

(terra) australis incognita



eva fernández

Eva Fernández
(terra) australis incognita

2011

Fremantle Art Centre

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All artworks are archival inkjet prints

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Anigozanthos flavidus 2011

unknown southern: colonial folly, madness and hybridity in Eva Fernandez's (terra) australis incognita

The title of Eva Fernandez's new photographic series, *(terra) australis incognita* is drawn from the ancient European belief in an 'unknown south land', a mythical continent whose existence was assumed from Pythagoras onwards, as a natural counterbalance to the land masses of the northern hemisphere.¹ Terra Australis Incognita was popularly imagined as a paradise, milder than Europe but with similar ecological diversity² and variously expected to be rich in gold, silver, tin, iron, lead, copper, precious stones, pearls and shells, as well as elephants and wild game.³ As such, its location was keenly hypothesised by rival nations, and by the sixteenth century this could lie nowhere other than between Africa and South America, the only part of the globe still largely unfamiliar to European navigators.⁴

What they did eventually discover in this region could not have been further from their utopian expectations. James Cook was searching for *Terra Australis* when he claimed Australia's eastern coast in 1770. His appraisal of the landscape as "rather barren than fertile"⁵ concurs with that of the French and Dutch who preceded him, Cameron noting the Dutch dismissal of Western Australia in the early seventeenth century as "little beyond an arid, barren and wild land".⁶ Following British settlement, Matthew Flinders famously shortened *Terra Australis* into *Australia*, falsely believing it to be the globe's southern-most landmass.⁷ Mack argues that the re-naming was not only an error (Antarctica was yet to be mapped), but also something of an afterthought and time-filler while Flinders was imprisoned by the French, as well as a way of usurping Cook's preferred title of *New South Wales*.⁸

This series of disappointments and false assumptions set the tone for Australia's colonialism – and particularly that of Western Australia, where Fernandez produced these works – as a comedy of errors. Cameron portrays the foundation of the Swan River Colony in 1829 as farcical, James Stirling optimistically basing his appraisal of the site on a small pocket of rich soil on the coastal plain and assuming the surrounding countryside to be as well-suited to farming despite the numerous ill-appraisals that preceded him.⁹ Once the settlement was established, colonists had to contend with "[t]he sandiness of the coastline, the unexpected severity of the winter storms, the shortage of fertile land, and the chaos in the administrative centres of Perth and Fremantle".¹⁰ Nonetheless, British shipping agents were quick to exploit the *Terra Australia* myth, promoting the new colony as a southern paradise and leading to short-lived 'Swan River mania',¹¹ one couple bringing with them no livestock other than pointers, greyhounds, pheasants, rabbits and a lap-dog in anticipation of a new life of carefree luxury.¹²

Fernandez's images of ravished Western furniture contrasted with the almost alien forms of Australian flora, evoke a similar disjuncture between European gentility and the harsh realities of the Australian landscape. For many early settlers in Western Australia this disjuncture proved too severe. Once the 'mania' died down, the dwindling settlement was transformed into a penal colony out of desperation, until the late nineteenth century gold rush provided the first real incentive for immigration.¹³

This legacy of colonial folly could perhaps be considered funny, were the consequences not so dire for those people already thriving here. Another Latin term, *Terra Nullius* (no mans land), was used to classify Australia as legally empty¹⁴ and therefore ripe for British colonisation despite the preceding fifty thousand (or more) years of Indigenous habitation. Fernandez has created a similarly 'empty' space in her photographs. Her subjects are framed within a white void intended to evoke the sterile quality of forensic photography, with the damaged furniture representative of a site of vandalism, or a mutilated body. While some of her couches and armchairs are merely disassembled, others have been haphazardly pieced back together or had their upholstery replaced by native flora. For Fernandez this is a metaphor for the legacy of postcolonial Australian race relations, the attempts to alternately overlook prior devastation, or naively seek to restore the original state of things.

The clinical styling of Fernandez's images additionally evokes the aesthetics of studio portraiture, a genre employed as a tool for domination practically from the invention of camera-based photography, with many early portraits depicting subjects who were being forced to pose – prisoners, the homeless and the colonised. Similarly, much early studio portraiture was of the dead, many families only able to justify the expense of a portrait as a last resort, going so far as to carry the corpse of a child or sibling to a photographer's studio. Fernandez explicitly referenced this history in her *Memento Mori* series (that preceded this new body of work both chronologically and conceptually), in which she documented everyday objects from deceased estates. Her entire practice has been similarly obsessed with capturing subjects on the brink of dissolution, including abandoned rural buildings, bygone industrial spaces and the vestiges of landscape poised for development. She has in fact even photographed a ghost, glimpsed in the background of a seemingly-innocuous group shot taken at the allegedly haunted old York Hostel. Whether or not one believes the photograph to be genuine, it seems possible that a spirit would choose to reveal itself to a photographer whose practice has been so preoccupied with mortality.

