



**Wonderlust: the influence of natural history illustration
and ornamentation on perceptions of the exotic in
Australia.**

College of Arts and Social Sciences

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Exegesis of Studio Research

Declaration of Originality

I,(signature and date) hereby declare that the thesis here presented is the outcome of the research project undertaken during my candidacy, that I am the sole author unless otherwise indicated, and that I have fully documented the source of ideas, references, quotations and paraphrases attributable to other authors.

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Abstract

This thesis is comprised of two parts: a Studio Research component with an accompanying Exegesis (66%), and a Dissertation (33%). The Dissertation examines the historical and cultural context of the production of natural history illustration and ornamentation, and the formal qualities of these visual forms that enabled them to inform and disseminate exotic constructions and perceptions. These visual forms were a significant part of the intellectual and cultural framework of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and frequently represented the 'other' as desirable and different. The aesthetic responses generated by such exotic representations operated subliminally to develop and reinforce dualistic notions surrounding the difference of the distant 'other' in comparison to the European self. The Dissertation examines the specificity of the operation of these visual forms in relation to exotic perceptions of the Australian 'other' from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, and develops an argument about the rise of a unique mode of perceiving the Australian 'other'.

The Dissertation elaborates the theoretical context for the studio research which is an evocation and examination of the aesthetic experience of the exotic, informed by natural history illustration and ornamentation. A process of quotation and transformation of historical imagery was developed to investigate foundational representations and perceptions of the Australian exoticised 'other' and the manner in which this imagery persists and reforms as it circulates in society. The imagery is reworked by a painting process that utilises the material and formal properties of paint to explore the nature of the aesthetic perception of the exotic while also providing a metaphoric model of the manner in which the self is defined in relation to the 'other'. The process offers an alternative mode of conceiving the 'other' within the post-colonial concept of hybridity.

The results of the studio research are elaborated in this Exegesis and will be presented as a site-specific installation of paintings in the ANU School of Art Gallery from 17 to 26 March 2010.

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Introduction: influences and intentions

It has always been animals, birds and plants. For as long as I can remember I drew and painted them. I collected pets, domestic and wild, and dreamed of horses. I loved to try to capture creatures on paper. I loved being outside. My fascination with animals drove my decisions to train and practice as a veterinarian. My increasing scientific and practical knowledge within the natural sciences however caused me to question my romantic sense of affinity with the natural world. The possibility of interrogating my conceptions of the natural world and my sense of place within it informed my original PhD proposal.

The proposal was to ‘investigate and compare various forms of cultural interaction with the natural world and how such interaction informs current Australian perceptions of the concepts of Nature and the Environment’’. This proposal soon proved too broad and needed to be more specifically defined. As discussed in the introduction of my Dissertation a range of intellectual interests, aesthetic and working preferences influenced the development of my research topic. The operation and character of the aesthetic perception of the weird yet desirable exoticised ‘other’ had interested me since studying Bernard Smith’s book, *Imagining the Pacific: In the Wake of the Cook Voyages* as an undergraduate.¹ Smith elaborates the fact that exotic representations formed from natural history illustrations were an integral facet of the process of colonialism. This discourse opened a conduit for me to investigate the construction of the ‘other’ located in the natural world of Australia using imagery with which I felt a degree of affinity. My decision to additionally examine the relationship between ornamentation and exotic constructions was based on both my appreciation of ornamental imagery and a long standing curiosity regarding the implications of the widespread use across many cultures of motifs or patterning based on aspects of the natural environment. My research was underpinned by my premise that the various forms of imagery found in the domestic environment reflect and inform perceptions of the natural world. My topic emerged as: *The Influence of Natural History Illustration and Ornamentation on Perceptions of the Exotic in Australia*. My research aimed to unravel the specificity and operation of exoticism based on the natural world of this

¹ Bernard Smith, *Imagining the Pacific: In the Wake of the Cook Voyages* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1992).

land. I intended to use the insights gained to develop imagery that would both evoke and examine the Australian exotic 'other'.

A series of research questions, outlined in *Appendix B*, directed my studio research. Although the research questions appear to be logically ordered, their appearance and my progress were convoluted rather than linear. Concepts were frequently revisited, my understanding of them growing each time. The reflective studio research was underpinned by my search and examination of primary and secondary visual source material and theoretical research of relevant topics elaborated in texts and other artists' work. This Exegesis is a streamlined account of the progress and outcomes of the studio research. For clarity it is organised into chronological sections that discuss the exploration of various processes and media, relevant concepts and precedents. Five different bodies of work are discussed; the initial ornamental natural history paintings, screen-printed wallpapers, '*Other*' visions, the *An 'other'* vision series and *The exotic hybrid* works. I have not discussed all the studio work made. Instead I have concentrated on works that were formative on my progress. *Appendix A* contains a selection of images of some of the various processes that I experimented with but did not pursue.

The ornamented natural history image: 2006-2007

My initial research questions were aimed to explore the context of the production, cultural significance, and formal qualities of natural history illustration and ornamentation that enabled them to act historically as defining agents and carriers of the exotic 'other'. A theoretical grasp of these issues was fundamental to my studio investigations. In addition, insight regarding the nature of the exotic as both a construction and aesthetic perception – its location, character and cultural implications, was vital for my creative engagement with this subject. The cultural significance and formal attributes of natural history illustration are discussed in Chapter One of the Dissertation. These same issues are elaborated at length in Chapter Two with respect to ornamentation. As my theoretical understanding was developing I explored the rich visual resource of illustrations and ornamentation created in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Rather than create new illustrations from direct observation of subjects or photographs I decided to develop a means of referencing and re-presenting relevant historical imagery. I believed that such a process would allow an engagement with a broader range of contextual implications.



Figure 1: (left) Sarah Stone, *Small Paraquet*, c. 1790, watercolour on paper, 23 x 17 cm, State Library of NSW, PXA 909/18

Figure 2: (right) Sarah Stone, *A Tapoa Tafa*, c. 1790, watercolour on paper, 17 x 23 cm, State Library of NSW, PXA 909/28.

Where possible I examined original natural history illustrations and engravings created by Australian and European artists. As the artists who created these works operated with a range of intentions, underlying cultural imperatives and levels of technical expertise, a vast spectrum of images with differing aesthetic qualities exists. My responses to these images ranged from being awe-struck by Ferdinand Bauer's virtuosity to being highly amused by some of the works of Richard Browne and the Port Jackson Painter. Fortuitously, I became aware of the work of Sarah Stone. My examination of a folio of Stone's original illustrations in the Mitchell Library (Sydney) proved to be particularly illuminating.² Although her work falls far short technically and aesthetically from Bauer's, Stone had sufficient skill to render the surface textures of her bird and animal subjects with a reasonable degree of verisimilitude. I could imagine that her images were created through direct observation, but what were represented were weird, odd creatures. Their bizarre postures, expressions and placement in fantastic settings meant that although the species were identifiable to me, they were represented in a manner that made them strange. Figures 1 and 2 are two of Stone's illustrations, *Small Paraquet* and *A Tapoa Tafa*. Unlike the clumsily rendered naïve images of Browne or Bauer's images which left little for the imagination to

² Stone's work is discussed more extensively within Chapter One of the Dissertation.

embellish, Stone's images provoked in me a strong sense of the believable fantastic. While the eighteenth century British viewer would have considered this an exotic image of an unfamiliar creature, I perceived a sense of the exotic in the familiar animal which was represented in an odd manner. I decided that I would need to blend fantasy and fact in my imagery if I was to recreate a sense of the exotic that I felt.



Figure 3: (left) Nicola Dickson, *Kangaroo*, 2006, acrylic and oil on canvas, 40 x 30 cm.

Figure 4: (right) Sarah Stone, *Kangaroo*, c.1790, watercolour on paper, 23 x 17 cm, State Library of NSW, PXA 909/25.

As natural history illustrations are characteristically made from direct empirical observation, imagery I created that clearly referenced such sources would also imply a level of documentary truth. An unambiguous reference to natural history illustration could be made if I retained the typical formal structure of these illustrations within the process of quoting and reworking the imagery. I anticipated that by combining such quotations with ornamental imagery a sense of the fantastic would enter the work, evoking an impression of the unfamiliar exotic. I began by using a combination of screen-printing and painting processes. I literally copied several of Stone's awkward animals using a similar scale to the original illustration onto a cadmium orange ground onto which I had screen-printed a gold pattern derived from commercially available wallpaper. The pattern featured the most common contemporary cultural associations of what constitutes the exotic — palm trees, tropical fruit, monkeys and leopards. The

figure of the animal or bird was painted in a contrasting ultramarine blue (see Figures. 3 and 4). The way I defined the figure from the ground in this body of works produced images that were visually chaotic and aesthetically displeasing. The strident patterned rendering of the figures of the animals and birds made them too odd and lifeless to suggest an actual fantastic creature.



Figure 5: (left) Ferdinand Bauer, *Noisy friarbird* 1802, watercolour on paper, 34 x 51.1 cm. From, *An Exquisite Eye: The Australian Flora & Fauna Drawings 1801 — 1820 of Ferdinand Bauer*, Peter Watts, Jo Anne Pomfrett and David Mabberley, Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, Glebe, 1997.

Figure 6: (right) Nicola Dickson, *Bauer's Friarbird*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 75 cm.

I determined to base the next body of paintings more loosely on my primary source, this time derived from Ferdinand Bauer. Figure 5 depicts an original illustration by Bauer and the work I painted in response to it is shown in Figure 6. I increased the scale of the image, altered the form of the branch and painted chinoiserie cloud forms across the ground in order to reference this highly influential decorative form.³ On top of an olive green ground I silkscreened a grey pattern derived from eighteenth century British flock wallpaper. The identifiable friarbird was painted in unnatural colours to contrast with

³ Although this form of imagery is a well known example of the process of exoticisation within ornamentation, I felt a degree of disquiet using it as its widespread use in Britain occurred before the colonisation of Australia. My quotation of it seemed a little illogical to me in comparison to my efforts to reference natural history illustration that was aligned historically and geographically to my subject. For this reason I did not incorporate it again and endeavoured to quote imagery from roughly the same period within the one painting.

the ground and only partially distorted by my exaggeration of the distinctive neck ruffle of this species. As in the previous works I explored manipulating the figure-ground relationship in order to develop a means of combining ornamental and empirical imagery. Line, colour contrasts and three-dimensional modelling distinguished the figure from the ground. I consider this second body of works was more successful in formally blending the two visual forms.

In my search for resource material of eighteenth century British textile designs, I was excited to find the works by a highly prolific and influential textile designer Maria Anne Garthwaite (b1689). Garthwaite's imagery was a blend of botanical and fantastic ornamental forms that reflected the fluctuating Neoclassical, French and Chinese influences on the continually shifting taste for decorative imagery of this period. As well as the formal incorporation of the fantastic, the manner in which Garthwaite painted gouache preparatory designs for fabrics offered an alternative means of rendering form and mark-making in paint that referenced ornamental imagery. As separate colours and tones cannot be physically blended to model form in woven or printed textiles, volume is represented by aligning tonal gradations of the same colour. The impression of blending is enhanced by using a cross-hatched profile to separate the various tones or colours. This technique is shown in Figures 7 and 8. I experimented with the insertion of figures of parrots derived from Bauer into imagery appropriated from Garthwaite. The most successful attempt to use this methodology, *Rococo Parrots IV*, 2006, is shown in Figure 9. I screen-printed the same patterned imagery quoted from British flock wallpaper to form a light tertiary grey ground. I rendered many of the forms in a manner similar to Garthwaite's gouache studies. The figures of the birds were punctuated sporadically by 'holes' through which the ground was visible. Other areas of the bird's form were painted with the same pattern as the ground. The birds were placed on a rococo inspired branching form, constructed from feather motifs, flowers and beaks. I believed that the crosshatched mode of mark making and the alignment of tonal gradations rather than blending was a successful technique and I continued to use it subsequently. However I was uncertain whether the illusion of fantasy was too strident. In addition the figures were unrelated to the ground which was quite inactive. I needed to contemplate my imagery further, consider some questions that had been raised by supervisors and try alternative modes of investigation.



Figure 7: (left) Anna Maria Garthwaite, silk design, 1741, gouache on paper. From *Silk Designs of the Eighteenth Century*, Natalie Rothstein, Thames and Hudson, 1990, 151

Figure 8: (right) Anna Maria Garthwaite, silk design, 1741, gouache on paper. From *Silk Designs of the Eighteenth Century*, 147



Figure 9: Nicola Dickson, *Rococo Parrots IV*, 2006, acrylic and oil on canvas 100 x 120 cm.

Quoting history

I had decided to examine and incorporate imagery of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a means of investigating past and present perceptions of the exotic. I was questioned several times about how I proposed to avoid producing work that appeared

merely nostalgic. As a romantic idealisation of the past was not my intention, I pondered the means and implications of using historical imagery.

