Chapter 5. Making Nature

The aim of the installation Making nature: Extinct Tasmanian plants, is to commemorate the extinction of twenty two Tasmanian plants and to create an environment that elicits reflection about this loss. In the installation each extinct plant is commemorated in the form of a wreath or a funeral urn. In addition, the Memorial Board indicates the current escalation in extinction rates. The form of the works in the installation along with their placement in the gallery and the lighting has been constructed to elicit a feeling of reverence, similar to that which one might experience on entering a crypt.

My concern for extinct plants follows a long interest in the Tasmanian natural environment. Earlier work for a Souvenir exhibition consisted of three shirts in the style of the Hawaiian shirt. One of these shirts, titled Chipped in Tasmania, was embellished with tree stumps (as shown in Figure 5-1), another, The Dam Shirt, depicted Tasmanian dams. A third shirt, The Colonist, depicted an introduced pest, the Northern Pacific Seastar, which has infested the Derwent River, destroying the habitat and devastating endemic marine species.  

Figure 5-1. Robyn Glade-Wright, Chipped in Tasmania, 2001. Nylon, digital transfer images. 45cm x 60cm, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.

My interest in extinction was first realised in a set of three embroidered panels (shown in Figure 5-2). These panels were the size of a coffin pall and each depicted an extinct Tasmanian plant.\(^2\) The plants were embroidered on transparent organza with white thread and hung a few centimetres from the gallery wall. The distance of the hanging from the wall, and the use of gallery lighting, enabled shadows from the embroidery to be cast on the gallery wall. The air currents in the gallery made the work move gently and created subtle movement in the shadows. This work and the reaction to it, which often involved the troublesome word ‘beauty’, initiated the current body of work, although the journey was not linear.

![Figure 5-2. Robyn Glade-Wright, Vanished, Lost, Extinct, 2002, Hand stitched polyester organza. 100cm x 50cm.](image)

For some time I worked on digital images rather than textile pieces and this work enabled me to become familiar with the extinct Tasmanian plants. I produced a body of twelve digitally manipulated images from reproductions of extinct plants sourced from the Department of Primary Industries, Water and Environment web site.\(^3\) The images on the web site were black and white photographs which I manipulated using Adobe Photoshop. The digital prints

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\(^3\) Images sent by email by Louise Gilfedder from the Nature Conservation Branch Department of Primary Industries, Water and the Environment, on October 16, 2002.
were shown in an exhibition titled ‘Silent’. The title indicated my concern for how quietly the extinct plants slip away and how quiet the community is about their disappearance. One of the images from this exhibition is shown in Figure 5-3.

Figure 5-3. Robyn Glade-Wright, *Caladenia cardiochius*, 2003. Digital image, 42cm x 59cm.

At this time I realised that lists of extinct plants are not static. Plants are delisted if they are rediscovered or if an error in classification has occurred. The plant, shown in Figure 5-3, was renamed to *Arachnorchis cardiochila* in 2004 by the Threatened Species Unit, of the Tasmanian government Department of Primary Industries, Water and Environment (DPIWE). Two of the plants (*Tetratheca gunnii*, and *Prasophyllum concinnnum*) that I had embroidered in the pieces shown in Figure 5-2, *Lost and Vanished*, were re-discovered. The third plant in this series, *Hutchinsia tasmanica*, which had been listed as extinct by Leigh, Boden and Briggs⁴, was not listed as extinct by DPIWE until 2005.⁵ Of all of the variations to the lists of extinct plants, I found that the most perturbing changes were the ongoing additions. Somewhat surprisingly, I had not imagined or perhaps preferred not to recognise, that

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extinctions are occurring currently. This aspect of extinction was to be addressed in the *Memorial Board*.

Returning to the development of the visual work, I was interested at this time in the difference between natural spaces and the built environment. I began to generate digital wall pieces which I embedded in virtual built environments as illustrated in Figure 5-4. These wall pieces were not static. The images slowly transformed throughout the day, replicating the changing aspects of light, the movement of clouds, rain and wind that are apparent in the natural environment.

