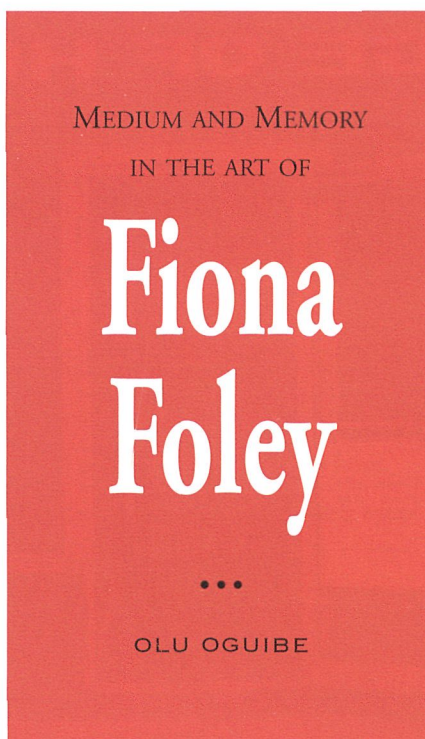


TERRITORIES

"...a melancholy history
of loss forms my memories."

[Fiona Foley, Tyerabarrlowaryaou, 1992.]

In the 1990s, a new wave of interest is visiting indigenous Australian artists. This wave is quite distinct from the voyeuristic, exoticist interest which aboriginal art drew from Western culture-brokers in the 1970s and 1980s. It is built on a development which receives rather uncomfortable recognition in the West: the culture of indigenous Australians continues, not merely in the form of the much-loved sand and bark paintings (which collectors scrambled to accumulate at tourist prices and made an industry out of earlier), but also in forms which belong amongst the most advanced and 'avant-garde' - if that word still makes sense - contemporary art. Though residues of the voyeuristic may still be detected, say in the rather discomfiting, mercantilist and neo-Oceanist hype around the art of the nonagenarian Emily Kngwarreye, there is a gradually developing recognition of these artists as *artists*, and not as ethnographic curiosities and foils for Caucasian modernity. At the center of this new wave of interest, are a number of women artists and experimental filmmakers whose works are no longer shown in the ethnography or craft museums, but rather in postmodernist



galleries and spaces around the world. Amongst these is Sydney artist Fiona Foley.

Foley works in several media, but mostly in pastels and installation, and more recently with photography. Although she works occasionally in forms which are possibly associable with 'aboriginal' art, she not only steps outside the stereotype at will; but indeed resents the manner in which 'aboriginal' art is theoretically homogenized and synonymized with dot-painting and dreaming. Through her media and her work, she addresses aspects of personal and collective experience, what she describes as 'the sense of loss' after the genocide and deprivation which her people, the Badtjala of Fraser Island,

suffered under the Caucasian incursion into the South Seas. Her art, she notes, is driven by her "custodial responsibility" towards this legacy, and her determination to register the persistence of memory in a milieu of conciliationist desire for erasure and obfuscation.

At the turn of the century, the Badtjala were driven out of their ancestral island abode by Caucasian settlers, and most of them were killed in a series of massacres which aimed to annihilate them. Those amongst the Badtjala who were not shot or driven into the shark-infested seas of the Pacific, were forced into Christian missions on the Australian mainland. There, throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the Euro-Australian policy of violent 'whitification', what Tasmanian artist Ian Anderson has described as the policy of "fuck 'em white," was carried out on them. Through racial transgression, often applied in the form of the rape of Aboriginal women, and through the often brutal and unrelenting imposition of Caucasian culture and values, the Badtjala, like other indigenous peoples of the South Pacific, were nearly severed from their cultural heritage. Aboriginal children were brought up to ignore or deny, or indeed to have no knowledge of their ancestry. They were denied contact with the land, and with their deities and sacred places. At the end of the 20th

century, only remnants of these cultures survive, and it is with great pain but much courage and resilience that, strand after strand, the descendants of the Badtjala now reconstruct their culture.

The resilience of the Badtjala is long-standing, as illustrated by the legend of ‘Banjo’ Henry Owens— the last Badtjala to be taken from Fraser Island in the 1930s, but who came after time returned to Fraser Island, defying the violence of his Caucasian captors. In her art, Fiona Foley reiterates ‘Banjo’ Owens’s repeated return, his stubborn reclamation of his country and roots, his tenacious grip on memory and his struggle against history. Especially in her pastel drawings, Foley repeatedly projects remnants and strands which lead us to her past: the figure of the Dingo, the canine who was company for the Badtjala, and the feather of the Cockatoo, a bird peculiar to the Island and the adjoining bay of Cooloola, feature amongst these.