Examining imagery of the past can provide new insights into history and constitute an alternative to the written text. Oral histories, sound records and material artefacts offer differing social viewpoints in the telling of history while engendering diverse modes of contemporary viewer/reader engagement. This fact is elaborated by Dipesh Chakrabarty who states that a diversity of narrative forms and voices now compete for legitimacy within historical discourse, and although accompanied by challenges to historical objectivity the past may be revealed more vividly through specific objects and images than textual borrowings.⁴ John Berger suggests the imagery of the everyday can provide insights into former cultural preoccupations, conceptions and tastes. Berger states that compared to images, 'no other relic or text from the past can offer such a direct testimony about the world which surrounded other peoples at other times.'⁵

Bronwen Douglas points out that 'pasts' exist both in the past and the present. They are knowable 'only as histories through their variously 'texted' debris written, visual, spoken, remembered; but histories are always present as acts of conception and representation.'⁶ The most frequent strategy contemporary visual artists employ when exploring this mutability of history is a process of appropriation or quotation. Rex Butler defines appropriation as the practice of borrowing or quoting from one work of art to produce another with the aim of providing a new context and thus creating new meanings and significance for the original work. Within this strategy an art work is available to an infinite number of meanings, settings or interventions on the part of the reader.⁷

Implicit within the practice of appropriation is recognition of the original as an essential part of the meaning of the new work. Joan Kerr points out that this conceptual rationale 'is hardly a post-modern invention; it was the inevitable outcome of the historical

⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'History and the Politics of Recognition,' in *Manifestoes for History*, ed. Alun Munslow, Keith Jenkins, and Sue Morgan (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), 84.

⁵ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972), 10.

⁶ Bronwen Douglas, 'Art as an Ethno-Historical Text: Science, Representation and Indigenous Presence in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Oceanic Voyage Literature,' in *Double Vision: Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific*, ed. Nicholas Thomas and Diane Losche (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 65.

⁷ Rex Butler, ed., *Radical Revisionism: An Anthology of Writings on Australian Art* (Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 2005), 7.

awareness which accompanied European modernity.’⁸ However the prevalence of its practice, the formal means used to achieve it and the cultural critiques that the process engages with shift. The work of the Australian artist Imants Tillers from the 1980s to the present is a good example of this. The breadth of concepts explored by Tillers is underpinned by modifications and adaptations of the formal means he employed to appropriate imagery; the pictorial structure reflecting the underlying concept being explored.

The quotation and re-presentation of historical images enables a form of contemporary re-reading or ‘revisionism’ of their meaning.⁹ This concept, which is highly relevant to many Australian artists’ work, did not fully underpin my intentions or the implications of my quotation of historical imagery. Natural history illustration and ornamentation are produced and circulated in a different cultural context to fine art. Issues of intention, authorship and originality vary. My successful engagement in a deliberate process of revisionism was more uncertain as the original imagery was more obscure, often unattributed and already subject to previous transformations. I considered my re-worked imagery could only reliably refer to a sense of the past.

My intentions were based on the aim to imaginatively engage with the past. I primarily wished to understand how perceptions of the ‘other’ were experienced and developed. I wanted to imagine a sense of how settlers perceived the ‘otherness’ that surrounded them. Importantly I wanted to consider how these foundational feelings regarding the Australian ‘other’ had evolved into those experienced today. Despite the labile and variable nature of these perceptions, they had a potent influence on the formation of succeeding conceptions and constructions. Unpicking the thread of their continued but malleable existence I believed would engender an understanding of my own perceptions of the ‘otherness’ of the natural world that surrounded me; an ‘otherness’ I needed to be reconciled with in order to understand my own sense of place and identity as an Australian settler.

Michael Foucault’s concept of ‘re-writing’ elaborated in his text *The Archaeology of Knowledge* was an enlightening way for me to consider the rationale and process of re-working historical imagery within my research project. Foucault states that within an exploration of history a process of re-writing occurs. This process is ‘the preserved

⁸ Joan Kerr, ‘Colonial Quotations,’ in *Radical Revisionism: An Anthology of Writings on Australian Art*, ed. Rex Butler (Brisbane: IMA Publishing, 2005), 295.

⁹ Butler, ed., *Radical Revisionism: An Anthology of Writings on Australian Art*, 9.

form of exteriority, a regulated transformation of what has already been written. It is not a return to the innermost secret of origin; it is the systematic description of a discourse-object.’¹⁰ As discussed in Chapter One of my Dissertation, natural history illustrations and ornamental imagery were typically re-worked and transformed to reflect contemporary tastes and concerns as they were circulated throughout society. The quotation, re-working and reinvention of historical imagery within my paintings could be considered to be another phase in the ‘life’ of these images, a mirroring of the sedimentary nature of any cultural experience. I wanted to tease out and add to the continued thread of representation of the exotic ‘other’ as it was woven into transformable cultural constructions. Used in this manner, the re-worked illustrations and ornamental imagery in my work could be understood as acting as a form of ‘intertext’. In other words, they functioned within a vast network of language, able to refer to other forms of imagery and texts rather than only past images of the same form.¹¹ In the same way contemporary constructions of the exotic within Australia are the result of the accretion of a myriad of shifting past and present perceptions. The concept of the palimpsest is offered in post-colonial texts to elaborate how ‘traces of earlier inscriptions’ remain as a continual feature of the ‘text’ of culture and provides an apt metaphor of the nature of such constructions.¹²

Although I became familiar with the theoretical implications and precedents of using historical imagery, the question of how to creatively engage with such images remained. I had begun to investigate quoting aspects of the two forms of imagery using the process of painting but felt it would be worthwhile to explore a wider range of media and processes. While contemplating the perceptual experiences evoked by the spectacular, immersive displays of exotic signifiers in the curiosity cabinets, imperial natural history museums and world fairs, I was struck by the similarity of those experiences to that of settlers placed in the overwhelming unsystematised natural world of Australia. In my attempt to evoke the exotic, I wondered if I could actually engage with the visceral nature of this perception that often engulfed and surrounded the body.

I attended a conference, *Art and Re-enactment* in 2007 at the Humanities Research Centre, ANU which presented a range of case studies dealing with how artists, writers

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972), 140.

¹¹ Mary Wiseman, *Poststructuralism* (Oxford University Press, 2010 [cited 6 January 2010]); available from <http://www.oxfordartonline.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/subscriber/article/opr/t234/e0416>

¹² Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 174.

and film makers do engage with the past. I found the presentations regarding the increasingly popular process of re-enactment particularly thought-provoking. Re-enactment involves diverse historically related genres ranging from theatrical and 'living history' performances to museum exhibits, television, film, travelogues and historiography and often verges on fantasy role playing within its elastic appropriation of both the real and imagined past.¹³ Re-enactment operates as a bodily-based discourse in which the 'past is reanimated through physical and psychological experience.'¹⁴ Despite having a substitutive nature, meaning that participants often choose to re-enact histories that are not their own, it is claimed that it serves an emancipatory function, allowing participants to come to terms with the past as they experience history through sympathetic, liminal engagement within often commonplace everyday events.¹⁵

This alternative and highly effective means of presenting history that allowed an imaginative engagement with the past stimulated me to investigate making two-dimensional works that would initiate foremost the sensation of being surrounded by the strange and desirable exotic. Certainly, an individual painting may generate an experience of the exotic, however as I was exploring a perception that was frequently experienced spatially as an overwhelming sensory encounter I aimed to reflect this attribute.

My concurrent theoretical research exploring the role of British wallpapers in Australian homes initiated the next step in my studio research. I turned to examining the material and conceptual properties of wallpaper. I began to tear, cut and draw on wallpapers and moved rapidly to designing and printing my own imagery.

Wallpaper and the uncanny

In the conclusion of my Dissertation I draw together the threads of my argument concerning the uniqueness of exoticism within Australia. I argue that in Australia the marked physical and psychological repression of the indigenous and natural 'other' has resulted in a close and frequent inter-relationship between perceptions of the exotic and the uncanny. The specific historical, cultural and environmental factors that have operated in this country lead to a distinctive mode of perceiving and locating the 'other',

¹³ Vanessa Agnew, 'Introduction: what is Reenactment?' *Criticism* 46, no. 3 (2004): 327.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 330

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 328

informing constructions of self and national identity. Social identity and notions of home were strongly informed by a unique Australian habitus, which was founded on British standards of taste. This was influenced by the widespread use of British wallpapers depicting European notions of nature in Australian homes in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Wallpaper occupies a unique perceptual position within the home. The affect of the overwhelming visual fields formed by wallpapered walls is countered by a rapid familiarisation of the viewer with the typically highly repetitive imagery. Our psychological evaluation of patterning as background imagery is related to the manner in which we perceive the world. The human perceptual system has a predilection for finding patterns. Once such patterns are detected we subconsciously assume that they are continuous, allowing the scanning for irregularities to take precedence.¹⁶ Our perceptual reaction to the highly repetitive imagery of wallpaper ensures it is rapidly relegated to the background of our consciousness, irrespective of the imagery depicted. Such familiarity is implicit in Freud's concept of the *heimlich*.¹⁷ The manner in which patterning empties a motif of meaning is evident when the process of contemplating a single isolated motif is compared to a field of hundreds of the same image. This mode of perception can be metaphorically related to the manner in which pervasive cultural constructions and values are rarely questioned. This comparison in conjunction with wallpaper's formal structure and familiar domestic location has stimulated its investigation by a range of contemporary artists. A number of publications outline the diversity of practice and cultural critiques explored through the medium of wallpaper. These included *Wallpaper*¹⁸, *The Cutting edge of Wallpaper*¹⁹ and *On the wall: Contemporary wallpaper*.²⁰ Of the various artists operating in this field, I found the work of Renée Green particularly interesting. *Mise-en-Scène: Commemorative Toile* is derived from the distinctive single coloured cotton toiles manufactured in Europe using copperplate engraved rollers from the mid eighteenth century.²¹ Each engraved vignette was often framed by a vegetative border that structured the patterning of individual

¹⁶ E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, *Wrightsmans Lectures* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1979), 3.

¹⁷ Chapter three of the Dissertation defines the homely *heimlich* as the homely or familiar and intimate.

¹⁸ Lachlan Blackley, *Wallpaper* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd, 2006).

¹⁹ Cigalle Hanaor, ed., *The Cutting Edge of Wallpaper* (London: Black Dog Publishing Limited, 2006).

²⁰ Judith Tannenbaum, 'On the Wall: Wallpaper by Contemporary Artists,' in *On the Wall:*

Contemporary Wallpaper, ed. Judith A. Singsen (Providence: Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design and The Fabric Workshop and Museum, 2003).

²¹ Mary Schoeser and Kathleen DeJardin, *French Textiles: From 1760 to the Present* (London: Laurence King Ltd, 1991), 32.

motifs. In Green's work the usual pastoral image has been replaced by historical images of racial conflict in the Americas such as the hanging of French officers in 1805 by the Haitian army in retaliation for past atrocities. Such violence is even more unsettling when discovered within a domestic context. The strategy successfully alerts the viewer to events that are usually concealed or suppressed.²²



Figure 10: Sally Smart, *Family Tree House*, 1999, installation view, Re-emplace, Earl Lu Gallery, Singapore. From *Sally Smart: the Unhomely Body Series Femmage, Shadows and Symptoms series*, Sally Smart, 1999, Melbourne, 46

Contemporary artists use various strategies to evoke the perception of the uncanny within the domestic environment. Australian artist Sally Smart has created several bodies of work that explore perceptions of the strange and the familiar within the domestic space. Figure 10 shows Smart's use of felt and photographic elements collaged onto the gallery wall. Familiar domestic objects and furniture are distorted in shape and scale and combined with forms that suggest disembodied organs and limbs.²³ Smart conflates the wall of the domestic dwelling with the outer confines of the body in her exploration of the tension between the familiar and unfamiliar within the experience of the uncanny. The viewer is continually confronted with things of abnormal scale, form and location. Although her creation of large wall-based installations in order to generate a perceptual space was of interest to me, I decided that rather than suggest the uncanny by presenting the strange, I would experiment with inserting more subtle distortions of the familiar.

²² Tannenbaum, 'On the Wall: Wallpaper by Contemporary Artists,' 24.

²³ Rachel Kent, 'Disturbing Narratives: Sally Smart's Femmage, Shadows and Symptoms,' in *Sally Smart*, ed. Sally Smart (North Melbourne: Sally Smart, 1999), 29.

Much of my second year of candidature was spent exploring the possibilities of using wallpaper to engage with the association between the exotic and uncanny in Australia. My intention was that the installed wallpapers would create a perceptual space that could evoke this close relationship. I designed and printed a series of four wallpapers. Each was based on a different formal structure derived from historical models. The motifs displayed both horizontal and vertical repetition and engaged with a range of formative influences on the experience of the exotic and uncanny in Australia.

Picturesque visions

The imagery of this initial wallpaper (Figure 11) was constructed from a variety of quotations. These included vignettes from Joseph Lycett's *Visions of Australia*, and natural history illustrations of Ferdinand Bauer. I aimed to create imagery that referred to colonial perceptions of the Australian landscape and aligned notions of ownership. The quoted Lycett images depicted exoticised indigenous figures to provide a sense of emblematic locality.²⁴ Such images were widely circulated in Britain to promote the process of colonisation and encourage emigration.²⁵ I based the pattern structure on the French toile and transformed different plants into frames for a series of vignettes. The conversion of the exotic flora into sinuous decorative forms referred to the colonial desire to interpret the landscape within familiar contexts. In an attempt to create visual interest I not only varied the colour used in the printing but also removed some motifs, replacing them with another of similar form derived from iconic implements and symbols (cat'o'nine tails and the broad arrow) of Australia's history as a penal colony (Figure 12).

²⁴ Richard Neville, *A Rage for Curiosity* (Sydney: State Library of New South Wales Press, 1997), 44.

²⁵ Richard Neville, 'Painting and Patronage,' in *Joseph Lycett: Convict Artist*, ed. John McPhee (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 2006), 38.