![Figure 5-4. Robyn Glade-Wright, *Myriophyllum glomeratum*, 2003. Digital image, 40cm x 21cm.](image)

The digital wall pieces were generated using Adobe Photoshop and an animation program Jasc Animation Shop 3. While the technology to generate these pieces in a digital context was available, the capacity to make this work on a large scale was not readily available and constrained by cost. These limitations lead to a revaluation of the work and ultimately a return to the embroidered form. I recognise that this shift from digital images to hand craft is considerable, however, while the techniques employed could and did change, the essential aim of the work remained constant.

In returning to a focus on generating artefacts, I looked for symbolic forms that would evoke reverence and honour to commemorate the extinct plants.
The wreath form is one that has symbolic associations with victory, supremacy and dedication, but is also associated with death and mourning. Wreaths are commonly used at cemeteries to commemorate people who die in tragic circumstances. The image in Figure 5-5 depicts wreaths that were laid in commemoration in 2005 at The Marker, the mass grave at Queenstown cemetery that houses the bodies of the 42 men who died in the North Lyell mining disaster in 1912.

![Figure 5-5. Wreaths laid at the Marker: The mass grave at Queenstown cemetery to commemorate the 42 men who died in the 1912 North Lyell mining disaster.](image)

The association of human death and the loss of plants due to extinction was one that I believed could be made with the wreath form. Here was a connection that I felt had the capacity to increase the audience’s emotional reaction to extinction. I generated digital images of wreaths using an extinct plant in each. In October 2004, I presented the digital images of the wreaths (Figure 5-6) and the first embroidered wreath in an exhibition titled *Loss: Extinct Tasmanian plants*.

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The Embroidered Wreaths

The embroidered wreath was hung a few centimetres from the wall, enabling the embroidery to cast shadows on the gallery wall. The combination of gallery lighting, the reflective surface of the fabric and the shadows disrupted the appearance of the embroidery. There was a satisfactory shift from an embroidered surface to one that was vague, unpredictable and unknown. The vacillating, uncertain affect that was achieved alludes to both the physical absence of the extinct plants and their presence as a memory of their former life. This transience makes a link to a linguistic expression of the Aboriginal people in the Victorian River District, who describe extinct animals as ‘being only spirit now.’⁷

Embroidering the wreaths was a slow, contemplative activity which allowed me the time to reflect on the former life of the plants and to commemorate their passing. In this post industrial society, where clothes and accessories are often cheaper to buy than to make, creating a handmade garment, accessory or

domestic textile is an activity usually reserved to mark special occasions such as a birth or a christening, or to show love for someone. Hand embroidery, therefore, often indicates a special relationship between the maker and the recipient.

Time is also a factor that distinguishes hand embroidery from other forms of fabric embellishment. My feeling is that the time invested in the work adds a quality that would be difficult to replicate using other techniques. Machine embroidery, which is much faster, produces regular stitches whereas hand embroidery will inevitably show diversity and carry with it the mark of its human creator. The metaphor of the hedge, with its regular, machine-like spacing of plants, as discussed in the prologue, seems applicable to indicate the difference between hand and machine embroidery.

I do not want to suggest that other methods of textile construction and embellishment, including machine embroidery, lack the capacity to engage an audience and to be widely recognised by the community as techniques employed in significant artefacts. They clearly can. However, in this body of work, my machine embroidery trials were not as effective as the hand embroidery in describing the essence of extinct plants. During the three to four weeks of embroidery for each wreath, I often felt concerned that my stitches would indicate what I imagined to be the essence of the plant. I did not attempt to represent the plants in accordance with the established tradition of botanical illustration in which accuracy and scale are indicated. My aim in the embroideries was to honour the life and the spirit of the plants. It was a commemorative act.