In a most peculiar rhetoric of recollection, the loneliness of the Dingo encodes the savage depopulation of Fraser Island. Once an intimate companion to humans and a permanent party in hunts, as well as in the domestic space, the Dingo witnessed the racial cleansing of the island at the beginning of the century, and today the canine wanders alone through the savanna and the rain forest, highly suspicious of humans, bearing in its mournful eyes a record of what happened to the people. Foley adopts the Dingo as both guardian

spirit and signature, and though many may not notice it, the recurrence of the Dingo in her work reiterates that inescapable question which is permanently inscribed in the animal’s eyes: what happened to the Badtjala? In Foley’s work, the Dingo is a witness as well as a trope, a reliquary of largely discounted memory, an interrogatory loop. Unobtrusively but repeatedly replicated, the Dingo is a sign of the occasionally faint but indelible line between the Australian settler and the indigenous people, of the unbroachable interstice between the one and the other, of the crack in the facade of a new multi-culturalism and its demand for collective amnesia. The Dingo is the silent figure that calls history to account.

The colorful feather of the cockatoo, which appears as frequently in Foley’s work, especially the work from the early 1990s, not only echoes the above, but also relates to the peculiar climactic and vegetational diversity of Fraser Island, which is perhaps the only place on earth where three climatic regions fall within the boundaries of a tiny sand island. There is a reference, too, to the colored, undulating sand-cliffs of Rainbow Beach on the east coast of the island. This beach lies at the center of a Badtjala legend and is the subject of Foley’s “Colored Sand” (1993). The colored sand-cliffs record the antiquity of male transgression and sexual violence against women: once, a young woman was betrothed to an elderly man without her consent.

Dissatisfied with the arrangement and intent on defending her right to choice, she began an affair with the Rainbow. One day, the elder found the two lovers in their hideout and, irate with jealousy, hurled his boomerang at the Rainbow, thus cutting him in two. The severed Rainbow fell from heaven, his remains splattering the cliffs and staining them forever. The sand-cliffs became a women’s site, a shrine to female defiance of male domination, and has recently returned to the custody of the Badtjala, who struggle to protect it against (often male) tourist trespassing.

The cockatoo feather in Foley’s art therefore registers both environment and myth, both the physical and the spiritual, both the visual and the political. Set against her often deep blue backgrounds, the cockatoo feather sits like the Island itself against the sea. It is also usually shown in descent, singular and fragile, like a speck of memory caught in mid-air. One is disturbingly reminded of a shot bird, from which a lone feather descends as evidence, as a sign of the violence visited upon the bird. It is a fragment of the owning body, a metonym which registers its owner’s fate and survives to give perpetuity to its memory. By seizing the feather in descent, we reclaim its origin, just as the artist seizes fragments of a mediated history as an act of recuperation and rehabilitation.

Foley’s use of pastel is itself significant, in that the medium has often been denigrated and occasionally

consigned to women in malestream art history and practice. Pastel succeeds, perhaps more than any other medium might, in capturing the fleeting, as well as in codifying the fragility and vulnerability of memory. Whereas pastel was, in the past, pigeonholed as a frivolous, drawing-room medium, certain contemporary artists employ it as an underhand medium for the playful act of 'disruption' - the so-called subversion of tradition and return to materiality. Foley projects the medium beyond even the normativity that we find in Mary Cassat's domesticities, or the transfixing of the transient that we find in Degas' pastels. In Foley's work, as in the work of Jean Michel Basquiat, pastel is not just a medium, but also a figure of signification. As a loose and fragile medium, pastel is vulnerable to vandalism and distortion. Yet, properly preserved pastel is one of the most durable media in art. Chalk and conte drawings in caves and on rock surfaces, have survived from prehistory. With pastel, unlike with the equally fragile medium of graphite, there is no deletion without trace. Pastel, therefore, is a paradox of frailty and permanence, delicacy and resilience. Like history, pastel speaks of fragility, transience and impermanence, on the one hand, as well as of survival and perpetuity on the other. Pastel replicates history's vulnerability to distortion, as well as the impossibility of perfect erasure. And Foley, like Basquiat, signs allegiance to the alterity of history and inscription,

through her employment of the medium.