Figure 11: Nicola Dickson, *Picturesque visions*, (single motif), 2007, acrylic on wallpaper, 250 x 52.3 cm.

Figure 12: *Picturesque visions*, (detail of inserted motif), 2007, acrylic on wallpaper, 250 x 52.3 cm.

I screen-printed my design onto plain commercially available vinyl-coated wallpaper and experimented with its installation in an alcove at the School of Art. Wishing to preserve my wallpaper, I secured the wallpaper to the wall temporarily with strips of wooden beading that allowed the rolls to hang as gently unfurling scrolls, partially revealing glimpses of a burgundy coloured wall beneath. Unfortunately the effect was somewhat claustrophobic, running counter to my intentions to evoke the more subtle uncanny.

Classique visions



Figure 13: Nicola Dickson, *Classique visions*, (single motif), 2007, acrylic on wallpaper, 250 x 52.3 cm.

The imagery of this wallpaper (Figure 13) was derived from neo-classical ornamental imagery particularly the acanthus leaf and scroll. My design was based on an alternating diaper pattern formed by a sinuous vine from which scrolling leaves and flowers unfurled. On the vine support were human figures, hands and bird's heads. In several locations convict leg irons were grafted onto the primary structure. In this work I attempted to strengthen the formal qualities of the imagery by varying line quality, thickness and colour as well as the inclusion of flat areas of colour. I selected a range of blues — cobalt, ultramarine and cerulean which were used to sequentially print the main motifs. A phthalo-green and silver mixture was used for the large flat areas underneath the vine motifs. In the same manner as *Picturesque visions*, this work was conceived as a reference to the formerly unspoken convict past, hidden within British notions of good taste. Rather than providing a large uninterrupted area of patterning, this work was comprised of six unique panels, each 250cm long. I had great difficulty printing the

large flat areas of colour successfully on the vinyl coated paper which discouraged me from producing a greater volume.

Baudin's boudoir



Figure 14: Nicola Dickson, *Baudin's boudoir*, (primary motif left, motif with insertion right), 2007, acrylic on lining paper, 250 x 51.7 cm.

This wallpaper (Figure 14) was conceived of as a 'feminine' floral bedroom paper. I developed a single motif of a garland comprised of roses, leaves and fuchsias. Each fuchsia hid a face with a protruding stamen tongue. The motifs were printed on top of a rocaille-like abstract form. Into this abstract form various head and shoulder profiles were inserted at irregular intervals. These insertions were quotations of some the portraits drawn by Nicolas-Martin Petit of Tasmanian Aboriginals encountered during Baudin's voyage of 1800-1804 from France to Australia.²⁶ In the first series that I created I used a combination of cadmium yellow, pink and silvered brown madder. I again experienced technical difficulties using the vinyl coated paper and experimented with using a matte lining paper which was much easier to use due to its more absorbent surface. Difficulties with registration often impeded my ability to add the inserted heads seamlessly, which disrupted the subtlety needed for their presence to be

²⁶ Susan Hunt, 'Paris Le Havre Sydney' in *Terre Napoleon Australia Though French Eyes*, ed. Susan Hunt and Paul Carter (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales in association with Hordern House, 1999), 11.

successful. However on the whole the quality of the printing was much more successful.

'Other' visions



Figure 15: Nicola Dickson, 'Other' visions, (detail of motifs), 2007, acrylic on lining paper each roll, 250 x 51.7 cm

In Chapter One of the Dissertation, I discuss how the overwhelming, chaotic presentation of signifiers developed into a consistent form of exotic representation. This form of representation occurred in imagery such as frontispieces, natural history museums and world fairs and led to the objectified, exoticised 'other' being perceived as irrational and sensual. The form of the primary motif of my final wallpaper was a reference to this typically chaotic mode of presentation that informed the conception of the exotic 'other'. This motif (Figure 15), printed in burgundy, was a conglomeration of human heads, waratahs, lizards and bones. The structure of the wallpaper was based on a traditional ogival patterning device. This time I chose a glossy lining paper on which to print in the hope of improving the surface qualities of the wallpaper. I aimed to develop a means of printing areas of solid saturated colour, avoiding the large unprinted spaces that were present in *Baudin's Boudoir*. To minimise the technical difficulties, I

created two complementary screens of a small diaper pattern based on the Tudor rose, scotch thistle and Irish shamrock, as an obvious reference to Britain's formative influence on Australian perceptions. These patterns were printed in silvered magenta and brown madder which imparted a degree of reflectivity to the colours, increasing their visual impact. The choice of pinks and burgundy was a reference to sensual, fleshy excitement of the exotic. Despite the use of small patterns to impart the impression of solid colour this design was irritatingly difficult to print faultlessly.

In order to develop my investigation with wallpapers further, I needed to solve one of the major problems with this medium – its display and installation for exhibition. I began to develop the *'Other' visions* wallpaper for exhibition in the ANU School of Art Foyer Gallery in May 2008. As I considered how to present and install the wallpaper, I decided that the addition of paintings could enhance the ability of my printed paper to be perceived as wallpaper while alluding to the manner in which the exotic was presented. Referencing the process of collection and display that occurred in the natural history museum, I produced a series of thirty paintings on oval and circular supports designed to be literally framed by the ogival motif of the wallpaper. I installed a sample of this work as a trial at a review in March 2008. Peer and supervisory response to the installation caused me to undertake a major reassessment of my studio research.

Although my intention was to reproduce the typical chaotic presentation of exotic artefacts a 'hysterical jumble' was not a successful installation strategy. There was intense competition for visual dominance between the wallpaper and the paintings. Perhaps this assessment of the work is partly the result of conventional notions of the objectivity of paintings and the associated accepted modes of viewing and contemplation. My inability to print the wallpaper faultlessly led to breaks and deformities in the patterning which interfered with its ability to act as background contextual imagery. This was compounded by the installation of the wallpaper as loose hanging scrolls which further asserted their objecthood and competition with the paintings. I needed to use the wallpaper either as a background decorative field or increase its activity both in the printing and installation and explore its physical properties more fully. I had to decide which medium would be dominant and was strongly urged to consider which processes and forms of artistic practice would be most satisfying for me.

Despite the interesting conceptual and material qualities of wallpaper, I found the printing process technically frustrating and very mechanical as I was printing high volumes of the same image. The installation difficulties were considerable. The best option for display was to actually paste the paper to the wall and therefore destroy the work at de-installation. More significantly, I missed the plasticity of the painting process with its intrinsic possibilities of editing and re-working; a capability which I believe enables it to ably mirror the activity of creative thought. I decided to cease wallpaper production and concentrate solely on painting.

'Other' visions Exhibition, 2008: Foyer Gallery School of Art, ANU

Abandoning wallpaper necessitated a reappraisal of the methods I had been exploring for the creation of an active perceptual space for the viewer. For this exhibition I produced a large ornamental field for the display of the paintings by stencilling onto the wall a simplified version of the wallpaper imagery. Translucent pink gouache was applied at regularly repeated horizontal and vertical intervals, mimicking the wallpaper pattern (see Figure 16). This was a far more successful formal solution; the simpler delivery of the stencilling enhancing the detailed, highly worked nature of the paintings.



Figure 16: Nicola Dickson, Installation view of *'Other' visions* exhibition, 2008, acrylic and oil on MDF, ANU School of Art Foyer Gallery

The paintings depicted subjects typically displayed in Imperial natural history museums of the nineteenth century. The supports were constructed from MDF board laser cut into several different sized ovals and some small circles. I used a painting process

similar to that described in the section, *The ornamented natural history image*. This involved screen-printing a metallic pink acrylic ground on each support of the same pattern of roses, shamrocks and thistles used on the wallpaper. The various subjects were derived from a variety of historical sources depicting Australian flora and fauna as well as indigenous people, including the First Fleet collection of the British Natural History Museum, Ferdinand Bauer and Sydney Parkinson. The exotic was evoked primarily by the use of non-naturalistic colour and the melding of ornamental motifs and textures to the original quoted forms. I also created a series of bizarre hybrid creatures by combining plant, reptile and plant forms (see Figure 17). The subjects were rendered with a high degree of detail in a flat shallow space without additional contextual details in keeping with the formal conventions of natural history illustration. I mounted each panel onto a either a brushed aluminum or mirror frame as an allusion to the role of the viewer's perceptions in framing the construction of the subject.



Figure 17: Nicola Dickson, two works from the 'Other' visions series, 2008, acrylic and oil on MDF, 38 x 25 cm

In this body of paintings I included the human figure for the first time (see Figure 18). I had been very reluctant to quote imagery of Australian Aboriginal people for a range of reasons to be discussed in the next section. These images were quotations of field illustrations of Nicolas-Martin Petit. The impact of the images I created of indigenous profiles combined with ornamental motifs compared to the animal and bird subjects was

striking. These images demonstrated the increased potency of perceptions of exotic when contemplating fellow humans as opposed to the ‘otherness’ of the natural world. Motifs embellishing the various sense organs also alluded to the physical experience of the exotic; how it was perceived and disseminated. I realised I needed to investigate the associated conceptual implications of quoting images of indigenous people if I was to enter this sensitive area. The most confronting issue was the possibility that by doing so I occupied a position that was perpetuating exploitative exoticism.



Figure 18: (left) Nicolas-Martin Petit, *Portrait of an Aborigine from Van Diemen's Land*, c. 1802, pencil and charcoal on paper, 15.4 x 13.5 cm. From *Terre Napoléon Australia through French eyes*, Susan Hunt and Paul Carter, Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, Sydney, 1999, 68. (right) Nicola Dickson, from the *'Other' visions* series, 2008, acrylic and oil on MDF, 45 x 35 cm.

Locating the Australian 'other'

The choice of which specific historical imagery to quote and re-present was determined by my evolving understanding of the concept of the 'other' within Australia. In order to probe the perception of the exotic in Australia a firm grasp on the notion of the 'other' was implicit. As elaborated in the Dissertation, the constructs of 'other' and self are defined in relation to each other.²⁷ Within my research the normative standard of self is the Australian settler, the only position which I can claim authentic connection. I

²⁷ I have used the term to refer to individuals, races, cultures and their material culture; aspects of the natural environment and the land itself that are perceived as different and spatially distant to the defining culture.

increasingly realised that an engagement with the ‘other’ in Australia could not legitimately avoid the inclusion of Australia’s indigenous population.

I had been transforming illustrations of birds, plants and animals into more bizarre creatures however I was very uncertain how to actually engage pictorially with imagery of Aboriginal people in an appropriate and sensitive manner. The ‘political’ pitfalls inherent in quoting historical imagery representing indigenous people are cavernous; ranging from accusations of paternalism, imperial exploitation or a simplistic position assuming that all black colonial subjects are ‘good’ and all white are ‘bad’.²⁸ I dithered for over 12 months considering this position, challenged by an increasing awareness that perceptions of Australia’s indigenous people were a major factor in shaping settler perceptions of Australia while acutely aware of the impossibility of creating a mode of representation that would be considered appropriate by all people.

I searched for imagery to quote that exhibited a degree of empathy and cultural sensitivity to its subjects. Imagery created after the early nineteenth century reflected shifts in attitudes to Aboriginal people. In this period increasing amounts of frontier violence between settlers and Aborigines occurred, often due to fundamental misunderstandings of concepts of land, property and reciprocity. This was interpreted as a sign of the inherent savagery of Aboriginal people and ‘proof’ of the increasingly dominant ‘evolutionary’ theories of race. Aborigines became progressively more objectified as ethnographic specimens for scientific investigation in visual representations.²⁹ These representations, whether photographic or as illustrations or paintings were symptomatic of the progressive marginalisation of Aboriginal people as white settlement engulfed more land.

Imagery I chose to explore was created prior to this period and included work by Thomas Watling and the Port Jackson Painter as well as illustrations and subsequent engravings created by the French artists Nicolas-Martin Petit, Charles Lesueur, Barthelemy Roger, and Jacques Louis Copia accessed from the National Library. These images executed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries reflected a more ‘innocent eye’ that, while focused on discovering and exploiting sources of economic

²⁸ Joan Kerr, ‘Past Present: The Local Art of Colonial Quotation,’ in *Double Vision: Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific*, ed. Nicholas Thomas and Diane Losche (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 236.

²⁹ Elizabeth Edwards, ‘Representation and Reality: Science and the Visual Image,’ in *Australia in Oxford*, ed. Howard Morphy and Elizabeth Edwards (Oxford: Pitt Rivers Museum University of Oxford, 1988), 33.

gain, found much delight in the 'other' which was considered revelatory of nature's diversity rather than an affirmation of European racial supremacy.³⁰ This appreciation in the 'other' also ensured that these images conveyed a degree of exoticism and desire rather than harsh objectification.

I began to consider that it was inevitable that my engagement with imagery of indigenous Australians would also include the process of exoticism. The exotic is the product of perception of, in this context, the Western settler's mind. My position outside of that of Aboriginal people, and the plant and animal kingdoms means that this process is inescapable. What is in my control is my intention to engage in this process. I would like to enjoy, revel, respect, understand even feel safe with the wonder of the 'other'. Rather than hungrily consuming the excitement of the attractive 'other', the work is intended to act as Frantz Fanon advocates, 'the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself'.³¹

Painting as a research methodology: 2008-2009

The decision to concentrate on painting as my research methodology broached the immediate issue of what the implications of *painting* my subject would be. In my third year of candidature two major research questions were evident. Firstly, how I could harness the materiality and process of painting to creatively explore and evoke the experience of the perception of the exoticised 'other' in Australia? The second question was centered on the contextual relationship between painting and my subject. Within my research project, the relationship between painting and exotic representations and the interplay between ornament and painting are key issues. I will briefly discuss how these investigations informed my studio research.