Materials and techniques
I trialled a number of fabrics for the embroideries, including polyester and silk organza. I felt that the silk organza, with its soft cream hue, natural sheen and its pleasant handle, was too attractive, subtle and life-giving for the embroidered wreaths. By contrast the polyester organza felt lifeless and cold to the touch. These qualities were suited to my aim of depicting absent plants. For each new wreath I made stitch samples to work out how to embroider the
image. I chose white fabric and thread for the embroidery because of the symbolic association of white with purity, innocence, perfection, the triumph of the spirit over flesh, and mourning. The wreaths were technically satisfactory in all but one case. In one wreath the twenty-four layers of appliquéd fabric caused the piece to buckle and prevented it from laying flat. I remade this wreath, cutting the layers on the cross, and the second attempt was effective.

The heritage of stitch, the garden and botanical illustration.
The technique of embroidery has a long association with the heritage of women’s domestic and decorative crafts, the nurture of the home and of nature. From the early years of the Australian colony, women were valued as helpmates in the establishment of the home. The creative works of women were integral to their role as home-makers because these objects were not only functional, they were also considered civilising influences that had the capacity to raise the family’s status and denote its moral standing. Embroidered bible tracts were prominently displayed in the late nineteenth century, showing a moral code for the family to live by. Other objects were made to keep the family warm, or for protection against rain and the particular exigencies of Australian conditions, such as cloth covers to protect food from blow flies.

The garden was also important for the establishment of the early settlements in Australia, with woman not only tending to the kitchen gardens but also growing flowers from precious seeds sent to them from England, which ‘nourished their inner need and nostalgia for another, different world.’

These Australian colonial women had inherited a long tradition of English floral arts, both in the garden and inside the house. With these soft arts, or the ‘arts of the needle’, women combined their artistry in the garden with their

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8 Cooper, An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Signs & Symbols, 41.
10 Isaacs, The Gentle Arts, 8.
11 Isaacs, The Gentle Arts, 8.
desire to beautify the interior of their homes. They worked with the language of flowers, a secret language in which unspoken messages were conveyed through the specific meaning of each flower. The working of embroideries was thought to give solace and meaning to a woman’s life. I wonder to what extent my own mother’s embroidered textile representations of a woman in the garden and pansies, which were kept in the linen press, have unconsciously influenced my work. The embroidered wreaths did provide me with a sense of solace.

From the early diaries of the colony, women indicated their fascination with the flora of their new home. Even though English flowers were their first love, and despite concerns that the bush was dangerous and had to be cleared, many women did appreciate its strange beauty. There was a great interest in classifying and categorising flora and fauna in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. At that time ‘educated women were permitted a love of botany, perhaps because of the feminine association with flowers.’ Louisa Ann Meredith, who migrated to New South Wales in 1839 and settled in Tasmania in 1840, was an author and artist, revered for her embroideries, watercolours and drawings depicting Australian wildflowers.

Figure 5-7. Louise Ann Meredith, *Wreath of Berries*, 1860.
Pencil, watercolour and Chinese white highlights, 32.5cm x 24.5cm.
Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart.

Meredith was fascinated by the variety of new plants which she frequently painted in the formal Victorian manner as bunches or wreaths, such as the Wreath of Berries, shown in Figure 5-7. This heritage of stitch, and the interest of women in the flora of Tasmania, has influenced me during my visits to Tasmanian museums and collections. Indeed, I feel that this historical past has made its mark on my understanding of this island and culture, and has consciously informed my work.

**Subversive stitch**

During the mid to late twentieth century the changing role of women in Australia has demanded that they be given a greater access to education and an increased participation in employment. Consequently, these aspirations have reduced the time available for embroidery. The access to low cost mass produced consumer goods, and the influence of modernism with its preference for undecorated surfaces have both contributed to the decline in participation in embroidery in the wider population. This being said, needle crafts have still flourished amongst women and men in specialty groups, and post war migration resulted in a range of needlecraft techniques from many countries being introduced and practised in Australia.

The use of needlework has not always been confined to domestic ends. During the late twentieth century stitch was used as a political tool. In the 1980s the making of banners, using the traditional feminine skills of knitting, embroidery and appliqué became firmly established in the world of political protest. The women’s peace movement evolved its own form of protests, such as those staged in Greenham Common in the United Kingdom, at which their unique banners were used to demonstrate against nuclear weapons. Thus, female craft traditions were used in a public and political context. A similar protest was staged by Australian women at Pine Gap near Alice Springs. The women at the Pine Gap camp made banners, and other women throughout the country, who could not attend, sent their messages and emblems in the form of

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needle craft samples to the demonstrators.\textsuperscript{19} Another political message was presented in the \textit{Land rights d’oyley} made by Marie McMahon for the D’oyley Exhibition held in Sydney in 1979 (in Figure 5-8).

