

**Julie Gough**

***Force field, 2007***

**Bricks, tree, wood, metal, paper**

**5 x 3.5 x 4.5 m**

**Courtesy the artist.**

**Thanks to Robyn and Jonathan Banks; Manuscript Librarians, National Library of Australia; Australia Council for the Arts – and particularly to James Holland and the installation crew at the ANU School of Art Gallery.**

**PLEASE WALK ON THE WORK**

**Artist statement:**

It has been a great challenge to arrive and create a new installation artwork in nine days' stay at ANU. I arrived with a vision of a dead tree in a fireplace – about the anomaly of the cold heart of a home, instead of what a fireplace should be – warmth, comfort, memories, security. I also had in mind to present a history book I personally detest in another manner than the accreditation a bookstore or bookshelf accords.

Another strong desire to achieve during this trip to Canberra was to visit the Manuscripts section in the National Library of Australia (NLA) to view an original Magistrate's Report from 1825, having only previously seen the transcribed version. This report presents two witnesses' accounts to the aftermath of an attack. The seven page handwritten document reveals that one of my (Aboriginal) ancestors in Tasmania, Dalrymple Briggs, when 12 years of age and a 'native' servant to the fairly notorious Dr Jacob Mountgarrett at Longford, Tasmania was shot by him.

Dalrymple survived, and two weeks after the event was summoned to Launceston to present her account to a magistrate. There she stated that her 'master' was shooting at a possum and mistakenly shot her... directly contradicting the witnesses' account. I don't believe her account – I think she was under pressure from Mountgarrett to clear him of this charge.

I have fixed copies of the original Magistrate's report onto the wooden mantelpiece above the cold brick fireplace. It is smaller than real size and hence difficult to read, but it is possible to read by those who really wish to and can spend the time. A commitment to understanding. Hidden history. I haven't provided the typed version, it seems too easy to offer it verbatim to anyone. It is close and personal for me and family, a link across ever lengthening time to Dalrymple.

To reach the mantelpiece the viewer has to cross the floor papered with the book: *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* – that targets Tasmanian Aborigines as makers of their own demise and not deliberately removed, poisoned, shot, or otherwise harmed by the incoming British through the first half of the nineteenth century. This version is fanciful – relying only on written evidence to, of course, paint those that write and keep the records, as harmless observers of some extraordinary, apparently inexplicable, demise of the majority of Tasmanian Aboriginal people in the short span of fifty years post invasion.

Walking to the fireplace to read an account livid with nuance and fear is an action that will hopefully blacken and erase this text on the floor that doggedly misinterprets the past. To go by written history as it is presented, without a balance of oral history and without reading between the, in this case, obvious lines, is too easy and giving a mainstream

majority a palatable version of their past, not the most likely past... There is much unfinished business and emerging questions with every document uncovered afresh offering any Indigenous voice. Who is the black boy also living with Dalrymple, Mountgarrett and his wife? What kind of antagonisms already existed between the Brumby's, Archer's and Mountgarrett?

For people to arrive at the original history text they must cross over the heavily biased account on the floor. The two room cottage that Dalrymple fled from still exists on a colonial Midlands estate in Tasmania. The scale of the main room closely approximates the floor plan space made by the book pages in this artwork. This cottage was moved about 2 miles down the road in about 1829, the year after Mountgarrett died. Dalrymple fled the cottage 10 months after she was shot. In later years the cottage was a timber working shed. This information only came to me last week, here in Canberra via fax and email. The decision to insert an apple tree in the fireplace before I knew this timber presence in the cottage post Mountgarrett seems portentously fitting. The scale of the sitting room of William Archer's cottage where Dalrymple, according to the witnesses, was about to flee when they rode past and intervened is also approximately the scale of the floor plan in this artwork.

The papers were glued to the floor with *clag* - flour and water paste. Flour is also significant to Aboriginal people in Tasmania, for flour was known to have been laced with poison on occasion, and flour drums held traps, which likely was responsible for the self amputation of at least one man's (Tongerlongeter) arm. The tree is an old apple tree from Pialligo, one of 60 that was about to be chipped to make way for native plants. Tasmania was marketed as The Apple Isle – the delightful holiday destination for generations of Australians – pre-overseas flights. For me the apple also marks the onset of colonization. Captain Bligh, carrying the breadfruit around the globe, also planted the first apple tree in Tasmania, on Bruny Island. Bruny D'Entrecasteaux' expedition planted and gifted an entire French vegetable garden in D'Entrecasteaux Channel, southern Tasmania to Tasmanian Aborigines – it failed. By their next expedition the French could hardly locate it.

The title ***Force field*** notes the pressure to accept written history as fact, when it holds layers of meaning and nuance, particular to time, place, authorship. Deliberate recordings are about substantiation, power and culpability, or lack of. Dalrymple's words do not ring true – but did she have any other option than absolving her 'master' of her shooting?

A shadow walked past my left when I was solo and gluing the pages onto the floor over an entire night just before the exhibition opening. It was a possum, live. It walked calmly into the ANU gallery at 11.30pm and past me and stopped near the beginning of the book, it looked at me, up at the tree, at the pages, it did a kind of quiet turn on the pages and walked in front of the fireplace left to right across the floor, in front of me, to the wall then appeared to look up at Vernon Ah Kee's work whilst walking the perimeter to exit the gallery, leaving its tracks clearly on the work.

Julie Gough  
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