

182 DAYS



EVA FERNANDEZ

10 NOVEMBER - 19 DECEMBER 2012

IMAGE: EVA FERNANDEZ, NARCOSIS, 2012, CAST IRON BED AND GOOSE DOWN, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Reception 1,2 &3, 2012 Archival inkjet print 215cm x 70cm

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TILT, now in its fifth year, is a City of Melville initiative which aims to stimulate the production of a body of artworks that respond to the Heathcote site. A local artist is invited to reflect on any layer of the site's history. The result is thought provoking and engages the memories of the community.

This year's TILT artist is Eva Fernández and with 182 days she chose to reflect on the experience of the individual within the walls of the former Heathcote Hospital and gives the visitor a chance to contemplate the extremely intimate experience of mental illness and its treatment.

Point Heathcote is a place of many histories. It was known to the Beeliar people as Goolyagatup and provided them with a significant living and hunting site. Captain James Stirling used the point as a camp in 1827 during his exploration of the Swan River and considered it for the establishment of the capital city. The site where Perth lies now was finally chosen as it was considered more suitable for communications and better endowed with suitable resources. Stirling named the point after Midshipman G.C. Heathcote, believed to be the first white man to set foot on the land. Heathcote was subsequently used for horse and cattle grazing, as attacks by Aborigines and fear of bushfires kept settlers away. In 1896, the area was subdivided for residential development.

In the 1920s, new theories in the treatment of mental illness and overcrowding at Claremont Mental Hospital resulted in the need for an alternative accommodation and treatment facilities. As a result, a Reception Home for the 'mildly mentally afflicted' was established at Heathcote by The State Government. The Heathcote Hospital, as it became known later, opened in 1929 and ceased to function in 1994. Patients considered 'recoverable' would find treatment at Heathcote for a maximum stay of 6 months [182 days]. Since 2000, the site has been open to the public and is used for recreation and learning and includes City of Melville's Heathcote Museum and Gallery.

Point Heathcote's history of being a living place, vantage point, strategic piece of land and place of many power struggles, became even more multi-layered with the establishment of the Hospital. In its intention and in many ways a progressive institution, a rehabilitation place set within natural beauties, an environment conducive to healing. Remote, quiet, peaceful. A trap? Isolation, alienation, exclusion, coercion. Each experience of the Hospital is unique. And Heathcote certainly has left a deep and lasting impression on the people it touched.

Olimpia Cullity
Curator
City of Melville

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Illness of many a kind is invested of a faithless guile. It plies its shapeless and duplicitous 'loyalty' to bind a living cipher to the whim of fate. Similarly, the affliction of melancholy is a dualistic exposure of sorts - a bare, raw rattle of the spirit and infidelity of 'reason'. Anomalous and disenfranchised, the mentally ill often take up a sequestered occupancy of the fringe. But, there is an almost naïve audacity to psychosis that willfully grants its demons a voice. From an extravagant distance, the ill are cohorts of human dreams and erstwhile prisoners of their protocols. Ultimately, (and of course), 'they' are an intrinsic and integral part of the viably 'normal' world itself. So why do we continue to sequester difference - even whilst we pitch a claim for the adventure and experiment of rebellious 'uniqueness' in a vicarious' world?

Ostensibly, the 'healing' space of abjection is neither architecturally nor empirically removed from the space of the ordered world of the 'mainstream'. But, what if our measure for anomaly turned out to be a mere yardstick for a wider variation of 'normality'? Indeed, how do we distinguish that attenuated divide between passions of the heart and the clutter of the 'disordered' mind? The institution of mental 'correction' is always an instrument and a vehicle of moral scrutiny and judgement - its onus resonates with the authorial voices of altruism and compassion, whilst bearing the roundly emphatic weight of myth, stereotype and historical prejudice.

Eva Fernández has surveyed the space of Heathcotes' architectural and medical past with a lyrical sensibility. She earnestly engages both with the vagabond and the graciously poised stories of what it is to be humanly flawed. For those who found home here - or at least found like souls with whom to countenance their fear, share a breathing air, and thrall at lambent night skies - it was a measured and measurably corrective placement. Definitively, they were 'mental patients', diagnosed as flawed, imperfect, unsound. Lying in astringently clean linen, the stain of their abjection left the residue of a pitted signature across the abyss of a noisily contrived and arcing silence. Imbued of all their unruly humanness and the realm of their spirited kind, the taunt of a bellowing ache must surely have chafed at the order of their tempered days.

