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A sleek, clinical coldness

VISUAL ARTS

Tilt 2012: Eva

Fernandez' 182 Days

Heathcote Museum and Gallery

REVIEW GEMMA WESTON

At first glance, the picturesque grounds of the Heathcote complex in Applecross might not suggest its somewhat darker history. The seclusion of the heritage buildings — and their million-dollar views — once had a convalescent purpose: Heathcote started its journey as a centre for psychiatric treatment, a history preserved and explored by its museum and gallery.

Each year, the gallery invites a local contemporary artist to respond to the location's fertile history, exhibiting the resulting body of work as part of its ongoing Tilt series of exhibitions.

For 2012's edition, Eva Fernandez' 182 Days presents a poetic and uneasily beautiful interpretation of the museum's archives and architecture, juxtaposing tactility and vulnerability with a sleek, clinical coldness.

The task of visualising the murkier areas of mental health, and some of its perhaps murkier methods of treatment, could easily result in melodrama or in stereotype if handled without sensitivity. The arrangements of stainless-steel implements and a vintage electroshock unit displayed in the museum offer an intriguing picture of early 20th century asylum, although the personal photographs and stories presented in the small museum suggest that Heathcote was in its heyday considered a refuge, pairing medical treatments with fresh air, gardening activities and a community spirit.

Fernandez manages to strike a



Emotion: Eva Fernandez, *Narcosis*, 2012, cast iron bed and white goose down installed in the Heathcote Museum & Gallery.

similar balance between distress and optimism, finding in her source material an uncomfortable beauty and grace. The title of her body of work, 182 Days, is drawn from the maximum length of a stay at Heathcote, which was considered to be a kind of half-way house; after a maximum of six months, patients would either be discharged, or transferred to a more "heavy duty" hospital.

Her sculptures, videos and photographs make good narrative use of the gallery's poky rooms and corridors — a suite of photographs in the lobby refer abstractly to arrival, depicting tall stacks of battered suitcases which are broken up into frames suggestive of a reel of film.

Subtle repetition in these "frames" adds to an atmosphere of fragmentation. The stacks of

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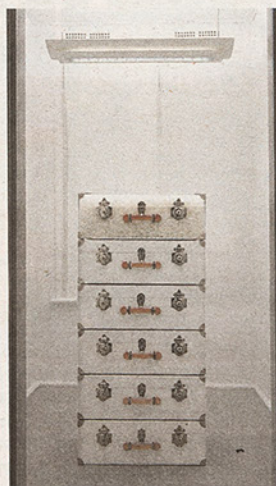
suitcases reappear elsewhere as sculptures, this time clean and uniformly white in an even brighter white room, as though "purified".

Goose down also makes repeat appearances, heaped in white on an iron bed frame, trapped inside a sleek Perspex case or plucked at by anonymous hands in a video glimpsed through an observation window. The lightness and frailty

of the material lends it, like the suitcases, an anthropomorphic quality, a stand-in for a dissipated emotion or sensation.

These works, which are suggestive of an invisible body, are often more resonant than those in which the body is present. A series of large photographic "portraits" employs the stainless-steel medical instruments — tongue depressors and forceps, a mouth gag — first glimpsed as artefacts in the museum, putting them to use on an anonymous female figure.

Elsewhere, the meticulous refinement of Fernandez' compositions highlights the tactility of materials, but here the immaculate gloss of the figures moves the images into the realm of fetish. In *Tongue Forceps*, the titular instrument grips a



Purified: *Compartmentalise*, 2012, wooden and acrylic suitcases, nickel fitting and goose down.

sensuously extended tongue, the cropped figure wearing an expression almost of relish. The contrast between these images and their sculptural counterparts is jarring, as the viewer shifts from a dreamlike participation to objectification.

In a darkened back room, *Painting the Clouds With Sunshine* provides an elegant summary to the exhibition. A response to a 1932 Western Mail article about a man arrested while climbing the mast atop Wireless Hill, a 90-minute projection documents the slow transition of a sunny sky to cloudy grey.

This simple piece is a reminder of the nuance and weight of human experience, and of what can be gained from the careful examination of a familiar landscape, or from delving a little deeper into peripheral local stories.

■ 182 Days closes on Wednesday.