PART FIVE
Related contexts – Related Practices:

The following artists apprehend the world in similar ways to myself. Sometimes our works overlap either visually or in intention; but it is the particular initial, awry way of viewing the world that brings me to discuss them here.

Fred Wilson
Fred Wilson often works with objects which are held by museums. He focuses on how a collection is displayed, what it consists of and what meanings can be drawn from the dialogue the museum is engaging in (or avoiding) with its public.

![Fig. 67](metalwork-1793-1880.jpg)


In 1993, Wilson was invited to create a work for the Maryland Historical Society. His exploratory process of literally not leaving a stone unturned resulted in a startling intervention into the history of the museum and of the society which founded it. Discovering in the museum storerooms many objects which referred to slavery, conspicuously absent from the public galleries, Wilson brought them back ‘upstairs’ and inserted them into fresh arrangements of objects from the collections. 139

Lisa Corrin recounted what occurred on the site of the museum: ‘Mining the Museum’ examined how the Maryland Historical Society defines itself and how this self-definition determines whose history has been included (or excluded) in its narrative of Maryland history. It also addressed how those excluded have come to view the museum. The project dealt with the power of objects to speak when the “laws” governing museum practices are expanded and the artificial boundaries museums build are removed. It considered how deconstructing the
In an exhibition entitled: *Mining the Museum*, Wilson created rooms and cabinets called: *Cabinet Making 1820-1960, Metalwork 1793 – 1880* and *Modes of Transport*.

*Cabinet Making 1820-1960* was a room which included many pieces of fine timber furniture. Amidst this display Wilson inserted a slave-whipping-post. The cabinet entitled *Metalwork 1793-1880* contained metal ornaments, fine tableware – and a pair of shackles.

The room *Modes of Transport* included a baby’s pram. On top of the pram linen lay a Klu Klux Klan hood.

Elsewhere in the Museum, Wilson continued to refocus the viewers’ eyes, asking that they (re)consider marginalised and repressed stories. He relit the colonial paintings so that slaves were spotlit instead of being marginal pet-like figures darkly set behind furniture in opulent plantation mansion scenes.

In 1999, Wilson responded to the collection of the Maritime museum in Liverpool. He recontextualised the grand oil paintings of ship battle scenes by creating new museum labels. Suddenly, all the paintings in the gallery reconfigured as one grand narrative of race and gender - of identity. Wilson described on the new labels what was happening between the ships - which he referred to by their (female) names or gender - ‘She was all afire’.

These labels were so inviting, these new identities of the ships personified so endearingly away from their former reading, that I found myself almost *running* around the gallery absorbing each alternative vision and representation of the battles and their participants. I suddenly stopped and so clearly saw how much a viewer *makes* a collection *into* something by *their* reading of it. It was a brilliant moment. Wilson had physically, mentally, emotionally drawn me completely into his work. This is what is so exciting about Wilson’s practice – he not only sees another

correlates can transform it into a space for ongoing cultural debate’. Corrin, Lisa C, 1994: 9

This was his contribution to the biennial exhibition *TRACE* held throughout Liverpool, England in October/November 1999.
underlying dialogue to that which is given, but he shares this with an audience in an unforgettable way.

Wilson’s process necessitates his thorough examination of the museum, its staff; all the minutest details. His investigations consider the ways that objects and people interact in different configurations and locations; how we attend to objects and let them stand as affirmations of the creation and maintenance of our identities.

He inspires my own practice in that although we work differently, we share a vision of the world; we both look awry and see the gaps and absences first, rather than the given version of a story. We make work differently as we shake our version of a story from the tree – but our outcomes are a similar sharing of our world with an audience.

Fiona Foley
Fiona Foley’s work expresses similar concerns and visual aesthetics to my own. Many of her pieces are based upon, or inspired by traces of stories that inhabit her own cultural landscape and that of her homeland, Thorgine (Fraser Island). In this sense of recall or retrieval of stories, our practices sometimes overlap. This conjunction may also be linked to our ages, and the fact that both Foley’s and my own ancestors were forcibly removed from their lands. This is the driving story that has provoked my practice into being and I believe this is the basis for many of Foley’s works also. Foley visually exposes stories of displacement and dispossession.