Foley's method of application of pastel is of significant interest. Whereas traditional uses of pastel emphasize swiftness and deftness, as we find in Degas, Foley stains with the medium. She lays out her color, then persistently and methodically, almost painfully, rubs it into the support. Again we are reminded of Basquiat who, though interested in the graphic qualities of pastel, nevertheless underlined his even greater interest in the medium as rhetoric by repeated inscription, by a methodical process of insistent reiteration, through writing over and over again so to register, in his consciousness, the permanent threat of the elided desire. Foley painstakingly rubs her pastel into the support with an identical consciousness of the delicacy, even futility of inscription, and the will to preclude complete elision. In her application of pastel, the desire is to leave a persistent stain, to preclude erasure without trace.

In Foley's pastels, we are reminded of the brittleness of collective memory, of the frailty of history. We are reminded of the artist's own struggle and that of her race to retrieve fragments of a vandalized history, to retrieve morsels of memory from the ashes of this history, to survive fracture, to remember. We find an allegory and a moral in her medium. Equally, we find in it, a constant reminder of the thin glass between the picture and the

vandal, between the beauty and the beast. We are reminded of our own vulnerability to violence and annihilation, a condition underlined by the uncertainties and eccentricities of the digital age, with its pseudo-democratic license to transgressive power and privilege.

Also, pastel reminds us of that most delicate of structures, our own environment, which when respected and carefully tended, is eternally sustaining, but if neglected, could disappear before our very eyes. Fraser Island, Foley's ancestral country, is an impermanent structure of shifting sands, set precariously on the sea-bed, like a pastel on its support. The island nevertheless survived millennia under the careful custody of its original inhabitants. In the last hundred and fifty years, however, ecological and political transgression have repeatedly undermined this delicate system. The island has come under threat time and again, partially due to the fact that it is protected rather feebly from vandalism, like the thin piece of glass which keeps the pastel drawing from being touched. For a whole century, the logging industry depleted the unique vegetation of the island and almost irreparably affected its delicate ecology. This was followed by sand-mining in the 1960s, much of which not only destroyed the fragile geology, but also polluted the island's creeks and lakes. Titanium residues from the prospects of the "Queensland Titanium Mines Pty Ltd." between North Spit and

Eurong, still pollute the waters of Eli Creek and parts of Seventy-Five Mile Beach. Despite the vigorous campaigns of the original peoples of the island, as well as conservation groups, which led to an international legal battle and the conclusion of sand-mining since 1976, the Queensland government secretly renewed the leases of one mining concern in 1984.