'Humane practice', like a dogma, almost festers in its heartfelt goodwill. Its institutions frame the phantom of a gloaming sorcery that time and again legislates and renews arbitrary paradigms of 'correction' and alignment. Heathcote was, both by account and by anecdote, a progressively restorative facility and Fernández documents a poignant narrative of 'healing' with all its' rattling accoutrements and good intention. She looks incisively at the modality and calculation of

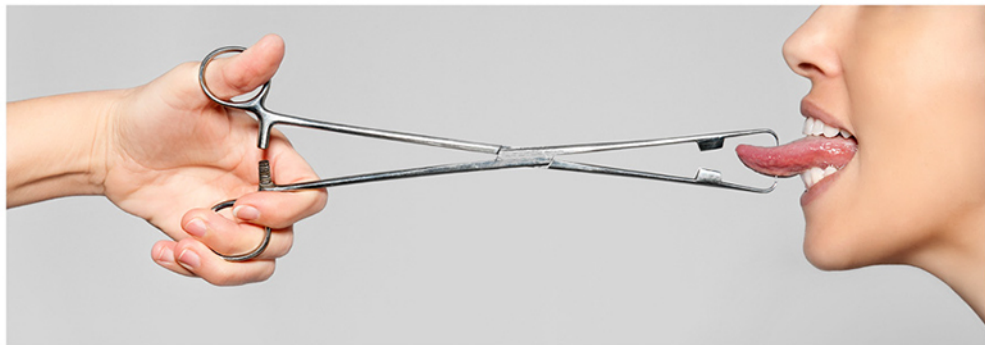


Tongue depressor 2012 Archival inkjet print 70cm x 70cm

implements. Bite blocks, tongue depressors, cheek retractors – to what worthy function would these apply in the context of mental health? Fernández depicts her photographic subject at close range, but chooses to crop the eyes. Thus, we have a voyeuristic vantage point and in a paradoxical sense, this both softens and acidifies our gaze. Somewhat comparably, the extruded and compellingly clasped tongue utterly silences the subject and determines the order of power in this relationship. The subject is demonstrably vulnerable with an utter objectification that is afforded by the highly polished and smooth, naked execution – a modality described by the artist as ‘mannequin-like’ – much as we would expect to encounter in a medical handbook¹. A clinical aesthetic, the aesthetic of healing and of curative places and processes, percolates through and charges these images. They leave us to question whether the ‘clinical gaze’ conjures an arbitrary etiquette or protocol that is invested of its own motives. Fernández posits these clinical implements within the very modality of their use. Somewhat askance to their original purpose, though, these photographs elucidate an essential disjuncture between the stated objectives of clinical care and the invasive ramifications of instrumentation. Somehow, all is not quite right with these images. Though seamless and sumptuous, they speak of the almost oppressive virtue that informs a delinquent conscience. The power of their signifying language is invested with the clout of a compelling intellect and a discerning eye.

Anomaly has a somewhat guarded and almost neurotically particular lexicography. Much of the way that we view the ‘mad²’ is measured by definitive quotients. (Culturally, we seem to have a utilitarian propensity for this – scientific ‘evidence’, for example, is contingent upon believable ‘measurability’). The ‘insane’ are simultaneously judged both by what they ostensibly lack, (reason), and what they appear to have in abundance, (eccentricity). Taut with significance, mental illness is defined, to some extent, as a detachment from its time. Indeed, Foucault postulates ‘madness’ as “the absence of an oeuvre³” – but equally it is that lyrical epiphany that, were we to look closely enough, might be a disconcerting mirror to our world. Its treatment, though, is emphatically of its time. Fernández’ photographs posit an axiomatic backdrop of sorts to elucidate the imperious heart of pragmatic healing. Pictured here are grim gadgets that masquerade as benign, palliative utensils, whilst manifesting more like instruments of torture. Inherent to their signifying faculty, is the curative ministration toward life wherein ‘the extremity of subjectivity [is] blended into the immediate fascination of the object⁴’. But madness also discloses something of the truth about ‘normality’. It betrays a fear of the ‘other’ whose difference is best sequestered in ‘homes of [the] constantly renewed magic of purification and exclusion⁵’ – the mental institution.