![Filet crochet. Size not specified.](image)

Figure 5-8. Marie McMahon \textit{Land rights d’oyley}, 1997.

A poignant use of needle work in the visual arts is evident in the work of Narelle Jubelin who used \textit{petit point} and found objects to address ‘the issue of how Australians understand and represent the land.’\textsuperscript{20} Julie Ewington writes: ‘indeed in Jubelin’s case, the medium of \textit{petit point} is perhaps more significant than the content of any single image.’\textsuperscript{21} Fiona Hall has similarly used traditional textile techniques to create \textit{Medical bundle for the non-born child}, \textit{Biodata}, (1994) and the \textit{Understorey} series (1999-2004).\textsuperscript{22} For both of these artists, the textile technique invests their work with significance beyond the image represented. The technique brings with it associations that extend a work’s capacity to generate meaning. I anticipate that the embroidery in the wreaths of my installation will generate associations which nurture and support the aims of the work.

\textsuperscript{19} Isaacs, \textit{The Gentle Arts}, 185.
\textsuperscript{21} Ewington, ‘In the Wild: Nature, Culture, Gender in Installation Art’, 35
\textsuperscript{22} Janet De Boer, ‘The Fabulous Fiona Hall’ in \textit{Textile Fibre Forum}, 80:4, 2005, 57
Memorial Board
The Memorial Board developed from my realisation that my grasp of the number of extinct Tasmanian plants was tentative. I could not feel confident that I was aware of all the members in this group because each time I accessed the Threatened Species list, new plants were added. I noted with concern that my original lists, dated October 16, 2002, contained sixteen species. In 2004 the number had grown to twenty, and in 2005, twenty two Tasmanian plants were known to be extinct. I decided to make the Memorial Board to indicate that extinction is still in progress and to record the increase over the period of this research.

Figure 5-9. Maya Ying Lin, Vanished, Vietnam War Veterans Memorial, 1981. 246.75 feet long, 10.1 feet high, engraved granite, Washington, D.C.

There are many precedents for lists that commemorate human death, notably the Vietnam Veterans’ War Memorial, located in Washington D.C. USA., designed by Maya Ying Lin in 1981 and shown in Figure 5-9. Similarly, in Tasmania, a list of victims of the North Lyell mining disaster appears on the Marker in Figure 5-5.

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A digital maquette of the proposed *Memorial Board* is illustrated in Figure 5-10. Shadowy grey vinyl was selected for the text. The heading of the piece reads ‘X-tinct Tasmanian plants’. The ‘x’ in the title refers to the use of this letter to denote an extinct plant in botanical lists, for example: *x Myosurus minimus*.

![Figure 5-10. Robyn Glade-Wright, Digital maquette of the proposed Memorial Board, 2005.](image)

**Funeral Urns and Make-believe**

The funeral urns were the last series of objects made for the installation. They replaced another set of twelve embroidered ‘x’ pieces that I intended to make. These twelve ‘x’ pieces were to be small in scale, approximately twenty four centimetres square, with one piece for each of the extinct plants that were not represented in the wreaths. A prominent ‘x’ indicating the extinct status of the plant, was embedded in the piece as illustrated below in Figure 5-11.

![Figure 5-11. Robyn Glade-Wright, Sample ‘x’ piece, 2005. Hand stitched polyester organza, 24cm x 24cm.](image)
These pieces were to be shown either on a glass enclosed display shelf or in glass cases to emulate museum displays. They were to be lit from behind as shown in the virtual installation in Figures 5-12 and 5-13. The small scale of these pieces would invite closer examination typical of the process of looking at museum displays.