Painting ut poesis

During my candidature, I was inspired by the research of one of my peers who was investigating the poetics of painting. I wondered what the distinction was between the

³⁰ Smith, *Imaging the Pacific: In the Wake of the Cook Voyages*, 187.

³¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press Inc, 1967), 231.

concept of 'poetics' and my intention to evoke a particular aesthetic response.³² Comparing painting and poetry provided a portal for my engagement with painting to evoke the exotic. Mulling over the different ways words, singly and in combination, create meaning in a poem was particularly illuminating. I concluded that the slippery term 'poetics' related to the ability of individual paintings to evoke meaning that was understood cognitively, perceptually and emotively. A significant aspect of painting's poetic operation is the ability of the non-mimetic aspects of painting such as colour, tone, scale, surface and mark to convey meaning that is interpreted intuitively by the viewer. I believe these formal elements are particularly influential in determining the aesthetic response to a work and came to focus on their influence in suggesting the perception of the exotic.³³

It is important to emphasise that the exotic is not an inherent physical quality but a mode of perceiving or 'aestheticising' the strange or the stranger.³⁴ My experimentation with the selection, manipulation and combination of the various formal elements in my paintings was a means of exploring how this perceived difference to self could be represented visually. The principal formal choices I made in order to convey the weird, sensual and often chaotic nature of the exotic were reflected in colour, form and mark-making. I primarily used full chroma colour and complementary relationships to create works of vibrant non-naturalistic colour. The forms of my natural history subjects became bizarre as they were metamorphosed with ornamental motifs. By ornamenting natural history subjects I was able to create images that engaged with the aesthetic perception of the exotic and its visual modes of generation and circulation. I developed a mode of cross-hatched mark-making that referred to the manner in which tone is rendered in many forms of ornamental imagery. The fine, detailed marks were similar in scale to those often used to record details of form in natural history illustrations. This slow mode of mark-making encouraged close inspection by the viewer. During my last year of research I explored how the various formal elements

³² I understand that irrespective of my intentions, the viewer will independently form their own interpretations of my work. However as this whole research project is based on my deliberate production of meaning for the work, the variable of the independent agency of the viewer will not be included in this discussion.

³³ Other formal aspects of a painting also contribute to meaning including the creation of resonances, patterns and rhythms, the formation of metaphors and the introduction of paradoxes and ambiguities. Such ambiguities allow open imaginative engagement and may exist within the figure-ground relationship or between the materiality and surface qualities of the painting and illusory depth.

³⁴ The physical attributes of this shifting aesthetic perception, which is discussed in Chapter One of the Dissertation, are defined against the idealised Western standard of the beautiful, in structure and/or implication. Also highly relevant in my investigations was understanding that exotic representations often develop by the manner in which individual signifiers are presented.

and their combination could also elicit the qualities of complexity and hybridity while offering visual pleasure. This is discussed below in the sections, *Painting, the exotic and visual pleasure* and *The exotic hybrid*.

Painting as discourse

Yve-Alain Bois argues in his book, *Painting as Model* that painting has unique specificities that allow it to operate as a mode of theoretical discourse. Bois asserts that painting has the ability to not only convey ideas, but to manifest them within the means of pictorial structure and invention employed.³⁵ This argument led me to speculate whether I could devise a painting process that employed a pictorial structure to conceptually deliver my subject. Of the four different modes of modelling thought that Bois offers for painting, the perceptive model was the most salient to my investigations. This model proposes how painters may investigate or question perception and create meaning by disturbing a primary means of perception within painting — the differentiation of a figure from a ground.³⁶

In order to develop a process that could utilise the visual perception of a figure to engage with the exotic, I defined the undifferentiated ground as the self. The figure which was defined against the ground represented the ‘other’. Subsequent to the ‘*Other*’ *Visions* body of work in 2008 I experimented with various ways of defining the figure. The strategies I trialled included altering the degree of distinction between the two by manipulating tone, colour and texture relations, disrupting the uniformity of either and creating reversals of dominance. During my production of the body of paintings for the *An ‘other’ vision* series in 2009 (discussed below) I developed a process of forming the figure against the ground by applying multiple layers of transparent pigments. This process meant that the ground would exist as part of the figure to a varying degree. The figures although visually distinct possessed a degree of ambiguity. This was exacerbated by the fact that the floral patterned imagery of the ground was preserved at times within the opaque field of paint that I used to further define the figure. As discussed below in the section entitled *Framing* this created a degree of disorientation as the figure was both filled and framed by the patterning of the ground. This pictorial structure had the effect of disrupting a clear demarcation or

³⁵ Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1990), 257.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 248.

privileging of the figure from the ground. This model ensured that the 'other' was seen not just in relation to the self but also questioned our perceptions of what and where the 'other' is.

This process satisfied my intentions for the pictorial structure of my paintings to act as a model of the relational nature of self-'other' definition. I developed this process further by using a variety of painted patterns over the ground to variably define the figure. This painting process was also used in my final body of paintings, *The exotic hybrid*.

Painting, the exotic and visual pleasure

The contextual relationship between painting and the exotic is complex. There are two basic modes of the operation of exoticism in Western painting. The first is the representation and reinforcement of accepted stereotypical cultural constructions of the exotic in paintings. The second is the formal and conceptual influence of non-Western visual traditions and processes on the practice of painting. I will now discuss these two modes of influence in relation to my research.

Orientalism is a sub-category of the exotic used to describe Western attitudes to the Orient, particularly the near East. By the end of the nineteenth century the exotic subject was considered to be a modern alternative to the academic tradition of classical study and antique subject matter.³⁷ John M. MacKenzie points out that the Orientalism of the Middle East and North Africa was distinctly different to other Imperialistic art of the period:

While there are copious representations of British Imperial possessions throughout the world, of which those of Australia and the Pacific, India and even South Africa are perhaps best known, none of these areas has a tradition of painting attached to it of the 'Orientalist' sort.³⁸

MacKenzie suggests that this was due to the proximity of the Islamic Near East and its well-known ancient, biblical and classical associations. Orientalism in painting was largely a consequence of the more ready imaginative engagement of the artist and

³⁷ Roger Benjamin, 'Orientalist Excursions: Matisse in North Africa,' in *Matisse*, ed. Caroline Turner and Roger Benjamin (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery Art Exhibitions Australia Limited, 1995), 71.

³⁸ John M. MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 52.

general public rather than a manifestation of Imperial control.³⁹ Mackenzie's theory implies that exotic representations involve an element of desire and pre-existing entry points of cultural connection. The point that desire is integral to the formation of an exoticised 'other' is made in the Dissertation. What is of relevance to my studio research is how Orientalist painting reflected conceptions of the exotic and conveyed the coloniser's desire for the colonised 'other'.

This is astutely examined by Linda Nochlin in, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on nineteenth-century art and society*.⁴⁰ Nochlin states that the perception of the near East as passionate and lusciously salacious was reflected and reinforced by painting. Such paintings were seductively painted, rich in colour, included much decorative patterning with exciting often violent and highly eroticised subjects. Not surprisingly the actual material and social depredations associated with colonisation in the near East were not depicted.⁴¹ The aestheticisation of the 'other' was subtly outside the classically beautiful with its idealised norms of both form and morality. The Orientalist subject was not depicted as bizarre or weird but titillatingly beyond moral boundaries.

Nochlin argues that the creation of visual pleasure and desire were central to the perception of the Orientalist subject of that period. Orientalist artists such as Jean-Lion Gerome, John Frederick Lewis, Eugene Fromentin and Edward Poynter depicted Orientalist themes, Islamic ornamental patterning, architecture and atmospheric weather conditions in a highly illusionistic manner. The wealth of detail (as with natural history illustration), implied the artist was an eye-witness and gave a legitimacy to the represented image. As Nochlin states, the strategies of these painters are intrinsic to the mystification of the Orientalist.⁴² Of the various artists painting within this genre, Gerome's illusionistic virtuosity eliminated any trace of the artist's hand, authenticating 'the total visual field as a simple artless reflection — in this case, of a supposed Oriental reality.'⁴³ One of Gerome's Orientalist paintings, *Moorish Bath (Lady of Cairo Bathing)*, 1870, Figure 19, is an example of these strategies. The Western colonial presence was never the subject of Orientalist painting. Instead the Westerner was implicitly present in the controlling gaze, the consumer of the seductive exotic. The

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ cLinda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).

⁴¹ Ibid., 36.

⁴² Ibid., 37.

⁴³ Ibid., 38.

visual pleasure offered by these paintings, operated as a Trojan horse to mask the political and cultural implications of exotic representations.



Figure 19: Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Moorish Bath (Lady of Cairo Bathing)*, 1870, oil on canvas, 50.8 x 40.8 cm. From *Orientalism: Delacroix to Klee*, Roger Benjamin, ed., The Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 100.

The American artist Philip Taaffe, (b. 1955, New York) states that the purpose of his paintings is primarily the ‘creation of visual pleasure’. Ornamental imagery is the vehicle Taaffe uses to experiment with the evocation of such pleasure, quoting from a global pool of decorative imagery.⁴⁴ Taaffe’s monoprint, *Old Cairo*, 1989, (Figure 20), has been produced by layering Islamic patterning on a variably coloured ground. The horizontal bands in the painting were created by the application of stencilled imagery and refer to the pictorial structure of Mark Rothko’s iconic works. Taaffe often reworked well known Modernist paintings by including patterning. By doing so he aligned himself to the Post-modernist theory which contests any authorising singularity or privileged Western viewpoint.⁴⁵ Taaffe’s rationale and methodology interested me; particularly his combination of painterly expressive grounds which strongly assert the materiality of paint with more precisely defined, printed images of appropriated ornament from a wide variety of sources.

⁴⁴ Enrique Juncosa, Robert Rosenblum, and Robert Creeley, eds., *Philip Taaffe* (Ivam Centre Del Carme 191V/9VII: Generalitat Valenciana, 2000), 158.

⁴⁵ Markus Bruderlin, ed., *Ornament and Abstraction: The Dialogue between Non-Western, Modern and Contemporary Art* (Köln: Dumont, 2001), 206.



Figure 20: Philip Taaffe, *Old Cairo*, 1989, monprint, acrylic on linen, 231 x 172 cm. From *Ornament and Abstraction: The Dialogue between non-Western, modern and contemporary Art*, Markus Brüderlin, ed., Dumont, Köln, 2001, 82.

The influence of the exotic on the continual evolution of style and form within Western painting is the second major facet of the inter-relationship between these visual languages. A degree of overlap exists between the concepts of primitivism and exoticism. Within the visual arts, primitivism broadly refers to the construction of a form or style considered to convey the perceived attributes of other cultures thought of as at an ‘earlier’ but deemed desirable stage of human/cultural development. Alongside this somewhat depreciatory assessment were the implications of freshness, simplicity, crudity and a child-like vision of the world⁴⁶. Primitivism is based on an exotic conception of ‘other’ distant races. Western imagery that appropriates the pictorial conventions of such exoticised cultures conveys by association the same desirable attributes. Neo-classicism, Gothic or Egyptian revivals can be understood to be forms of primitivism.⁴⁷ When the concept of the primitive is used to characterise non-European cultures however it becomes aligned with constructs of exoticism, colonial conquest and exploitation.⁴⁸ Modernism can be considered a twentieth century

⁴⁶ Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, 196.

⁴⁷ Peter Beilharz, *Imaging the Antipodes: Culture, Theory and the Visual in the Work of Bernard Smith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 159.

⁴⁸ Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighton, ‘Primitive,’ in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 170.

manifestation of exoticism as it absorbed and visually reconfigured many non-European sources in the attempt to revive itself internally in its global spread.⁴⁹

Painting's continual aestheticisation of the strange in the search for novelty makes it both a manifestation of exoticism and a process that allows examination of exoticism's operation in a broader cultural field. A particular critical context is available to me as a settler artist painting in Australia today. The paintings that I make quote specific imagery but also they are situated within the history of Western painting, modernity, colonial conquest and post-colonial debate. The critical potential of an Australian painter engaging in the examination of post-colonialism is articulated by Peter Beilharz who states

The neo-colonial avant-garde faced a choice: to work largely in the centres and to accommodate their views into the dominant culture, or else to remain in their own neo-colonial societies and seek to create an art in the spatial interstices that were opening out in the spheres established by European vision. They would behave as displaced European or else as antipodeans; they could open up more fully to European trends, or they could work the tension.⁵⁰

My contemplation of this position was aided by examining how Vivienne Binns (b. 1940) has explored this issue and its implications in her work. Her wide oeuvre primarily examines the nature of the creative process and the implications of being a contemporary Australian painter situated on the Pacific Rim. The formal strategies and process of quotation and re-interpretation that Binns employed in her paintings *Surfacing the Pacific* (1993) and *Slicing History* (1996) (Figure 21) were of particular interest to me. Binns investigates the historical visual precedents that informed perceptions of the Pacific by combining the culturally specific ornamental imagery of Pacific Tapa cloths with imagery that references the historical and cultural legacy of Cook's Pacific explorations. In *Slicing History*, she quotes a thin vertical section of a painting by William Hodges, *A view of Cape Stephens in Cook's Strait with Waterspout*.⁵¹ The source of the image is a reproduction within Bernard Smith's text, *Imagining the Pacific*, acknowledged by the inclusion of the caption text at the base of the painting. Binns reworks the quoted imagery within the patterned grid of the Tapa cloth firmly anchoring its interpretation within a Post-colonial position. The painting's

⁴⁹ Beilharz, *Imagining the Antipodes: Culture, Theory and the Visual in the Work of Bernard Smith*, 170.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁵¹ The English painter William Hodges (1744-1797) was the primary artist aboard Cook's second voyage on the *Resolution* (1772-1775).

surface is ruptured by a vertical yellow strip that traverses the length of the painting. This pictorial device further questions Modernism's claim of progressive linear primacy and acts to insist on the existence of other cultural perspectives.⁵² Her seductive, painterly rendering of the quoted imagery evidenced by the use of gestural marks, shifts in colour and flattening of the surface influenced my own technical and conceptual handling of paint.



