Chapter 1. Introduction

_Making nature: Extinct Tasmanian plants_ is the title of an installation of art works which aims to commemorate the loss (due to extinction) of Tasmanian plants and to generate a sense of concern and urgency about the current escalation in extinction rates. Furthermore, my aim in making the art work is to induce reflection regarding the role members of society have played in the loss of these plants. Due to our lifestyle and land use practices, human existence affects and changes the natural world. By changing the composition of the natural world, we may unwittingly be contributing to extinction and thereby ‘making nature’ in the process. My concerns for the natural environment are distilled by extinction.

The extinction of a plant species usually occurs in silence and without notice, a situation that differs from the concern and attention afforded to the extinction of animals and notably, in Tasmania, that of the thylacine. In my art work I have attempted to provide a voice for the silent void of plant extinction. My intention is that this installation will function as a mnemonic device, lest we forget the consequences of our impact on the environment.

The installation takes the form of embroidered wreaths, a memorial board and funeral urns. These symbolic forms, normally associated with human death, are co-joined with images of extinct plants. The aim was to heighten the sense of loss associated with a species passing. I also attempted to make work which is beautiful. This is not for the pleasure and gratification that beautiful works commonly bring, but rather, by revealing the beauty of the extinct plants, I am attempting to disclose the extent of our loss. Beneath the tactile veil of the embroidered works lies a disquieting and uncomfortable message.

This body of work addresses whether visual work can function to raise our awareness of this loss due to extinction, and whether beauty can function to enhance this capacity. The introduction of beauty in this discourse generates a further issue concerning what beauty is, how it affects us and what place it occupies in contemporary visual arts.
In Chapter Two of this exegesis I describe how my experience in Tasmania has contributed to my concerns about extinction. I present theories from the physical and social sciences which help to explain why I and other people are troubled when we learn that species are now extinct. I also discuss examples such as that of Mother Cummings Peak where clear felling and subsequent replanting with a single plant species has been used to generate an illusion that these forestry practices are not harmful to the natural environment. What was lost is a complex rainforest environment which once supported numerous plants and animals. Along with this loss is the reduction in biodiversity that supports life as we know it.

The concept of beauty, examined in Chapter Three, includes a discussion of the qualities inherent in beautiful objects, potential cognitive responses to beautiful objects, the consideration of beauty in contemporary visual arts and why I have elected to use beauty as a feature of my visual work. The work of contemporary artists whose practice examines extinction and/or beauty is considered in Chapter Four. In Chapter Five, I discuss the conceptual and practical development of my visual work and its installation in the gallery. In the Conclusion I describe how my installation *Making nature: Extinct Tasmanian plants* has made a contribution to the field of contemporary art.