into air, only to reappear in later passages.

Rikizo describes the first time he went to the island as feeling that it was like a paradisaical place – he was aware of the intense colours of the sea and the sky, of the bird-calls that laced in and out of the fabric of quietness. However, he says, during his second visit he became aware of a more sinister feeling. By that time he had become more aware of the island's history, and he describes an inexplicable sensation that came across him during his walks around the island and also at night, while he was engrossed in the lengthy process of photographing a stand of trees frame by frame.

However, there is no hint of any particular details of the history of the island in Rikizo's work. Rather, there is a sense in which the ambience of the place has been screened through his aesthetic sensibility and rendered in a poetic way in which it is possible to read the traces of two cultural influences. In these works, it's as if the artist's experience of place and memory has been translated into a formally beautiful minimalism that alludes to, rather than describes, the sense of place from which it arose.

- 1 "The significance of the island derives from its historic, social and aesthetic values, as well as the integrity of its natural environment." T Blake and R Riddel, *The Leper Shall Dwell Alone: Peel Island Lazaret Conservation Plan* (Brisbane: Department of Environment and Heritage, 1993), 38.
- 2 Peel Island operated as a quarantine station (1874-1906) and inebriates' home (1910-16). *Ibid.*, 35.
- 3 "Beautiful one day, perfect the next" is a slogan developed by the Queensland Tourist and Travel Corporation.
- 4 P Ludlow, *Peel Island: Paradise or Prison?* (Stone's Corner, Queensland: The Author, 2005).
- 5 See note 1.
- 6 Preface to *Sea Spray and Smoke Drift: The Poems of Adam Lindsay Gordon* (Melbourne: Claxson, Massina, 1876), v-vi.
- 7 "The Peel Island lazaret is significant as the only intact example in Australia of a lazaret designed on the principle of isolation, and also the only surviving former multi-racial lazaret in Australia." Blake and Riddel, *The Leper Shall Dwell Alone*, 29.
- 8 D Fausett, *Writing the New World: Imaginary Voyages and Utopias of the Great Southern Land* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993).
- 9 *Ibid.*, 2.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 11 Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, trans. TJ Harper and EG Seidensticker (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1977).

Pat HOFFIE is a visual artist based in Brisbane. For some time her work has focused on issues of Human Rights, and her series *Fully Exploited Labour* was the focus of a survey exhibition held at the University of Queensland Museum in February 2006, to coincide with a monograph on this series. Her installation titled *Maribyrmong - no place to weep* was included in the 2006 Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney's biennial survey exhibition titled *Interesting Times*. She has worked on a number of residencies in the Asia-Pacific region, and continues to work with artists and arts communities there. Professor Hoffie is also a writer who makes regular contributions to visual arts journals; she is the Queensland editor of *Artlink* magazine and has played active roles in the arts sector. She is currently a member of Viscopy and Asialink, and was a board member of NAVA, the Australia Council for the Arts, and is a past President of the Institute of Modern Art. She is currently Director of the research centre SECAP (Sustainable Environment and Culture, Asia-Pacific) at Queensland College of Art and is Griffith University's UNESCO Orbicom Chair in Communications.