Sequentially, Fernández’ negotiation of the exhibition space echoes the symbolic journey of the inmate. In essence, the narrative of the installations, photographs and video works reflect a calculable trajectory in the processing of a life. Battered suitcases, piled in an inglorious heap,



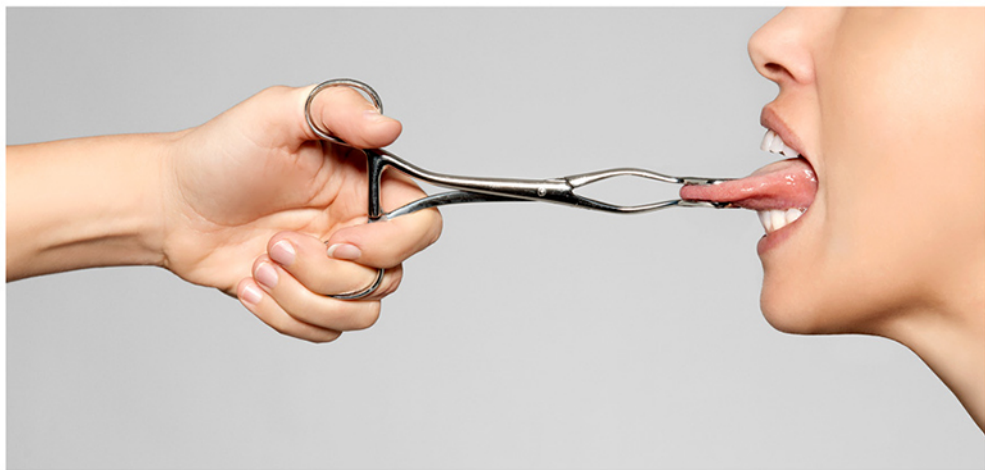
Tongue forceps 2012 Archival inkjet print 70cm x 200cm



Cheek retractor 2012 Archival inkjet print 70cm x 165cm



Ferguson's gag 2012 Archival inkjet print 70cm x 200cm



Lobe forceps 2012 Archival inkjet print 70cm x 148cm

signal an arrival of sorts and from here the journey through the gallery is punctuated by the allegory of comprehensively baffling physical and chemical 'correction'. Ungainly and spiked by the thrum of adversity, the arrant gravitas of the patients' confinement - which conferred no more than 182 days to 'regain' sanity - marked an ultimatum of sorts in a 'cut to measure' formula. Patients, (and their families), bore the onus of a finite time to 'heal'. Exceeding this time frame without the requisite 'evidence' of recovery engendered the irreversible commitment to institutionalisation. But the trespassed mind - a token wrench, almost, between a wizened child and an ageless adult - pits itself against the time that threatens to swindle its cloistered world. The feather filled bed, for example, becomes the renegade solace in a tenuous environment. It is a lie that glances at the utter fragility of both the subject and the treatment wherein both hover simultaneously over the transitional and ultimately ephemeral space of uncertainty. Chronologically, the polished and streamlined suitcases mark a closure of sorts and a compelling point of pause - representative, it would seem, of the anodyne outcome of systematised treatment.

It is an elementary conundrum of the mental institution that perhaps all of the best of intentions will one day be found wanting. The treatment of mental illness remains our dilemma and our responsibility, but our benevolence is at times shrouded by the nebulous intention of 'best' clinical practice. For the past inmates of Heathcote, and mental patients of every stripe, there is no single, indubitable panacea. Here, though, Fernández bears witness to the mettle and dignity of the human spirit. In fact, she ushers a flood of good reason to counsel both blemish and lustre as worthy co-conspirators in an utterly compelling body of work. Resonant with the like spirit of a former patient who notoriously climbed a nearby tower stoically singing his intention to 'paint the clouds with sunshine'⁶, it is as consequential as it is engaging. Importantly, it urges us to consider and reconsider our paradigms against the blight of complacency.

Sue Starcken

2012

Sue Starcken is an artist, writer and academic based in Perth, Western Australia.

¹ Fernández, E. (2012). *Paraphrased from the artist statement.*

² The vocabulary of anomaly is not without discretionary and partisan inference. The context of an era colours the language that is applied to certain afflictions and conditions to imply an observed sensibility and protocol. The use of terminology here - particularly the contemporaneously controversial application of 'madness'- is drawn in part from the writing of Foucault, M. (2006). *The History of Madness.* New York:Routledge.

³ *Ibid*, p 13.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 518.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁶ Author Unknown, (June 16th, 1932). *Western Mail.* Perth: Western Australia. p 21.
See <http://nla.gov.au/nla.newsarticle37757190> for full transcript.



Patient 2012 Archival inkjet print 70cm x 70cm



Nurse 2012 Archival inkjet print 70cm x 70cm



Painting the clouds with sunshine 2012 video still 1 hour 49 minutes



Compartmentalise 2012 wooden and acrylic suitcases nickel fittings and goose down



Back image: *182 days* 2012 video still 33 minutes

Front image: *Narcosis*, cast iron bed and white goose down. All images by Eva Fernandez



Heathcote Museum & Gallery • Heathcote Cultural Centre
Swan House • Duncraig Rd, Applecross
Gallery hours: Tuesday to Friday 10am - 3pm
Saturday & Sunday 12 noon - 4pm • T: 9364 5666