Figure 21: Vivienne Binns, *Slicing History* 1996, acrylic on canvas, 245 x 60 cm. From *Australian Painting Now*, Laura Murray Cree and Nevill Drury, eds., Craftsman House, Sydney, 2000, 47.

⁵² Vivienne Binns personal communication

Ornament and painting

Debate regarding the relation between Western painting and ornamentation that arose in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is discussed in Chapters One and Two of the Dissertation. It is significant that the wide polemic discourse concerning the function, philosophical basis, aesthetics and social relevance of ornament that occurred from the mid nineteenth century contributed to a modern conceptual and visual sensibility receptive to the development of abstract art and the aesthetic appreciation of functional form. Ernst Gombrich points to the linkage between the increasing abandonment of ornament by craftsmen, architects and designers in favour of a functional utility and the emergence of abstract art at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁵³

However many early abstract modernists exploring the non-mimetic development of pure form were concerned that their experiments in form, materiality and surface would be considered ‘merely decorative’ and actively denied any precedent founded in ornamental imagery:

There is nothing the abstract painter used to dislike more than the term ‘decorative’, an epithet which reminded him of the familiar sneer that what he had produced was at best pleasant curtain material.⁵⁴

The criticism of a painting as being ‘merely decorative’ is a well known pejorative that has intrigued me for a long time. As I was combining both forms of imagery I sought to understand what distinction exists between the two visual traditions. Identifying firm pictorial differences between painting and ornamental imagery is problematic. Certainly a distinction cannot be argued on the basis of structure, iconography or philosophical intentions for the imagery. Rather what locates and differentiates imagery as belonging to the world of ornamentation or of painting is the function of the artefact and its mode and context of presentation.

Ornamentation is by definition imagery that is applied to another surface. Although it may have representation, narrative or symbolic content it primarily exists to provide visual pleasure.⁵⁵ It serves to embellish pre-existing artefacts, granting them distinctive ritual and social functions. Paintings however exist as discrete entities generated

⁵³ Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, 61.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁵⁵ James Trilling, *Ornament: A Modern Perspective, Samuel and Althea Stroum Lectures in Jewish Studies* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2003), 23.

primarily to provide a visual experience. The nature of such an experience may reflect not just the artist's intentions but also their manner of thinking and personality. Painting is distinguished by the specificity of its materiality. Its plasticity as a medium allows the creation of works of differing scale from a vast spectrum of colours, tones, marks and surfaces. The expansive visual vocabulary of paint endows this material with a greater range of expression than other mediums traditionally used to create ornament.⁵⁶ The expressive potential of the process of painting has enabled paintings to ably embody ideas and perceptions metaphorically and conceptually. Painting as an artefact intended primarily for contemplation commands a different mode of viewer engagement as opposed to an ornamented surface primarily providing visual pleasure.⁵⁷ This distinction is made clear to the viewer by the usual context, for encountering Western painting – vertically in the gallery or museum space. The contribution that the white cube makes to painting's status is examined in depth by Brian Doherty.⁵⁸ Painting's contemplative function is further enhanced by the manner in which a single painting refers to other paintings made within the same cultural field.

Paintings are unique productions valued for their originality, authorship and authenticity. The value placed on these attributes by our culture is evidenced in the market place and within art criticism. Denis Dutton argues that the demand for authenticity in an art work is a function of Darwinian natural selection that has ensured that humans value and select high skill traits. 'Authenticity, which in the arts means at the most profound level communion with another human soul, is something we are destined by evolution to want from literature, music, painting, and the arts.'⁵⁹ While ornamental imagery is also created by the human mind, it is rarely presented as the innovative work and conception of a single artist or valued as a manifestation of an individual's creativity. Rather I would argue that the ornamental imagery of the everyday becomes perceived as a reflection of a broader cultural creativity; an assessment that is reflected in the different conceptual and commodity value ascribed to this visual form.

⁵⁶ These mediums include woven or printed textiles, printed wallpaper, metals, wood, ceramics and glass

⁵⁷ Ornamental imagery has certainly been created with the intention of conveying philosophical concerns, cultural identity and religious values within its provision of visual pleasure.

⁵⁸ Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1986), 29.

⁵⁹ Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure & Human Evolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 193.

My use of ornamental forms is an investigation of the role of this visual language in conveying and constructing the exotic 'other' as well as probing the distinction perceived between ornament and painting. By quoting and re-working historical ornamental motifs and incorporating an ornamental visual structure within my paintings I am utilising ornamental imagery to construct and convey meaning while offering a form of aesthetic engagement to the viewer which may elicit the visual pleasure, novelty and excitement that accompanies the exotic. The formal features of an ornamentally structured surface include 'symmetry, repetition, flattening, the drastic simplification or complication of outlines, and the fragmentation, transformation and re-combination of organic forms in defiance of nature.'⁶⁰ I have progressively incorporated such formal attributes into my paintings. In addition to referencing patterned imagery and using ornamental structures I have referred to ornament in the *An 'other' vision* and *Exotic hybrid* series by selection of format, framing and installation. The influence of format on painting was made evident to me in the body of work that I showed in the Foyer Gallery in May 2008. These paintings, executed on varying sized ovals or circles automatically offered additional readings of the images. The distinction between painting and ornament established by the usual context of viewing painting is explored by the inclusion of wall-painting. This process is discussed further in the section *Framing*.

The Gathering: Group exhibition, September 2008

I had the opportunity to experiment with installation and format in a group exhibition at M16 in September 2008.⁶¹ *The Gathering* was a body of four paintings comprised of two quoted images and two of my own design. One of the primary images, *Femme du Cap de Diemen*, was an engraving by Jacques Copia quoted from *Atlas pour servir à La Relation du Voyage à la recherché De La Pèrouse*, published in 1817. It is shown in Figure 22 alongside my re-worked image. This engraving was a translation of an illustration by Piron, the artist on D'Entrecasteaux's voyage of 1791-1794. The other original engraving *Nouvelle-Hollande, Ile Bernier, Kangarou a bandes* was derived from an engraving by Choubard, a translation of an illustration by Charles Lesueur, an artist aboard Baudin's voyage. The position of each painting in the installation was determined by the usual location of the subject to a viewer; birds were above, kangaroos

⁶⁰ Trilling, *Ornament: A Modern Perspective*, 23.

⁶¹ M16 is an exhibition venue in Fyshwick, Canberra.

below and the human figure was at eye-level. I selected three different formats: the oval and two different sized rectangular shapes with curved corners as the supports. The laser cut MDF supports were painted turquoise blue and screen-printed with a gold floral pattern. The figures, painted opaquely in burnt sienna, were subsequently printed with the same floral pattern. I incorporated additional ornamental floral motifs into the figures and emphasised the underlying floral patterning to a varying degree by painting within the negative space between the motifs. A similar method to that of 'Other' Visions exhibition was used to deliver the wall-painting: I prepared stencils based on patterns and motifs related to the figures and then applied a transparent mixture of watercolour pigment and print paste to the wall using the stencil at installation.



Figure 22(left): Jacques Copia, *Femme du Cap de Diemen*, Piron (del.), engraving, plate mark 44 x 30.2 cm, Pl. no. 6 of *Atlas pour servir a la relation du voyage a la recherche de la Perouse Paris, 1817*, National Library, PIC U8147/6 NK 3030.

(right): Nicola Dickson, *Femme du Cap de Diemen*, 2008, acrylic and oil on MDF, 125 x 75 cm.

I was disappointed with many aspects of this experiment. Firstly the scale of the various figures was too small and detracted from their impact on the viewer. The manner in which I had painted the opaque figures onto of the ground made them appear that they were placed on top of the ground rather than being formed in relation to it. The curved rectangular format with a painted irregular ornamental form inside did not convey an impression of an ornamental motif successfully. Nor was the installation of each work at differing heights in a narrative-like sequence suggestive of a unified ornamental structure. Finally, the difference between paint qualities and mode of delivery between the painting's surface and the wall was too marked, preventing the impression of extending the pictorial surface across the wall. It was evident to me that

the wall-painting would be more convincing if it was the same texture, opacity and colour as the support. I decided to change the wall-painting technique and also devise more intricately shaped formats of a larger scale for the next body of work.

The relational nature of the self and 'other': *An 'other' vision*

As discussed earlier in the section *Painting as discourse*, the aim of developing a painting process that would metaphorically model the relational nature of self-'other' definition informed the production of this body of work. Another primary goal was to enhance the interaction between the paintings, wall-painting and installation space. The hierarchical ornamental structure of motifs and the framing devices used within the design of North West Persian medallion rugs influenced this body of work.⁶² The format, framing, figure-ground relationship within and between motifs and their overall composition as a body of works was informed by the formal structure of the rugs. I began to consider each painting as a motif. The various irregular formats were designed to compositionally interlock and the wall was to act as the ground for the entire body of work. I had the opportunity to install and exhibit some of the work at Canberra Contemporary Art Space in September 2009, which I accepted to in order to develop this body of work further formally and conceptually.

The scale of the motifs was determined by my intention to use a life-size human figure as one of the primary motifs. Each support was prepared with a saturated red-oxide ground onto which I screen-printed an umber conventional Western floral pattern. The use of a saturated colour for the ground was part of the methodology I had been developing to evoke the perception of the exotic. The high chroma of the ground dictated the use of a similar cadmium orange, vermilion and red-brown palette combined with areas of contrasting viridian and sap green. It was fortuitous that these pigments were translucent rather than opaque. My initial frustration using them changed into a pleasant surprise as I realised that their layered application created figures with a variable degree of translucency. The fluctuating visual dominance between the figure and ground provided the metaphorical model I was striving for.

⁶² Leonard Harrow, *The Fabric of Paradise* (Essex: Scorpion Publishing Ltd, 1988).



Figure 23: (left): Barthelemy Roger, *Nouvelle-Hollande, Oui-re-kine*, N. Petit (del), hand coloured stipple engraving; plate mark 32 x 24 cm, Pl. no. 27 *Voyage de decouvertes aux terres Australes*, Francois Peron, Arthus Bertrand, Paris, 1824, National Library, PIC/11195/27 NK1429.

(right): Nicola Dickson, *Oui-re-kine*, 2008-2009, acrylic and oil on MDF, 200 x 112 cm.

The figures in the paintings were quotations from contemporaneous images of individuals created in the early nineteenth century. The images of the indigenous woman and man, *Oui-re-kine* and *Bedgi-bedgi*, were derived from engravings created by Barthelemy Roger for *Voyage de decouvertes aux terres Australes* published in Paris in 1824 by Arthus Bertrand. These engravings were translations of original field illustrations of Nicholas-Martin Petit. Figure 23 show one of these images alongside

my painted translation.⁶³ I also painted an European woman, Elizabeth Gould, (1804-1841) who was the principal lithographer and wife of John Gould. I quoted an on-line version of her painted portrait by an unknown artist from the National Library archive that was derived from a newspaper article of undisclosed publication date (nla.pic-vn3799791). Elizabeth Gould was one of the artists working in the ‘Gould factory’ that created and published close to 3,000 images of birds and animals in folio sets in the nineteenth century in response to the voracious appetite of the general Western public for exotic flora and fauna. John Gould established worldwide teams of collectors that sent skins and specimens to him in London.⁶⁴ I found the scale and entrepreneurial nature of John Gould’s venture fascinating and indicative of the highly formative nature of natural history illustration in that historical period. The animals motifs are all quoted from John Gould’s *The Mammals of Australia* which was conceived and published after both the Goulds visited Australia in 1838-1840.⁶⁵ The legacy of this short visit was profound as the identity of John Gould later became associated with rising nationalism in Australia and the search for symbols of national identity as discussed in Chapter Three of the Dissertation. As with the Australian Natives Association and the Wattle League, the Gould League was established to encourage an awareness and pride in the natural world of Australia. I was a willing member of the Gould League in the late 1960s as a result of its active promotion in schools. I do not recall any bird watching, but I enjoyed receiving a new badge each year.

⁶³ The image of *Oui-re-kine* was the best example I found of the transformation process of natural history illustration into engravings to suit differing intentions. The original illustration by Petit and a subsequent book plate are shown in Figure 38.

⁶⁴ Unknown, ‘John Gould Inc.,’ (Australian Museum, 2009).

<http://gould.australianmuseum.net.au/entrepreneur/> date accessed: 08/09/2009

⁶⁵ John Gould, *The Mammals of Australia* (Melbourne: The Macmillian Company 1983).



Figure 24: H. C. Richter (del.), *Onychogalea fraenata*, c. 1845-63, hand coloured lithograph, 38 x 55.8 cm. From *The Mammals of Australia*, John Gould, The Macmillan Company, South Melbourne and Crows Nest, 1983, 256.