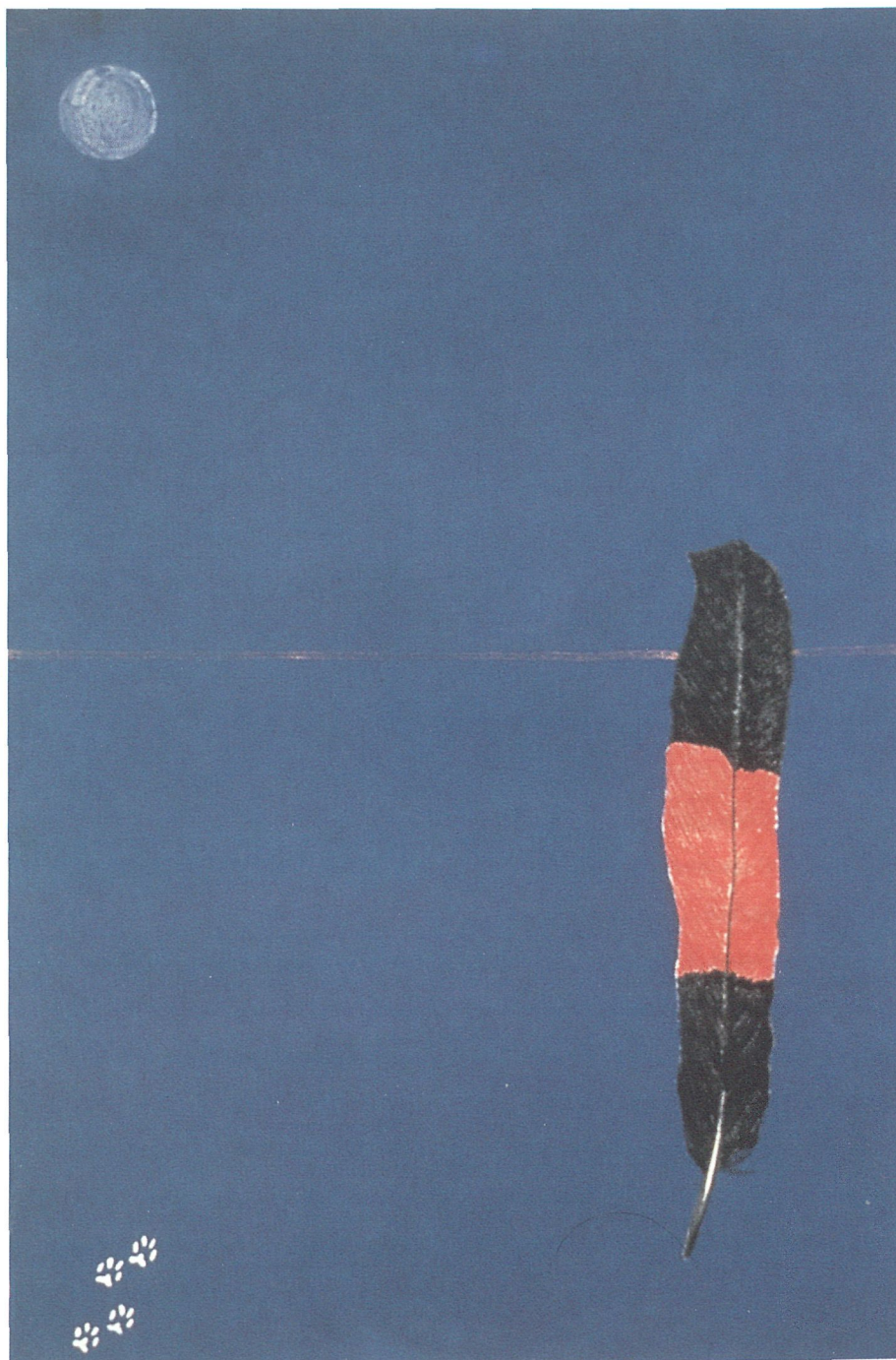
Yet it is tourism, perhaps, that poses the greatest threat to Fraser Island today. Hundreds of four-wheel drive vehicles and Devil's Angels bikes, thousands of camp-sites, irreverent campers and their litter, tourists who try to feed the Dingoes: all of these are locked in constant opposition to the renewed custodianship of the Badtjala and the government conservation department. Fraser Island remains like a pastel drawing: fragile and vulnerable, yet imbued with an inherent tenacity. This is evoked by Foley in her use of pastels.

In her earlier work, Fiona Foley recorded aspects of Badtjala culture in stylized drawings of ceremonies, rituals, and sacred sites, using for her imagery only the layouts of performance sites. Though she avoided paintings of dream-times and song-lines, she took naturally to the bird's-eye perspective which gave her works a schematic peculiarity quite uncommon in conceptual work by other artists from the region. In the drawings, we find interplays of forms and shapes which call to mind the paintings of the London artist Uzo Egonu, or indeed, the

work of Klee. In Foley's work from this period, each shape bore symbolic weight, each line alluded to a historical or cultural reality. There was none of the fashionable doodle-and-scrawl of much contemporary Sydney art. Foley has remained conscious of what she refers to as 'depth', in other words, of

the historical relevance in her work.

In some of her other work, she refers to specific historical moments and incidents, for example, the legend of Eliza Fraser, the wife of British naval captain James Fraser, whose cargo vessel ("Stirling Castle") was wrecked north of



Solitaire, 1993. Ink and pastel on paper, 56 x 38 cm.
Photo Courtesy: Roslyn Oxley Gallery, Sydney.