The 1995 installation Land Deal was a response to the words of nineteenth century ‘settler’ John Batman where he describes how he ‘purchased’ 600,000 acres

141 ‘I go in with no script [he writes], nothing whatsoever in my head. I try to get to know the community that the museum is in, the institution is in, the institution, the structure of the museum, the people in the museum from the maintenance crew to the executive director. I ask them about the world, the museum, and their jobs, as well as the objects themselves. I look at the relationship between what is on view and what is not on view. I never know where the process will lead me, but it often leads me back to myself, to my own experiences’. Wilson, Fred in Corrin, Lisa C, 1994: 11
142 Foley was born in March 1964 and I was born in March 1965
143 According to Kate Davidson, Foley explores ways to physically ‘Reinstate[s] her heritage – the voices of her people and the echoes of the land’. Davidson, Kate, ‘Fiona Foley: Land Deal’, in In Place (Out of Time) Contemporary Art in Australia Catalogue, curated by Howard Morphy, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1997: 38
from local Aboriginal people of Port Phillip in exchange for beads, knives, blankets, looking glasses, scissors, flour, etc.

Fig.66

Fiona Foley, *Land Deal*, 1995. Flour, blanket, box of beads, nine axes, seven knives, seven pairs of scissors, seven mirrors. 202 x 442 x 550 cm

Foley incorporated these materials in her installation. She placed in rows the objects traded for the land: axes, scissors, mirrors, blankets. Objects suddenly took on a new insidious edge, and leapt off the written page in Foley’s configuration. They stood out in their unexpected physicality and evoked the (un)reality of the situation then and now. The assemblage revealed the corrupted and one way dialogue of early land ‘transactions’. The real presence of these objects in the work draws parallels between indigenous loss of land and marks the absence of indigenous voices in the official records. Foley replaces them with the repeated alignments of these objects. The items are cold reminders of the present lack of public understanding about ongoing campaigns for land return - on which Foley and her own family have embarked.

In *Native Blood*, 1994, Foley presented her own body – partially unclad and boldly seeking the eye of the viewer. This was another real and physical means of making comment and establishing contact with the viewer. Foley was unafraid to objectify herself in order to infiltrate a viewer’s perception.
Fiona Foley, *Native Blood*, 1994. Hand coloured black and white photo. 49.8 x 39.6 cm

This work is a physical engagement with an audience and herself. It is her raw response to the images of Batjala women from Thoorgine, who were photographed in the 19th century for the gaze of the European Other. This work embodies and articulates the debilitating frustration that indigenous people *feel* but which lies beyond speech. We experience this in learning of parts of our own cultural heritage through the gaze, the will, the whim, the hand, the trace of the Other.

Foley subverts this powerlessness by taking and returning the gaze. In this act she cancels-out for herself the effect of being entrenched in colonial discourse. By retaliating in this way she ruptures the old and the new view of Batjala women by forcing viewers to renegotiate their own rules, preconceptions and expectations.

Fiona Foley and Janet Laurence, *Edge of the Trees*, 1995 (Detail and Installation. Museum of Sydney Forecourt). Twenty-nine sandstone, wood and steel pillars, oxides, human hair, shells, bone, feather, ash, honey. 900 x 800 x 1600cm
Much of Foley’s art practice is about meetings between Europeans and indigenous Australians and the outcomes of those encounters – she visually and theoretically posits herself, her people, her hopes and disgusts in the midst of her practice.

Gordon Bennett
The art of Gordon Bennett is pertinent to my own practice in that we are both indigenous artists seeking ways of expressing ourselves and our ‘predicaments of culture’.144 Central to our work is the consideration that we were both brought-up in households where our Aboriginality, although ever-present, was unspoken. Our concerns are to articulate our ‘selves’ as whole cultural beings.

Fig.71
Gordon Bennett, Self Portrait (But I always wanted to be one of the good guys) 1990. Oil on canvas. 150 x 260 cm

Nicholas Thomas refers to Bennett’s work as:

Consistently concerned with the pain and violence of colonialism ..... much of the power of his work arises from the way these themes have been drawn together.145

Bennett’s preoccupation with pain and violence is evident from his earliest canvases, which angrily spelt-out ‘Coon, nigger, boong, abo’, to later works in which these same words erupt or bleed in red paint through the slashed surface of his canvases.

Bennett’s recent video piece, *Performance with Object for the Expiation of Guilt (Apple Premiere Mix)* 1995, shows him with bandaged face in a black suit angrily whipping and abusing a black box of his own bodily dimensions.