Figure 25: Nicola Dickson, *Gould's Bridled Nail-tailed Kangaroo*, 2008, acrylic and oil on MDF 49 x 60 cm.

I incorporated a range of painting processes and modes of representation within each motif: flat colour, printed pattern, painted patterns and motifs and highly detailed mimetic areas. This use of multiple painting processes aided the suggestion of the fantastic, an integral element of the exotic. The strategy also refers to the complex, layered nature of cultural constructions and the various forms of imagery that inform them. I avoided creating any deep pictorial space within each motif in keeping with the relative flatness of ornamental imagery. The forms of the mammals were rendered more bizarre by minor distortions of ears, noses and tails, combining these features with ornamental motifs. However I still wanted the animals to be identifiable alongside Gould's illustrations so rather than distort their form markedly I used areas of non-

naturalistic colour to render their form. A comparison of the original and re-worked animal imagery can be seen in Figures 24 and 25. In order to comment on the shared humanity of the different people represented, I repeated motifs and forms of patterning within each figure. Elizabeth Gould is partly transparent and blends into the ground reflecting her 'invisible' status as a woman; her work obscured by her husband. The naked figures of Oui-re-kine and Bedgi-bedgi have been decorated with ornamental motifs to refer to the fetishisation of the 'other' that occurred and persists in the present. All of the figures in this series were further distinguished from the ground by a surrounding field of tertiary greys. Within this relatively solid colour field, the underlying pattern was variably preserved, spreading into the figure and/or the frame. The motifs were completed with a warm grey border of uniform tone and hue that acted to frame each work.

When the body of work was close to completion it was hung for a review. This unexpectedly revealed to me that the planned interlocking design of the multiple pieces did not work well. The high chroma and visual complexity of each 'motif' required more wall space than the original installation design allowed. It was difficult to balance the viewing demands of each 'motif' as a painted object within an ornamentally structured installation. Although the human figures, eye and mammal motifs had been envisaged to fit together conceptually and formally, it appeared that their installation as three related but separate bodies of work was likely to be more successful.

I planned an alternative mode of installation for the Gorman House exhibition with these limitations in mind and in consideration of the installation space. In the studio I constructed full scale designs and stencils for the wall-painting that I hoped would activate the entire architectural space and unify the work. In this installation I used acrylic house paint the same warm grey of each painting's border to frame the paintings on the wall. A brown-grey dado strip around the entire space was used to relate the separate works. Installation views are shown in Figures 26 and 27. In this case choice of colour, paint type and mode of application of the wall-painting was able to convey the impression of an extension of the frame of the painting onto the wall. The extended frame acted as both part of the image and the field of its display. The extension of the warm grey painted frame disrupted any illusion of pictorial depth and referred strongly to ornament, successfully blurring the border between the painted and ornamental surfaces. This body of work was the most successful to date and I elected to develop the body of work further for my examination exhibition.



Figure 26: Nicola Dickson, Installation view of *An 'other' vision*, 2009, acrylic and oil on MDF, Canberra Contemporary Art Space.



Figure 27: Nicola Dickson, Installation view of *An 'other' vision*, 2009, acrylic and oil on MDF, Canberra Contemporary Art Space.

Framing

The *An 'other' vision* series prompted me to think about the concept of framing. The wall has become an increasingly influential aesthetic and conceptual framing device for painting in the twentieth century.⁶⁶ Wall-painting alters the function of the wall and influences the reading of installed paintings. The frame conventionally encloses and focuses the viewer's gaze onto the image marking the boundary where 'real space' ends and represented space begins.⁶⁷ A physical frame is chosen to ornament the painting, embellishing or completing the display of what is already present. More significantly the frame functions conceptually and is constituted from the institutional, perceptual, semiotic and gendered contexts of the work and its display.⁶⁸ The operation of the frame is subtly integral to the meaning of the work it encloses. As noted earlier one of the main distinctions between the ornamentally structured surface and the painted image is the claim for contemplation that latter makes within its contextual frame.

Louis Marin describes the frame as edge and border, as boundary and limit; an indispensable *parergon* or constitutive element.

The frame renders the work autonomous in visible space; it puts representation into a state of exclusive presence; it faithfully defines the conditions of visual reception and of the contemplation of representation as such. Through the frame, the picture is never simply one thing to be seen among many: it becomes the object of contemplation.⁶⁹

My aim to create a perceptual space for the viewer to experience the overwhelming nature of the exotic directed my experimentation from wallpaper to combining discrete paintings with wall-painting. This revealed how ornament may act to frame, structure and fill a painting's surface. The wall-painting provided a context for the body of paintings within the space by the decorative extension of the paintings beyond their pictorial limits. The extension of the painted frame across the wall, linking and surrounding another work enabled the entire installation to act as a unified ornamental structure for aesthetic and cognitive contemplation. The painted gallery wall became an

⁶⁶ O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*.

⁶⁷ Michael Carter, *Framing Art: Introducing Theory and the Visual Image* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger Pty Limited, 1990), 113-14.

⁶⁸ Paul Duro, ed., *The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1.

⁶⁹ Louis Marin, 'The Frame of Representation and Some of Its Figures,' in *The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork*, ed. Paul Duro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 82.

integral part of the work, disrupting some conventional distinctions between ornamentation and painting as well as notions of display.

The practical difficulties associated with this process were considerable. The time needed for installation and repair, the unpredictable qualities of the wall surface and the assumption that paintings should be discrete movable commodities were all significant challenges. I was grateful to a peer, Jude Rae, who drew my attention to the work of the New Zealand artist Julia Morison (b. 1952). Morison used wall-painting with one of her later irregularly formatted bodies of work, *Gobsmack & Flabbergast*, 2005 to both formally and conceptually link the discrete works. Morison used amorphous forms, patterning and installation to convey an impression of growth, metamorphosis and exchange. Bizarre forms resembling body parts were transformed and structurally linked between paintings; the wall-painting acting as an actual extension of the pictorial surface.⁷⁰ Figure 28 shows a partial view of an installation of *Gobsmack & Flabbergast*, at her survey exhibition, *loop around a loop*, 2006, at the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu. The convincing nature of Morison's wall-painting encouraged me to persist.

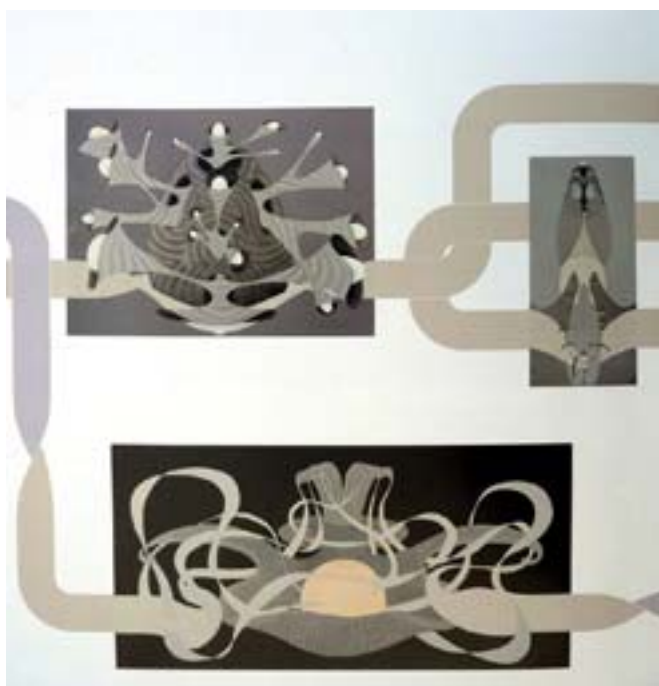


Figure 28: Julia Morison, Two installation views of *Gobsmack & Flabbergast*, 2006, mixed media on aluminum laminate, dimensions variable. From *Julia Morison: A Loop around a Loop*, Justin Paton, ed., Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu and Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Christchurch and Dunedin, 2006, (top) 163, (bottom) 166.

⁷⁰ Justin Paton, ed., *Julia Morison: A Loop around a Loop* (Christchurch and Dunedin: Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu / Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2006), 164.

Ornamental natural history illustrations

I decided to explore the potential of framing and edge quality between motifs, figure and ground to act as another metaphorical mode of self-'other' distinction in the next body of work. The ability of these formal elements to suggest spatial ambiguities and a range of meaning were alerted to me by one of my supervisors, Nigel Lendon who directed me to the work of David Malangi. Figure 47 shows two details from one of his bark paintings, *The Mokuy Murayana* (1989). The transparent ancestral figure of Murayana is both filled and framed by the white leaves of the wari tree and the oval fruit of the yamany. This pictorial device locates the narrative and implies that Murayana is both in and of the location. Within Malangi's work it creates the effect of a conceptual, culturally distinct form of perspective for the informed viewer.⁷¹ The sinuous floral pattern in the ground of the *An 'other' vision* series paintings was operating in a similar manner to the vegetative motifs in Malangi's work. As Figure 23 shows, the image of *Oui-re-kine* demonstrates spatial ambiguities created by the pattern as it both filled and partially framed the figure. I elected to develop the creation of spatial ambiguities further by manipulating patterning to form figures.



Figure 29: David Malangi, *The Mokuy Murayana*, 1989 (details), ochre on bark. From 'Innovation and its meanings', Nigel Lendon. In *No ordinary place: the art of David Malangi*, Susan Jenkins ed., National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2004, 55.

Shoulder pain from over-use strain necessitated a change in my studio practice. I decided to explore the ability of the flow properties of emulsified watercolour pigments

⁷¹ Nigel Lendon, 'Innovation and Its Meanings,' in *No Ordinary Place: The Art of David Malangi*, ed. Susan Jenkins (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2004), 56.

to engage with the concepts of framing and the edge. This medium, traditionally associated with natural history illustrations, allowed modes of experimentation not possible with an oil medium. I produced a series of large scale pencil and watercolour drawings that would relate to the *An 'other' vision* body of work. I chose a corresponding life-size scale for the figures represented in the drawings (250 x 140cm on 300gm Fabriano watercolour paper) and a similar palette of cadmium orange, burnt sienna and sap green. I selected an on-line version of a photograph of John Gould from the National Library⁷² to quote as well as two illustrations of kangaroos created in 1839 by Jean Charles Werner, an artist aboard Dumont d'Urville's final Pacific voyage of 1837-1840.⁷³ I slightly exaggerated the form of Werner's elegant but subtly bizarre kangaroos. As newly described fauna in the nineteenth century, they occupied the position of the perceived 'other'. I alluded to this by partially filling and framing their forms with a pattern loosely derived from an eighteenth century British silk damask design based on acanthus leaves and sunflowers. The patterning was interspersed with larger sinuous blocks of colour. I let the watercolour occasionally bleed out of the forms it was describing and attempted to vary the edges between the patterning and the figure and ground of the paper. I also used pencil to create variably textured areas; some representational when describing the claws and legs of the kangaroos, others a stylised suggestion of fur. A detail of my drawing, *Werner's Agile Wallaby* is shown in Figure 30. The kangaroos were predominately filled with the patterning which escaped the form in areas, whereas the form of John Gould was defined against a fantastic frame of birds, kangaroo feet, pattern and colour. I believe that this painting process and its conceptual basis will be the source of future fruitful investigations.

⁷² G. M. Mathews *Portrait of ornithologist John Gould*, unknown date, photograph, 15 x 12.2 cm, National Library <http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-vn3800026> [accessed 10 September 2009]

⁷³ Susan Hunt, Martin Terry, and Nicholas Thomas, *Lure of the Southern Seas: The Voyages of Dumont D'urville 1826-1840* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust, 2002), 14.



Figure 30: Below: Nicola Dickson, *Werner's Agile Wallaby*, (detail), 2009, pencil and watercolour on paper, 250 x 140 cm.

The *exotic hybrid* series: 2009-2010

Within imperial ideologies the self-'other' relationship is given a binary structure. The concept of the Manichean allegory is discussed in the Dissertation and is used to describe the rigid dualistic polarisation of coloniser and colonised.⁷⁴ The structure of the Manichean allegory operates to maintain dominance by suppressing the ambiguous, interstitial spaces between categories. Ambivalence, hybridity and complexity continually disrupt the certainties of imperial logic.⁷⁵ Hybridity refers to the 'creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone of colonisation'. It has been developed by Homi K. Bhabha to describe the interdependence and mutual construction of coloniser/colonised relations.⁷⁶ The notion of hybridity extends beyond that of cross-cultural exchange within its disruption of the claims of hierarchical purity of the coloniser to the colonised. This concept was referred to in the Dissertation (Chapter

⁷⁴ Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, 134.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

One) within the manifestation of the ambivalence of colonial desire. The rarely acknowledged ambivalent sexual attraction and fetishisation of the 'other' destabilises colonial societies.⁷⁷ Cultural identity emerges out of the contradictory ambivalent space or interstices within the self-'other' relationship that evidence the breakdown of the dualism of the Manichean allegory.

The London based artist of Nigerian descent, Yinka Shonibare, explores the concepts of ambivalence and hybridity.⁷⁸ Shonibare questions exotic constructions by his use of Dutch wax fabrics. These mass-produced batik fabrics were sold by the Dutch to West Africa in the nineteenth century for a range of expedient political and cultural reasons. Their widespread use and popularity in Africa ensured that they are still perceived as a signifier of Africa today.⁷⁹ Shonibare includes the batik material in installations, paintings and photographic works, combining them with a range of historical references to question stereotypic conceptions of cultural identity. Shonibare makes unambiguous references to well-known paintings typically employing headless mannequins dressed in the Batik fabrics to allude to the construction of identity. Apparent frivolity and theatrical excess are devices which superficially encourage engagement with these works, but also demonstrate the role of visual pleasure in reinforcing constructions of power. My next body of works explored the post-colonial concept of hybridity by questioning assumptions of the objectivity of the 'other'.