Fraser Island in 1836. Fraser and his wife were taken by the people of the island. Mrs. Fraser was kept with the women and made to observe their ways and to work with them. She would later narrate tales of her 'torture' and the 'cruelty of the natives' after she was recovered by the British, and would *make much money in the years to follow* from fees paid to her for lectures in which she spoke of her 'experience'. Although Captain Fraser died of starvation, according to a British magazine report shortly after his death, his wife would insist, in her narratives, on the cruel murder of her husband by 'the savages'. In 1838, George Ivy of London published a book of Eliza Fraser's narrative as told to John Curtis, *and this naturally stirred up much indignation in England*. As John Sinclair has written, 'the lives of the Fraser Island Aborigines changed irrevocably after the survivors of the "Stirling Castle" stumbled ashore.' What followed was a century of Caucasian incursions and forced settlement, and with it, the calculated annihilation and displacement of the Island's original inhabitants, much akin to the annihilation of the original populations of the Americas.

Foley keeps a photograph of the woman for whose spouse her ancestral home was renamed and whose landing on her people's land brought a cruel twist to their history. In her works, she interrogates Eliza's misrepresentation of the Badtjala, and her exploitation of a distorting history. On the other hand,

she also keeps a colonial photograph of an unknown young Badtjala woman, which appears in her 1988 series, "Survival". Foley plays the received image of the Badtjala woman off against the representation of the white-clad Eliza Fraser. Through the juxtaposition of the two women, she elicits the subtle *politics of presence and absence, of speech and silence, of the written and the emotive, of the validated and the discounted*. For an exhibition in 1994, Foley came up with the title "I had none of the language", a direct reference to the loss of the Badtjala language earlier this century, but even more so, an oblique reference to the disturbing binary of inscription and erasure which Eliza Fraser and the unknown Badtjala woman together represent. *Eliza Fraser's loquacious narratives, juxtaposed with the silence of the Badtjala woman, reminds one of the immense power of self-absolution which speech accords those who possess it*. Despite her story of 'ordeals', Eliza's white-draped, smiling face radiates triumph. In photographs from the period, Mrs. Fraser is fully clothed in the apparel of Victorian decency and civility, rescued from the claws of barbarity and restored to humanity. Her triumph is one not only of the individual over danger, but also of Christian decency over savagery, of civility over barbarity, of Europe over the native. The young Badtjala woman, on the other hand, beautiful and full of the strength of youth, carries a sadness in her eyes which bears a story more

tragic and disturbing, a story which is, however, denied cognition. She represents memory which is discounted because it exists not only outside writing, but equally, outside the validation of power. In looking on Fraser's image, we are confronted with a circumstantial structure of power and *consent: the press photograph is constructed in a collaboration between sitter and photographer, a collaboration which ensures that the former is fully and manifestly subjectivised*. The image is part of a self-validating and privileged narrative, a narrative empowered within history. In the other photograph we find - or rather, we are presented with - an object of desire and unmediated visual access, an anonym, a trophy of colonial *transgression*. The affective structure is one of cultural permission, one which places the native at the disposal of the outsider.

But this is only one possible reading. On the other hand, even in the silence of the anonym, we recognize the negation of privileged representation, located not denotatively but connotatively, in the unacknowledged, absent narrative. And this, though it *does not mediate the violence of the privileged gaze, nevertheless places it on record, thus inscribing a different history*. We find an element of the survival that Foley implies in her series of 1988. The image of the Badtjala woman, like that of Eliza Fraser, eventually subverts its own distorting intent by encoding the structures of its

realization. It becomes the trap for this intent, a trap which recurs in Foley's fist-in-the-face piece, "Eliza Fraser Heads for Trouble" (1991). In the piece, a black figure stands over the trapped image of Eliza Fraser, who is head down and held between the jaws of the contraption, held, as it were, between the jaws of her own narrative. There is a ring of triumphalist rhetoric in the work, but more significantly, the trap becomes a trope for history, and the image an accomplice and a witness. Foley has often worked with mouse-traps, and in her work, the trap is both medium and figure: it replicates the condition of the image as arrested memory, as inherently unalterable. In using the trap as trope, Foley reminds us that, even as artifice, the image overrules its own alterity.