Much of Bennett’s work seeks to repopulate the art world with his reconfigurations of modernist art. He incorporates details of the works of Imants Tillers alongside Mondrian. He references Greek mythology and racially-obsessed packaging of popular culture beside historical portraiture from the nineteenth
century. His work is a flight through and beyond the world of accepted representation. Bennett writes:

If I were to choose a single word to describe my art practice it would be the word question. If I were to choose a single word to describe my underlying drive it would be freedom. 146

I believe we must acknowledge that we both exist in a time in which we not only have the freedom to question but, through the pain and bloodshed, and the silences of those who went before, we have been delivered this particular form of bittersweet freedom that is our experience.

To be free we must be able to question the ways our own history defines us.147

Our liberty is one where we can reconfigure and represent the past, and yet it essentially does not yield to us. That is our irony, that Bennett’s and my own obsession with things past, is really our personal way of dealing with our present, and this visual agenda is fortuitously a form through which viewers of our work can also consider and negotiate this nation’s future.

Christian Boltanski
Christian Boltanski is a French artist who creates installations that reside somewhere between memorial and documentation, between fact and fiction.

Within this uncertainty Boltanski manages to convince his audience to suspend disbelief. His works have an aura of both the real and the unreal. His re-use of found portrait photography lends his work an air of credibility. He fills spaces with used objects, often labelling boxes and tins in a vast archival process of retaining memory for those who may not know they are a part of this, Boltanski’s life work.

These once personal things from home accumulate as objects, images, boxes, lamps, to create unnerving institutional zones. The spaces Boltanski fills are transformed into archives of vast inventories that unavoidably raise questions about the original

146 Bennett, Gordon, in McLean, Ian, 1996: 10
147 McLean, Ian, 1996: 12
possessors of these items. Boltanski’s work casts light and shadow on the past.

Fig.75 Christian Boltanski, Pourim Reserve, 1989. Eight gelatin silver photographs, eight lamps, eight biscuit tins, white linen. Variable dimensions 300 x 360 cm

His use of clothes suspended or in vast mounds, his corridors with lamps set at intervals, his multiple inclusions of black and white portraits – often of children from decades past – lend themselves to referencing the Holocaust.

In 1987, Boltanski created a work from a found photograph of the 1931 class of Jewish students from Le Lycée Chases, Vienna. He re-photographed each face until each lost its individuality and appeared skeletal.\footnote{148}

Another work Les Habits de François C, (The Clothes of François C), 1972 consisted of twenty-four tin vitrines each holding an item of clothing for a small boy.

Boltanski describes the use of clothes and photographs:

What they have in common is that they are simultaneously, presence and absence. They are both an object and a souvenir (of memory) of a subject.\footnote{149}

Much of Boltanski’s work negotiates the terrain of loss, absence, death, trace, relic, memory.\footnote{150}

\footnote{148} Christian Boltanski, Le Lycée Chases (Chases High School), 1987

105
Although his earlier work contained some humour (often directed at himself) Boltanski’s work since the 1980’s has become increasingly sombre and reflective.

In 1988, Boltanski made *Canada*. ‘Canada’ was the euphemism the Nazis gave the warehouses where interned Jews left their belongings. This work consisted of immeasurable quantities of used clothing across a floor which viewers negotiated on wooden walkways.

![Christian Boltanski, *Canada*, 1988](image)

In 1990, Boltanski worked with students in Berlin to create *La Maison Manquante*. In this work, the history of an empty block between two old apartments was researched and it was found to have been a building bombed during WWII - but not before the Jewish inhabitants had been ‘removed’ to concentration camps. Boltanski and the students placed plaques naming the original Jewish inhabitants on the walls of the adjacent blocks facing inwards to where the apartments once stood.

Andrew Causey writes of Boltanski: ‘He is concerned with loss. But he says at the same time that he cannot know historical reality, that photographs often lie, or - at least - that we draw the wrong inferences from them. Boltanski’s work teases with misinformation but enlightens because it compels consideration of how we recognise and know the past.... the effect of the clothes is presence, because they belong to someone, and absence, because no one takes possession of them...Boltanski warns us against naïve trust in photographs, which we believe cannot lie, but, he would say, are only bits of paper that are not in themselves anything except that someone somewhere existed.’ Causey, Andrew, 1998: 222
Christian Boltanski, La Maison Manquante
(The Missing House) First Part, 15/16
Grosse Hamburger Strasse, 1990

Christian Boltanski, La Maison Manquante
(The Missing House) Second Part,
Le Musee (The Museum), Berliner Gewerber Austellung, 1990

This was a period when he found that his Catholic father was actually a converted Jew who had been concealed under his family's Paris floorboards for the duration of the second world war.