My examination of the exotic so far had concentrated on developing a painting process to elaborate the relational nature of the 'other' to the self. I planned for the next works to build on the previous work and to re-present quoted imagery that did not settle comfortably into a dualistic relationship. Within the Manichean allegory, the 'other' is objectified, defined against Western norms of a subjective self. I painted a pair of works to explore this dichotomy. Critically exploring this issue by painting is complex, demanding consideration of the aligned issues of the painting as an object, the painted subject and the subjectivity of the viewer. I decided to explore the issue by reference to the classicised nude, historically regarded as the idealised standard of the Western self. One of the images I quoted was an engraving published in 1817 by Jacques Copia based on a drawing by Piron, the draughtsman aboard the *Recherché*, which sailed in 1792 in

⁷⁷ Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 159-82.

⁷⁸ Rachel Kent, 'Time and Transformation in the Art of Yinka Shonibare Mbe,' in *Yinka Shonibare Mbe*, ed. Rachel Kent (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2009), 12.

⁷⁹ Yinka Shonibare and Anthony Downey, 'Setting the Stage,' in *Yinka Shonibare Mbe* (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2009), 39.

search of La Pèrouse. The image shown in Figure 31 is *Femme de la Nouvelle Calédonie*. It was published as Plate 36 in *Atlas pour servir a la relation du voyage a la recherché de la Perouse* in 1817. It is a typical example of the classically influenced ethnographic convention for representing people (discussed in Chapter One of the Dissertation) which influenced many of the illustrations created of distant races in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The ‘other’ was defined visually by costume and adornment.⁸⁰ The human figure was represented as a universal type specimen as established by the sculptors of antiquity. This model was deemed to convey sufficient information about the character and status of the subject, obviating the ‘necessity’ for scrutiny of the individual.⁸¹ The conversion of the field illustrations into classicised engravings is an example of the re-writing of images to reflect cultural preoccupations of the day. *Femme de la Nouvelle Calédonie* is an unusual image however as it represents an indigenous woman conveying a degree of resistance and agency.⁸²



⁸⁰ Smith, *Imaging the Pacific: In the Wake of the Cook Voyages*, 80.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁸² Douglas, ‘Art as an Ethno-Historical Text: Science, Representation and Indigenous Presence in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Oceanic Voyage Literature,’ 76.

Figure 31: Left: Jacques Louis Copia, *Femme de la Nouvelle Calédonie*, Piron, (del), engraving, 44.2 x 30.3cm, Pl. no. 36 in *Atlas pour servir a la relation du voyage a la recherché de la Perouse*, Paris, 1817, National Library of Australia, PIC U8 147/43 NK 3030.

Right: *Capitoline Venus*, 3rd century A.D., Musei Capitolini, Rome. From ‘Leaving Nothing to the Imagination’, Jill Bennett. In *The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork*, Paul Duro, ed., Cambridge University Press, 1996, 249.

The second image was that of a photograph of the 3rd century AD sculpture the *Capitoline Venus* also shown in Figure 31. It has been suggested that this sculpture was the source material for many subsequent paintings which re-write the philosophical and mythological concepts associated with Venus — that of beneficial love and harmful lust.⁸³ Jill Bennett argues this particular manifestation of Venus is the epitome of the nude which is constructed to withhold the truth of the body as this statue literally covers its breasts and genitals with its hands.⁸⁴ The viewer is invited to actively imagine what is concealed. The classicised representation of the Western nude involves the transformation of the body into an idealised form. The expression of the concepts of beauty and perfection are aligned with Western ideals of the ordered self. Although such imagery is considered to represent Western standards of the self, the idealised female nude represents a particular form of objectivity in relation to the viewer. The maintenance of this objectivity depends on the ideal form being contained within its conventional frame of passive representation.⁸⁵ Both feminist and post-colonial discourses discuss the control of the objectified body by the Western male/coloniser gaze. The objectification of the ‘other’ in opposition to the notion of self based in the identity of the settler/coloniser was one of the major subconscious strategies of the maintenance of colonial power. The concepts of the colonised body and the colonial gaze are offered to describe the maintenance of such power.⁸⁶

By quoting and reworking these two images using ornamental motifs and mark-making I intended to question the simple dualistic definition of self against the ‘other’. Both of the human figures possessed a rich classical legacy situating them broadly within the field of Western painting. Categories of subject and object become destabilised as the passive, totally framed Venus is paired against a representation of an indigenous woman depicted in an active stance. The indigenous woman physically exceeds the painted frame as her foot and hand cross its threshold; her representation as an active agent

⁸³ Patricia Rubin, ‘The Seductions of Antiquity,’ in *Manifestations of Venus*, ed. Caroline Arscott and Katie Scott (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 31.

⁸⁴ Jill Bennett, ‘Leaving Nothing to the Imagination,’ in *The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork*, ed. Paul Duro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 248.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁸⁶ Wimal Dissanayake and Carmen Wickramagamage, *Self and Colonial Desire: Travel Writings of V. S. Naipaul*, ed. Norman R. Cary, *Studies in World Literature in English* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 21.

belies the usual objectivity of the colonised female body. This gesture also relates to Nicholas Royale's concept of the uncanny, namely the physic uncertainty caused by unstable framing and borders around notions of the self and place.⁸⁷ Royale's concept reinforces the theories of Julia Kristeva regarding the uncanny as discussed in the Dissertation. By visually engaging with notions of an unstable frame to define the self these works also elaborate the conceptual linkage between the construction of the exoticised 'other' and the experience of the uncanny.



Figure 32: Nicola Dickson, *Nouvelle Femme*, 2009, acrylic and oil on MDF, 200 x 112 cm.

I used a similar approach for *The exotic hybrid* works and the *An 'other' vision* series to define both figures shown in Figures 32 and 33. I repeated areas of patterning and various compositional elements between the two images. This suggests the shared humanity of the two figures inherent within the concept of hybridity. The skirt of the

⁸⁷ Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1-2.

indigenous woman was replaced with flowing drapery, painted in the same manner to the draped urn in the image of Venus. The figures share the various associations of drapery such as classicism, ambiguity, sensuality, desire, and the erotic as well as visual pleasure.⁸⁸ The combination of quoted illustrations and ornamental imagery within the paintings renders the form of the familiar human subject more fantastic. The form of exoticised *Femme de la Nouvelle Calédonie* was depicted in orange and reds which contrasted strongly with the light tertiary grey border and frame. In comparison, Venus was executed using a low chroma palette of similar tones and colours to the field in which she was placed. Another prominent shared feature between the two images was the inclusion of quotations from three of Jean Werner's illustrations of possums. These provided an Australian reference for the paintings and added an element of visual humor, a source of pleasure within a colonial discourse marked by inequality and misery.

⁸⁸ Gen Doy, *Drapery: Classicism and Barbarism in Visual Culture* (London New York: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 181.



Figure 33: Nicola Dickson, *Nouvelle Venus*, 2009, acrylic and oil on MDF, 200 x 112 cm.

This body of work was extended by several small diamond shaped (38 x 42 cm) paintings of hybridised animals. These works were designed to explore the concept of unstable framing while acting as a unifying formal device in the installation of the examination exhibition.

Conclusion

Natural history illustration, ornamentation and the exotic in Australia, this research project has creatively explored the complex relations between these subjects. My Dissertation examined the operation and formal characteristics of natural history illustration and ornamentation that informed the exotic as an aesthetic perception and cultural construction. Insights gained from the theoretical research were vital for my studio investigations which engaged methodologies based on alternative forms of

cognition and perception to investigate these themes. Specifically my studio research employed the material and formal qualities of painting (colour, mark, figure-ground relationship, the devices of illusionism) to analyse and metaphorically model my research questions. Significantly, the results of the studio research are presented in a manner that allows aesthetic and cognitive engagement; a form that offers a mirror, a metaphor and a model.

In order to understand the shifting manifestations of the exotic in Australia I perused a range of historical texts and imagery documenting the foundations and development of its construction. I tried to explore and imagine the perceptions of the initial European settlers of Australia; perceptions influenced by a myriad of cultural and natural events and then built upon and re-experienced by each successive generation. A process of selection, quotation and transformation of illustrations and motifs created in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries became the basis of my studio research. The visual forms of natural history illustration and ornament were formally combined in order to allude to the paradoxical mix of fantasy and fact that occurs in exotic representations. This methodology allowed me to examine of the influence of these visual traditions on constructions of the exotic in Australia. My transformation or ‘re-writing’ of these images was consistent with the ways such imagery had been routinely transformed and circulated in eighteenth and nineteenth century Western societies. I have created another phase in the life of these images so as to reflect current concerns and conceptions of the ‘other’. The resultant images are conceptually resonant with the post-colonial metaphorical construct of the palimpsest and consistent with my intention to engage with the complex layered nature of exotic constructions and perceptions.

Natural history illustration and ornamental imagery conventionally have operated culturally outside of the canon of fine art; they are part of the imagery of the everyday.⁸⁹ Their re-contextualisation as painting – into a visual tradition of critical contemplation – and their display in a gallery space, automatically invokes a reassessment of the operation of these visual forms. Western painting, regarded as a flagship of the cultural sophistication of the West, has absorbed the ‘other’ in its own particular form of colonialism. I have stated that the field of painting can be seen as both a manifestation of exoticism and as implicated in its construction and perpetuation. As such it is well positioned to scrutinise the operation of exotic representations. The painting process

⁸⁹ The point was made in Chapter One of the Dissertation that natural history illustrations were disseminated primarily as engravings in books and journals.

that I have developed manipulates the formal qualities of paint to poetically evoke the aesthetic perception of the exotic. The pictorial structure I have eventually devised for the paintings is comprised of sequentially applied transparent and opaque layers to define the figure from the ground. This structure questions the perception and definition of the figure (as 'other'), metaphorically referring to the interdependent, relational nature of the self-'other' distinctions.

My interest in the often immersive nature of the aesthetic perception of the exotic led me to explore ways of creating a perceptual space where the contemporary viewer may have a similar sensory experience. The resultant process of wall-painting extends the pictorial surface of the paintings onto the wall, framing each work in an ornamentally structured field and unifying the paintings and the installation space. The display of the paintings within the context or frame of ornamentation engages with the aesthetic perception of the exotic while questioning the usual distinctions made between these forms of imagery.

The fundamental function of ornamental imagery is to provide visual pleasure – a source of enjoyment which is also often offered by painting. Visual pleasure may involve intrigue, desire or amusement. It may be triggered by aesthetic, emotional or cognitive experiences; it may involve sexual titillation, vicarious fantasies of power and ownership, remembered associations or visual puns. The viewer may take pleasure in surprising visual ambiguities or paradoxes, rhythms, patterns or experiences of synaesthesia. Pleasure may reside in the experience of wonder at an image that generates revelation or flights of the imagination. This pleasure is not solely the domain of the viewer. My decision to work with natural history illustration and ornamentation was driven by my own aesthetic attraction to this imagery and its potential to act as a conduit for my imaginative engagement with the past. My studio research provided me with great and sustaining visual pleasure as I immersed myself in these visual forms. I thoroughly enjoyed the process of transforming this imagery, letting my imagination run riot, improvising and recombining forms in ways I could not have predicted or preconceived.

My studio research was not only an evocation of the exotic but also an examination of its operation. The pleasures associated with images of the 'other' involve a complex range of factors. The melding of painting and ornamentation in my work illuminates how the visual contemplation of the 'other' may foster desire which then initiates the

process of exoticisation. Such pleasure may disguise the reinforcement of inequitable power relationships. However by understanding this and creatively responding to the complexities involved in representing the ‘other’ I have sought to generate an appreciation of difference without manipulating or consuming the culture of the ‘other’.

My position as an Australian settler artist is a sensitive one. I am mindful that my quotation of imagery of Indigenous Australians may be considered to be perpetuating a process of exoticism, despite my best intentions. My engagement with the concept of hybridity allowed me to situate myself in an alternative position to that of rigidly defined coloniser. Hybridity does not refer to the physical mixing of races but rather to an undermining of the operation of colonial power by revealing traces of the ‘other’ within it.⁹⁰ It stresses the interdependence and mutual construction of self-’other’ relations.⁹¹ My final body of work, *The exotic hybrid*, offers an alternative to the dualistic definition of self and ‘other’ implicit in inequitable relationships. These works engage with the complexity, similarities and differences that actually exist within this unsettled relationship.

The studio research has been an effective vehicle for my imaginative and cognitive engagement with my topic. Equally significantly it has extended and consolidated my artistic practice. As I concentrated on the potential of painting to engage with my subject, my understanding and ability to harness the processes of painting to convey meaning metaphorically improved immensely. I undertook theoretical research into the relation of painting to my subject and the nature of painting as a discourse. I explored painting’s material properties and the conventions associated with its display. While my theoretical research and the process of writing my Dissertation informed my approach at the outset and enabled me to clearly formulate my research questions, this did not ever dictate what any painting I made would look like. Rather it was my reflections on the various paintings I made and the response they elicited in me that was most influential on further work, the studio research operating effectively as a form of experiential learning.