However, I was concerned about two aspects of this work. Notably, the concept of using the museum approach, evoked by the use of glass cases, became problematic. I felt that museums can be seen as validating, or approving, of the loss of a species by displaying the evidence in secure ‘safe’ glass cabinets. In such situations the museum presents the certainty of extinction as a factual and accurate, objective statement. Indeed, museums do function as good custodians of extinct species with museum curators looking after their specimens vigilantly and carefully cataloguing their species. But they do so dispassionately. Museum staff members often accurately and factually record the fate of the last individual in a species. For example, the museum records in Launceston contain statements which are similar in tone to the following:

   The last known specimen of this species was located on a small island near Wave Rock, but on a subsequent visit the plant was found to be dead.

What I find chilling about these statements is their lack of emotion. Museums are not supposed to be emotive places. They do not generally attempt to present scientific facts in a sensational or dramatic manner. By contrast to the
task of the museum, I did not set out to present the facts of extinction. Instead, I wanted to create work that would affect the audience, provoking reflection and generating a feeling of loss. My intention was to create pieces that were evocative, challenging and disturbing. Therefore, I became concerned that the ‘x’ pieces, in the safe, dispassionate and factual approach suggested by museum-style display cases would be inadequate, or even counter-productive, in achieving my objectives.

A further concern with the ‘x’ pieces was that the delicacy of these pieces might detract from, rather than contribute to, my aims to create a body of work that caused some disruption to the sensibility of viewers. A delicate quality could be interpreted as sentimental and comforting, an impression I did not want to create. By contrast, I felt that the size of the wreaths was more confronting and the symbolism of the wreath was much less comforting. Purposefully, I considered ways to increase the emotional and cognitive discomfort of the audience and I realised that by linking human death to the extinction of the plant species I could achieve my goal. This approach was consistent with the creation of the wreaths and the memorial board, both of which allude to human death.

**Funeral Urns**

The funeral urns were an effective and provocative way of representing the extinct plants that were not embroidered, because funeral urns are closely associated with human death. In the development of these artefacts I found digital representations of funeral urns and superimposed digital images of the extinct plants on them, as shown below in Figure 5-14.

![Figure 5-14. Robyn Glade-Wright, Funeral urns with digital images of extinct plants, 2005.](image-url)
I first attempted to create a funeral urn by using coloured digital prints. However, the finished coloured urn lacked refinement and it was visually heavy, particularly in relation to the transparency of the embroidered wreaths.

At the same time that I was attempting to embellish the funeral urns, I searched local funeral directors and found small white marble funeral urns that were eight centimetres tall. I recognised that these marble urns could be sandblasted or engraved with the names or images of the extinct plants, and I generated digital images of engraved marble urns as illustrated in Figure 5-15.

For a time, I thought that the pieces were resolved. But, as time progressed, I realised that I would have to repeat each of the three shapes four times to give the twelve urns I needed. I began to realise that this kind of repetition could become monotonous and the sense of individuality in commemorating each plant may diminished by using the same shaped urn several times. I also became concerned that the reality of the marble funeral urns would become so concrete, obvious and resolved that they left little of an evocative nature to engage the viewers’ imaginations.

At this time, I reflected on Walton’s observation that many art works are ‘props’ in a game of make-believe, and the value we find in art rests in the exploration and insight we find in playing the game. Walton writes that this insight is available without the usual costs and that art provides ‘experience’

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or something like it anyway - for free’. I wondered if the game I was playing by conjoining plant death with a funeral urn, which is generally reserved for human or animal death, would be more engaging if the funeral urns were props or a fabricated vessel.

I returned to the process of manufacturing the funeral urns by embellishing vessels with digital images of plants, only this time I used black and white digital images and handmade paper. This handmade paper had a translucent quality and when it was applied over the images, it produced a ghostly and ethereal appearance. I felt that this quality connected the funeral urns to the shadows generated by the embroidered wreaths. I determined to make twelve funeral urns from twelve different vessel shapes which I purchased. In several cases I bought vases and made lids to emulate a funeral urn shape. The shapes were selected because of their capacity to point obliquely to funeral urns, as well as reflecting the positive and negative shapes that are present in the wreaths. The style of embellishment of the urns is eclectic reflecting the varying attributes of the extinct plants. Some urns indicate a formal arrangement of plants while other urns are embellished in an asymmetrical style thereby reflecting the individual quality of the plant. I felt that this combination of ideas, manifest in the urns, had the potential to stimulate reflection on the connections between life and its transience. I purchased two varieties of oil that had been extracted from Tasmanian plants and placed a drop of one of the oils into each of the urns. Although these oils were from plants that were not extinct, the aroma provided another aid in creating a memory of the lost plants.