Boltanski implicates viewers through their encounter with his work.

**Doris Salcedo**

Doris Salcedo is a Colombian artist who through the interplay of worn objects creates otherworldly manifestations of places of grief, trauma, and absence.

Doris Salcedo, *Untitled*, 1998. Wood, cement, metal. 200.6 x 124.5 x 51.4 cm
Salcedo’s objects are a glimpse into another dimension where the register of grief is visibly palpable in the contortions of a wardrobe that sits within another; furniture with doors and drawers sealed with concrete; a chair which has fused with a doorframe. They are within and without time and space. They are hauntings.

Dan Cameron has observed that ‘Salcedo’s work paradoxically makes absence the register of a human presence that has been removed from the scene.’ 151 And Jill Bennett regards Salcedo’s work as an enactment where:

She constructs a world made strange by death and enables us to perceive this strangeness from the side of the witnesses. Salcedo’s methods demonstrate an overriding concern with inhabitation; that is, with the ways in which those left behind learn to inhabit the world made strange and uninhabitable by death. 152

Salcedo doesn’t regard her works as narrative or metaphor, but as metamorphosis.

I find her works incredibly moving because they embody the unspeakable. They greatly inspire me not only to place objects in configurations to reveal an essence of a story, but to push my practice further. Salcedo’s work shows the possibilities of working beyond the obvious borders of materiality to allow objects to reconfigure themselves in truly revolutionary ways.

**Tracey Moffatt**

Tracey Moffatt is unafraid. Her work is bold and sassy whether it be film *Nice Coloured Girls, Night Cries, Be-Devil*, or any of her photographic series. Her works hint at something more, something we know lies before and after that which she has chosen to give us - in this sense all her work is filmic.

She works with only pieces of theater, ruins or fragments: a discontinuous scenography of moments that add up to a story only in the most open and ambitious ways.153

152 Bennett, Jill, ‘Material Encounters – Apprehending the Trauma of Others through the Visual Arts’, Draft paper, 2000: 3
Moffatt's work is like the eye of a cyclone, a momentary glimpse at a grim, perverse and inevitably disturbing set of relations between people and location just before the suburban door closes, or a town's main street goes all empty again. It is charged with a sense of awaiting the apocalypse, the fall of which will sweep away all inhabitants of this place.

Fig. 81


She blends fact and fiction to give rise to the unease which permeates her practice. There is wry humour amidst the grit; false backdrop and overstated panorama. Moffatt's work holds truly beautiful clarity of insight into the uncompromising ridiculousness of life.

It provides inspiration for me always to continue looking beyond; pushing the representational borders of humour meeting horror; employing new ways of engaging an audience with my work.

Daniel Spoerri
The work of Daniel Spoerri inspires me because he recognises and represents the possibilities within any given moment.

Spoerri sees the register of time itself as a subject. He is known for his freezing of time. When Spoerri
created and left a half-eaten meal, he recognised the potential for *abandonment* to become a sculpture. Ralph Rugoff describes Spoerri’s works that embody the *temporal* and the *trace* as ‘forensic’. In a sense he memorialises moments by providing space in which to reflect upon usually transitory scenes.

![Image](image_url)

Daniel Spoerri, *La table de la Rotonde*, (Brevet de garantie Bernard Venet), 1966, l-p., restaurant, 50 x 50cm.

Memory and history for Spoerri sit in strong opposition to each other. Combining passion, imaginary fantasies and facts, memory is thus the result of human experience whereas time is dilated and chronology does not count – only heritage and inner beliefs. On the contrary, history is a vision of the past with forged and codified rules.

In 1979, Spoerri conceived a new work - *Dinner of Homonyms*. He searched the Cologne phone book and found and invited Engels, Kant, Hegel, Goethe, Faust, Wagner, Strauss, Bach, Dürer, Holbein, Cranach, Julius Caesar, Hamlet and Frankenstein to a dinner party. He wanted to create history from History; to conduct something sociologically disarming; to gauge how naming had affected his guests and to add his own chapter to what may have seemed a closed book.