My original broad proposal to investigate and compare various forms of cultural interaction with the natural world arose from my growing perception of the Australian natural environment as being absolutely ‘other’ to me. The sense of wonder that I felt

⁹⁰ Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, 23.

⁹¹ Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, 118.

in response to aspects of nature was increasingly tempered by an uncanny disquiet which extended to my perceptions of Australia's indigenous people. Contemplation and exploration of the reverberating implications of the experience of wonder has been the crux of this project. The lust for wonder was an intrinsic facet to the initiation of the process of exoticising the 'other'. The same experience of wonder also drives my creative practice. The act of methodically, meditatively creating paintings can itself be a wondrous experience as the unexpected emerges out of the material surface. Despite conceptualizing the basis of the work beforehand, deciding on media and processes and attempting to visualize outcomes in my mind; the final product is never exactly what I had anticipated. Sometimes the work I make thrills me, delighting me with its 'unsystematised' difference to my preconceptions. Sometimes the work disappoints and will be re-worked or destroyed; or if it puzzles me put aside to ponder. The unpredictability of studio outcomes initiates wonder, the driving impetus to create and importantly offers the opportunity for reflective engagement with the work, its possible meanings and the materials and processes used to achieve it. The ability to examine unforeseen studio outcomes distinguishes visual creative research from other research methodologies. From a basis of sound, thorough theoretical research the imagination re-forms ideas and perceptions offering new visual experiences, insights and opportunities for wondrous engagement for maker and viewer alike.

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Appendix B: Studio Research Questions

What were the formal characteristics, historical and cultural factors that enabled natural history illustration and ornamentation, to inform exotic constructions?

How may the visual forms of natural history illustration and ornamentation be combined within an image?

What was the nature of the aesthetic experience of the exotic?

What was unique about the construction of the exotic in Australia?

Which media and process would I be able to most effectively use to articulate my subject?

Where is the exotic located in Australia? In other words what specific iconography would aptly evoke the exotic; what should my images be of?

If historical texts are used, how do I avoid being simply nostalgic?

If the exotic is characteristically presented in a manner that engenders the perception that it is overwhelming, chaotic and exciting, how may I engage with such a presentation strategy?

What are the contextual implications of using paint to articulate my subject?

What is the relationship between painting and the exotic; in terms of defining the 'other' and as an aesthetic category?

What is the relationship between ornament and the exotic?

What is the relationship between the visual languages of ornament and painting?

How do I develop a painting methodology that engages with these relationships and with the visual language of painting itself? In other words, can I develop a methodology, that by the very means of pictorial structure and invention that I employ, I will engage with my subject metaphorically?

How may the presentation and representation my subject influence the perception of the exotic?

How do I avoid making work that simply continues to the process of exploitative exoticism?

How may I best convey the common characteristic of visual pleasure present in both the process of exoticism and ornamentation?

How do I paint the relational nature of the 'other' and self which defines the exotic?

How may I pictorially engage with the concept of hybridity?

Appendix C: Curriculum Vitae

Born 1959, Southport, Queensland

Education

2006-2010, Candidate for Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Studies in Visual Arts, School of Art, Australian National University,

2000-2003, Bachelor of Visual Art, Honours, National Institute of the Arts, ANU

1977-1982, Bachelor of Veterinary Science, Honours, Sydney University

1981, Bachelor of Science (Veterinary), Honours, Sydney University

Solo Exhibitions

2009, *An 'other' vision*, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Gorman House

2008, *Other Visions*, Foyer Gallery ANU School of Art, Canberra

2006, *Exotica*, Beatty Gallery, Sydney

2005, *Mementos*, Impressions on Paper Gallery, Canberra

2005, *Garden Games*, Canberra Grammar School

2004, *By any Other Name*, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Manuka

Group Exhibitions

2009, *The Flower Show*, Brenda May Gallery, Waterloo

2009, *M16 Drawing Prize*, M16, Canberra

2009, *Prometheus Visual Art Award*, All Saints Anglican School, Merrimac

2008; *The Gathering* M16 Gallery, Canberra

2007, *Great Southern Land*, Beatty Gallery, Sydney

2007, *Hazelhurst Art Award*, Hazelhurst Regional Gallery

2007, Waterhouse Natural History Prize, South Australian Museum

2007, *Caring for Land*, Curated by Christine Watson, Australian Botanical Gardens

2007, *Prometheus Visual Arts Award*, All Saints Anglican School, Merrimac

2006, *Picture this: painting alumni 2000-6*, ANU School of Art Gallery, Canberra, VCA Gallery, Melbourne

2005, Canberra Contemporary Art Space Award, CCAS, Canberra

2005, *Flock*, group show about birds, Helen Maxwell Gallery, Canberra

2005, Willoughby Art Prize, Chatswood

2005, *Artists' Book Exhibition*, Piece Gallery, Mullumbimby

2005, *Vision Exchange 2005*, Ewha Woman's University, Seoul

2005, *Prometheus Visual Arts Award*, All Saints Anglican School, Merrimac

2005-2007, *How I entered there I cannot truly say*, Collaborative works from the ANU Edition + Artist's Books Studio Artspace Mackay, Bathurst Regional Gallery, State Library of Victoria

2003, *130 degrees*, ANU School of Art Graduating Students, Australian National University

2003, *Land\$cape Gold and Water*, Cowra Regional Gallery, CSA foyer Gallery, Orange Regional Gallery

2003, *The Lachlan: Blue-Gold*, Grenfell NSW

Collections

Australian National University

Publications

2007, Trevethick, J., & Dickson, N. 'Rewriting the Exotic': In discussion with Artist Nicola Dickson. *Graduate Journal of Asia and Pacific Studies*, 5(1), 6-14.

Citations

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2003, Martin, Mandy and Sarah Ryan, eds., The Lachlan: Blue-Gold, Environment Studio, National Institute of the Arts, Australian National University, Canberra

Reviews

2004, Warden, Ian, Exhibition shows the beast behind the Beauty, Canberra Times, p7, 23/11/2004

Awards

2009, ANU School of Art Graduate Materials Award in Visual Arts

2009, Highly Commended M16 Drawing Prize

2008, Istituto Italiano di Cultura Premio Italia Award

2008, Cliftons Art Prize,

2006, Australian Post-Graduate Award

2003, EASS ANU Art Collection Acquisitive Award

2003, ANU H C Coombs Scholarship

Residencies

2005-2004, Alumni in Residence, Edition and Artists Book Studio, ANU

Grants

2007-2008; ACT Environment Grant supported by the ACT Government for *Learning the Land*; a project conducted with the ACT scouting association and exhibited at the Belconnen Gallery and Tuggeranong Arts Centre in 2008

Presentations

19/09/2009: *Ornamentation and Western Painting*, Art Worlds Symposium, Art History Department, ANU

5/06/2009: *The Art of Creative Research*, The Research School of Humanities, ANU

Post graduate Poster Presentation at the 32nd Congress of the International Committee of Art Historians (CIHA), Melbourne, 2008

Appendix D: Approved research proposal

General Aim

This PhD project will investigate and compare various forms of cultural interaction with the natural world and how such interaction informs current Australian perceptions of the concepts of 'Nature' and the 'Environment'.

Studio Practice Proposal

Aim

The aim of the studio practice component is to develop a visual language that will encourage the viewer to reassess cultural perceptions regarding the character of the natural world. The project would investigate these perceptions and their visual expression comparing them to factual evidence of how the natural world actually exists. The context of the studio practice is similar to artists such as Fiona Hall who explores 'humanity's relationship with nature'⁹², Simryn Gill⁹³ and Janet Laurence,⁹⁴ who both investigate the way in which the concepts of nature and culture interact.

The proposed studio practice component is an extension of my work undertaken in my Honours Year, 2003, which explored how painting may be used to represent the concept of the weed and how this concept relates to cultural perceptions of Nature. Subsequent to graduation I have continued working on this subject and also have explored how plants have been used symbolically to convey a sense of national identity. In addition I have investigated how imagery whose source was either botanical or the human body may be used to construct a sense of memory or longing. Coupled with my more recent experience as a visual artist is my prior academic and work experience within the

⁹²Julie Ewington, *Fiona Hall*, (Piper Press, Annandale), 23.

⁹³Wayne Tunnicliffe, 'Self Selection,' in *Simryn Gill Selected Work*, (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2002), 9.

⁹⁴ Rachel Kent, 'Changing topographies: the environmental art of Janet Laurence,' in *Janet Laurence A Survey Exhibition*, ed. Nancy Severs (Drill Hall Gallery, ANU, 19 August – 25 September 2005), 14.

disciplines of Microbiology and Veterinary Science. These disciplines are based on a wide variety of subjects within the Natural Sciences such as botany, agronomy, biology, herd health and veterinary medicine. The study and practice within these fields has allowed me to develop a broad understanding and ability to investigate many aspects of the natural world in a scientific manner.

Methods

In order to fulfil the aim of the proposal, investigation of the following areas would be undertaken:

An initial broad survey of various means of representing the natural world historically and contemporarily in areas as diverse as natural history, narrative, language, decorative and fine arts. Emphasis would be given to how this occurs within the Australian domestic environment.

Establishment of the various aesthetic categories in which such imagery resides.

Ask what conclusions may be drawn from the survey regarding the cultural desire to understand, appreciate and relate to the natural environment.

Compare and contrast these conclusions with research and prior knowledge within the disciplines of ecology, biology and botany.

The development of a visual language that seeks to compare and question the conventions used to represent the natural world, the assumptions derived from such conventions and how the natural world factually operates.

This project would explore the ability of a combination of both paint and printing techniques to act as a medium of such a language. The anticipated outcome would be the production of a body of paintings that juxtapose imagery derived from the natural world, both historical and contemporary in origin, with factual visual evidence of how the natural world functions. Manipulation and experimentation within the relationship between the figure and ground of the painting, constructed with the use of stencilling and screenprinting techniques, would be the means of achieving this juxtaposition. A further challenge to cultural perceptions would be achieved by shifting the subjects of these paintings from within the aesthetic categories they are usually found. An example of this would be the representation of a flowering plant using visual devices that ensure

that the viewer experiences a sense of the sublime or grotesque rather than the beautiful. The resultant body of work from the studio practice would allow reconsideration of presuppositions regarding the natural world.

Dissertation Proposal

Aim and Context

As a society our willingness to engage with issues related to environmental degradation is partly determined by how humanity defines its relationship with the natural world. The intricacies and character of the natural world are often broadly understood within the concept 'Nature'. This concept has a long history of being defined as a site separate from humanity, benign and emotional restorative.⁹⁵ This Dissertation would seek to argue that forms of visual culture commonly found in the Australian domestic environment foster an idealistic rather than realistic notion of the natural world. Such imagery acting to perpetuate the myth of a dichotomous relationship between Nature and Culture interfering with society's ability to acknowledge issues of environmental decline.

The Dissertation would involve both an exploration and evaluation of forms of imagery representing aspects of the natural world found historically and contemporarily within the Australian domestic environment. Such imagery is found in various mediums, however the Dissertation would concentrate on the ability of imagery found in the decorative arts, such as the patterning found in wallpaper, plasterwork, textiles, wood and metal work, to reflect and influence our relationship with the natural world.

An underlying premise of the Dissertation is that the trends that occur regarding choice of imagery to be included within our homes are a reflection of culturally informed taste. John Carey quotes a survey performed by Pierre Bourdieu in France in the 1960's that concluded that taste is 'a marker of class, reflecting educational level, social origin and economic power'.⁹⁶ Based on this premise, examination of various forms of imagery found in the domestic environment both in the past and currently, gives an indication of various influential perceptions of the natural world. Likewise Paula Wynell Bradley concludes that the individual units ordered within patterns provide historical and

⁹⁵ Peter Timms, *Making Nature Six Walks in the Bush*, (Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, 2001), 44.

⁹⁶ John Carey, *What good are the arts?*, (Faber and Faber Ltd, London, 2005), 118.

cultural insights into the society that created such patterns.⁹⁷ By examination and reflection on the changes within decorative imagery based on the natural world found within the Australian home, assumptions regarding perceptions of the natural world may be made.

Method

The argument within the Dissertation would be developed by:

Initial research and survey work in order to record various forms of imagery used both in the past and present throughout a range of Australian domestic environments.

Examination of which aspects of the natural world are represented within forms of decorative imagery.

Develop conclusions regarding the forms and prevalence of patterning as evidence of past and present Australian attitudes to the natural world.

Compare these conclusions to contemporary notions regarding Nature and the Environment

The desired outcome from such a project would be an analysis and understanding of the role of this aspect of Australian visual culture in shaping society's relationship with the natural world.

The knowledge gained from the Dissertation will allow engagement with a breadth of visual conventions that influence cultural perceptions of the natural world, many of which would be of relevance to my studio practice.

Summary

The use of art allows the exploration of the relationship between humanity and the ineffable that exists in the natural world. The combination of the knowledge gained from the Dissertation and the visual research involved in the studio practice I believe would allow the development of a unique visual language. The creation of such a visual language that aims to elicit an aesthetic response on the part of the viewer may initiate a

⁹⁷ Paula Wynell Bradley, *Miriam Schapiro: The feminist Transformation of an Avant-Garde*, (PhD thesis, North Carolina, 1983), 116.

reappraisal of assumptions regarding the concept of Nature and more practically actual environmental issues in a manner different to the consideration of text-based information alone.

In order to undertake this PhD project studio accommodation, access to library, computer and print- making facilities would be necessary.

Bibliography

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