**Planning for the Installation**

The gallery has been modified to create an intimate space for the installation as shown in Figure 5-16. The gallery lighting has been subdued to create a feeling of quiet reverence, not unlike that of walking into a crypt.

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Upon entering the gallery, the first two walls will be hung with the embroidered wreaths as shown in Figures 5-17 and 5-18. A pool of light will be thrown onto the central section of the wreaths, not quite reaching the edges. The wreaths will hang three centimetres from the wall so that the embroidery casts a shadow. The shadows cast by the wreaths will be more visible than the physical form.
Moving around the gallery, the *Memorial Board* will be mounted on the third wall (Figure 5-19). The lighting of this piece will be subdued to reinforce the dark message contained in the work.

On the final wall the funeral urns will be exhibited on small plinths that are the same colour as the gallery wall. I will hang the urns in a random pattern on the wall to emphasize the unique quality of each plant and the different shape of each of the urns as indicated in Figure 5-20.
The environment will be illuminated with low lighting levels, thus creating a meditative space. This attribute, together with the variety of symbolic forms, the aesthetic and cognitive information coalesces to provide a site intended to generate critical reflection. This may engender concern and thoughtfulness about the loss due to extinction of the twenty two Tasmanian plants, and in particular, the loss of six plants in the past four years, the duration of this study.

The Installation
When I commenced the installation of the art work in the gallery I found that the facilities in the entrance of the gallery did not support the type of lights needed to illuminate the embroidered wreaths. Therefore I decided not to hang the wreath in the entrance; instead I chose to hang this embroidery along with the five wreaths on the longest wall. With the addition of this wreath I was able to adjust the spacing between the wreaths so that it was similar to spacing of the wreaths on the shorter wall. The air movement near the wreaths on the short wall made the embroideries move very gently, which created a subtle movement in the shadows adding to the evocative nature on the work. On the long wall the air movement was not sufficient to create this effect. The lighting of the wreaths with round pools of light that just extended to the perimeter of the embroidery was achieved in accordance with my pre-
exhibition planning and this was a critical element in the exhibition. Images of the wreaths installed in the exhibition are shown in the Appendix, pp. 93-98.

The *Memorial Board* was installed as planned and it became more subtle than anticipated because of the reflective quality of the lettering. The surface of the lettering reflected differing quantities of light as one moved around the gallery as illustrated in the Appendix, p. 105. From different position in the gallery the lettering appeared to change, this was an unanticipated but pleasing quality. The lettering was less static than I had anticipated.

I had planned to hang the funeral urns in a random order, as shown in Figure 5-20. However, when I placed the urns in this manner, I found that they coalesced into a group which was contrary to my intention to emphasise the individuality of each plant. Therefore, the appearance of a group or collection of items that was generated by the random placing of the urns did not support my aim. As result, I placed the urns along a straight line as shown in Figure 5-21.

![Figure 5-21. Funeral urns installed in *Making nature: Extinct Tasmanian plants* 2006. Photograph: Brett Withington](image-url)
In this arrangement the differences between the urns became more apparent and the individual nature of each urn and the plant it represented was emphasised. Images of the funeral urns are included in the Appendix, pp. 99-104.

The funeral urns needed to be illuminated to a higher level than the wreaths or the *Memorial Board*. The variation in lighting levels created a subtle dynamic in the gallery which may have helped the audience to transit from the brightness outside the gallery into the mood of the exhibition space. As the audience moved past the greater illumination of the funeral urns, and on to the more subdued lighting of the wreaths and the *Memorial Board*, the environment became increasingly quiet and contemplative.