**Other related contexts. Other crossovers**

Other related contexts have inspired my practice much more than artists working in a similar way or

---

154 Rugoff, Ralph, 1997: 63
with similar concerns. The fields where I locate my inspiration, myself and my practice surround me.

My initial engagement and working process is outside the art world. It is an exercise in seeing askew and then listening, travelling, gathering, disassembling, organising in order to relate the journey I have taken.

This Marshall Island sea navigational map of sticks and fibre from the late 19th century illustrates how I see purpose and meaning encapsulated within innocuous materials. This map is made by 'unknown'. It carries generations of sea stories and knowledge in a language few can decipher; it represents the human urge to travel and to plot journeys in order to recount them physically. This object awakens my imagination by allowing me to understand it in a variety of personal, unfixed ways.

![Diagram](image)

**Fig.83**

*Unknown, Sailing Navigation Chart, Elmore, South Marshall Islands, pre-1906, Stick, 112 x 86cm*

**Strangers in a strange place:**
I remember when I was in London in 1998 and I thought I had by that time visited every obscure museum I could find in the city. I met with visiting writer Susan Stewart, there to speak at a conference.

---

Sites which inspire my practice include: newspapers, street signs, cinema, archives, cemeteries, museums, fêtes, markets, overheard street or bus conversations, auctions and people.
We spoke about collecting and collections, about museums and what they stood for once and now. Then we moved on. We talked about a mutual interest - gardening! I recounted that I had been desperately trying to keep a pot plant alive on a South London window ledge with ever decreasing success. Susan asked me if I had found *The Museum of Garden History* - I said no. I almost did not believe her. Could there be such a site? She wouldn't tell me more! Within days I found my way to this museum. I was impressed. Contemporary curators had not managed to over-label and thereby arrest the mystery of the *encounter* with the object.

I was confronted with the most obscure garden tools and decided to guess their intended use. A spoon one-third the size of a teaspoon beautifully crafted onto a four foot wooden handle perplexed me...What could it be? I finally located a tiny curled and faded label: 'Spoon for administering poison to wasps nests'. Oh the joy of that!

This museum was in an old church by the Thames near Waterloo Station - I wandered outside (via a corridor crammed with cheap b-grade very secondhand 20 pence paperbacks). The churchyard was a garden and yet it was not - it was a cemetery. People and plants permanently together. It was a beautiful perverse irony of the museum.

There awaited another encounter – Captain Bligh of the ship the *Bounty* and of Bruny Island, Tasmania apple-tree-planting fame was buried here – with an epitaph dating far earlier than this museum lauding his successful transplanting of the breadfruit to England. How fitting - garden to garden. I met him in

---


157 That most endearing (and also the most ethnographically politically incorrect and therefore frightening?) thing about a collection, where the lack of a label allows the viewer to read themselves into the object.

158 Captain William Bligh (1754 - 1817) visited Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) twice; once as Master of the *Resolution* on Captain James Cook's third voyage, later on the *Bounty* when he was sent by the Admiralty to transplant breadfruit from Tahiti to the West Indies. In 1791, he revisited Adventure Bay, Bruny Island, Van Diemen's Land and planted an infamous apple tree as well as a variety of other fruits and vegetables. *Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 1,* ed. A.G.L. Shaw, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, (1966), 1968: 118 - 119.
a garden unexpectedly, mirroring how he would have met my ancestors in what he called Van Diemens’ Land. Strangely perfect intersections. These means of personally travelling, encountering and piecing together stories (which may not seem to be stories to anyone else) are the real contextual life and substance of my practice.

The place of post-modernism and its influence on my practice and outlook:
This investigation and my ongoing practice - it must be acknowledged, has been borne and nurtured in an environment conducive to these meanderings and musings which are the basis of all my works. This environment is often referred to as Post-Modernist.

Post-Modernism with all its freedoms and weaknesses, encourages cross-disciplinary journeyings to collect and discard anything that has gone before. To be creating work at this time allows for unbiased rebuilding, and building afresh, to take place without bound from a position within the interstices where the fortuitously once discarded article lies awaiting rediscovery.

This exegesis has made no attempt to examine post-modernism although it has given some space to post-colonialism, which concerns me more closely; and they are, of course, interrelated.