Foley sees herself as a reincarnate of the young Badjjala woman, a reincarnate who equally restores speech and language to the anonym, and repositions her story on the site of cognition. She identifies this as her responsibility as an artist, as a producer of images. Foley recognizes the power of the documentary image and of the photographic medium. She has always been drawn to video and the short movie, but seems to have found her strength in the photograph. Her recent work continues her quest for the most eloquent medium in which to effectively pursue the discourse of recollection and interrogation, which she began with the images of Eliza Fraser and the Badjjala

maiden. In 1994, Foley presented a photographic installation at the Roslyn Oxley Gallery in Sydney, in which she finally entered the character of the Badjjala maiden. In the installation, she presented herself as an approximation of the colonial image, assuming the exact posture and simulating the condition of her Badjjala ancestor. She placed herself in the position of the consumed native, the silent object of outsider gaze. In contemporary art, there is neither

desired nevertheless. Between desire and possession, is Foley's body, which is the vessel of history and memory. Proffered to us in this manner, this body speaks of memory before and after its violation. It speaks of the violence to which it remains subject. In Foley's photographs, the Other makes herself available: she exposes herself and invites our gaze, if only to re-enact the original gaze, the original violence perpetrated on her. She does not disrupt this gaze nor does she



Coloured Sand, 1993 (Detail). Wall installation. Photo Courtesy: Roslyn Oxley Gallery, Sydney.

precedent for nor corollary to, the subtlety of Foley's auto-nativisation, the absence of the polemic edge, the absence of that anger and violence which Fanon deposits as the inescapable, self-defeating condition of the Otherised.

Foley replicated the silent, vacant stare of the objectified Other, the Other who is an object of outsider desire, the native who is denoted as savage yet

return it. She recognizes that it is impossible to return the invasive gaze: that which purports to be a return gaze is only mimicry. Instead, Foley forges the gaze into a blink, thus exposing it to itself. Looking at the pictures, we recall E. M. Forster's frustrated synopsis of India and the native body: "She calls "come" ... But come to what? ... she is not a promise, only an appeal." We

recall too. Lacan's analysis of the alienation of the subjectivity of the Other, which echoes Forster most tellingly: "[s]he is saying this to me, but what does [s]he want?" Foley's exposed body is neither promise nor appeal. She relocates herself at the disposal of outsider desire in order to elicit its intent and fragment its facade of coherence and linear clarity. She makes herself vulnerable only to emphasize her enduring vulnerability.

Foley avoids a prosaic narrative of the historical, and instead enacts a performative reclamation of time. Through self-flagellation, through the deliberate resubmission of her body to the violent gaze, she reinstates the memory which must neither be discounted nor displaced. She speaks of the persistence of memory, of the burden of history. For her, time does *not* heal all wounds. Like a boomerang, she casts history in a loop and returns it dangerously to the unsuspecting source.

In the most recent of her photographs, Foley gradually emerges from the role of the reincarnate maiden and begins to titillate transgressive desire. She begins to remind us of Josephine Baker, the ultimate auto-native, as if to ask: how do you like me

now? In addition, she adds a touch of color to the monochrome photographs, as a mark of artifice, so as to remind us that the image is a theater of enactment and inauthenticity, that every image is a construct beyond that unalterable circumstance which it registers outside the frames of institutional intent. Foley interferes with the photographic medium, also, to denote its materiality, its paradoxical nature as both object and language, as both art and document. In her "Urban Nomad" series she becomes a performer: thus she is both the image and its creator, the author and the text. Though she does not resolve the problem of technical control and its interventionist privileges, being only director and model rather than technical hand, she further establishes her presence by acting manually *on* the photograph, thus condemning it as incomplete without her manual finish, her ultimate validation. Foley reintroduces the element of making. In formulating her own image, even as she performs on the theater of expectation, she fully subjectivizes herself. The gaze which she receives is invited by her. She is no longer acted upon: but acts upon us.

Like a number of other Australian artists of her generation, Fiona Foley

introduces us to a different dimension and form in the art of the South Pacific. Born in 1964, Foley studied art and art education in colleges in Sydney. She then spent a period of time amongst the people of Ramangining in the Australian Northern Territory where she worked with artists in workshops and cooperatives. Since 1992, she has lived and worked in Sydney, for a period as curator of the Aboriginal collection at the Museum of Contemporary Art. In the past few years, Foley's work has been shown in major exhibitions in Europe, North America, and the far East, as well as in important Australian spaces. She has also executed a number of important public commissions and can be found in major collections in Australia. With each show and each new series, we find a strength and depth in Foley's work which is quite distinct from the vacuousness that seems to define post-grunge art in Australia, and millennial art as a whole: a strength and depth which establish her as one of the major artists of the 1990s. In her work, we find an indication that, perhaps, a 'custodial' aesthetics, rather than the prevailing pseudo-existentialist obsession with death and nothingness, is the one redeeming route for millennial practice.