(*terra*) *australis incognita* was produced for exhibition in another notoriously haunted site. Fremantle Arts Centre was built by convict labour in 1864 as Western Australia's first lunatic asylum, and whether or not you concur with its claim to be Western Australia's most haunted building, it undeniably provides an atmospheric source of artistic inspiration. Fernandez's imagery of distressed upholstery and strewn stuffing recalls the building's padded isolation cells (one of which will be opened to the public for the first time during her exhibition run), evoking a confusion of interior and exterior reminiscent of hysteria, in which the sufferer's emotional state was thought to manifest on their body. No doubt many of the building's female inmates would have been diagnosed with this notoriously ambiguous affliction which was something of a catch-all for little-understood conditions such as depression, that would have been rampant during the colony's first few difficult years.¹⁵

While the 'mad' appearance of Fernandez's images points to a failure within colonialism, her evocative use of native flora simultaneously provides an ambiguous beauty. The only works in the series that do not depict furniture are two images of native flora bursting from suitcases – iconic objects suggestive of travel or exile. They serve to question whether the owner is taking the landscape with them on their travels by choice, or if it has invaded their psyche just as they were trying to escape it. In titling her exhibition, Fernandez has interpreted the Latin phrase with brackets around the word *terra* – land – leaving the emphasis on 'Unknown Southern', evoking a mysterious, undiscovered quality of 'southness' that exists beyond geographical borders.¹⁶ While this 'southness' could be interpreted as pointing to the folly of the utopian myth, I prefer to read her works as arguing that despite the postcolonial disjunctures of *terra australis*, one may be able to piece together an idiosyncratic, hybrid subjectivity 'down under'.

Andrew Nicholls, 2011

Andrew Nicholls is an artist, writer and curator based in Perth, Western Australia.

Notes

- 1 Cameron, J.M.R. 'Western Australia, 1616-1829: An Antipodean Paradise', *The Geographical Journal*, 140/3, 1974, p. 374.
- 2 *Ibid*, p. 375.
- 3 *Ibid*, pp. 376-377.
- 4 *Ibid*, 373.
- 5 Frost, A. "'As it Were Another America': English Ideas of the First Settlement in New South Wales at the End of the Eighteenth Century", *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 7/3, 1974, p. 255.
- 6 Heers, 1898, cited in Cameron, *op. cit.*, p. 373.
- 7 Stallard, A.J. 'Origins of the Idea of Antipodes: Errors, Assumptions, and a Bare Few Facts', *Terrae Incognitae*, 42/1, September 2010, pp. 34-51.
- 8 Mack, J.D. 'The Naming of Australia: A Revised View', *The Geographical Journal*, 124/4, 1958, pp. 514-515.

- 9 Cameron, *op. cit.*, p. 382.
- 10, 11 *Ibid*, p. 383.
- 12 Uren, 1948 cited in Cameron, *Ibid*, p. 383.
- 13 Blainey, G. 'The Momentous Gold Rushes', *Australian Economic History Review*, 50/2, 2010, p. 215.
- 14 Secher, U. 'The High Court and Recognition of Native Title: Distinguishing Between the Doctrines of *Terra Nullius* and "Desert and Uncultivated"', *University of Western Sydney Law Review*, 2007. Retrieved from <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/UWSLawRw/2007/>
- 15 McPherson, M. 'Fremantle Arts Centre & Western Australian Museum, Fremantle History', *Spooked-Art and Horror in the Western Australian Landscape*, Artrage, 2005, pp. 66-67.
- 16 Curator Dr. Kevin Murray has spent several years exploring the resonances of this 'south-ness' to artmaking through his *South Project* and related endeavours.





Lectus reconcilio 2011





Sessio adornato 2011

whiteouts and other absences

I emigrated with my family from England to the northern suburbs of Perth in 1989. Some years later I had made good friends with other kids that lived along the coast. In the summertime we would walk along the freshly cleared dunes at night. Trees and vegetation rotted here and there in piles. White sand was all that remained of coastal places where new suburbs were to be built and given Nyoongar and other Aboriginal names, like Joondalup and Currambine. We walked through this white-out of sandy nothingness, smoking cigarettes and flicking hot ash into the night sky. Our faces were barely illuminated by newly installed streetlights marking out the enclaves of the neat cul-de-sacs to come. The cool, unhindered breeze from the sea showed us some direction in the blankness and we walked against it to the shore.

In the stark white backgrounds of these photographic works by Eva Fernandez, I see this same kind of nothingness I experienced walking the dunes on those windy nights; a nothingness that is brought in to being through a process of erasure. It is not an unencumbered, new white space upon which this story is told, but a kind of white-out that frames the objects and scenes Fernandez has arranged and captured photographically. *(terra) australis incognita* is a series of studio photographs of still-lives. The installation of her work engages viewers in a narrow space in which they are confronted by a series of images that resonate with the Fremantle Arts Centre's colonial and institutional architecture and history. They are photographs largely of eighteenth century, Victorian and Federation-era chairs in various states of human-made disarray and rearrangement, from the bent wood seat of a working-class kitchen, to the red velvet chaise of a boudoir. They are quite literally representations of seats of former colonial power.

(terra) australis incognita is an unpeopled series, though it speaks very much of human intervention in the natural world, and the divide between nature and culture. On her clear white backgrounds, Fernandez has arranged stuffed chairs with their lining ripped open, so that horsehair and hessian scatter on the ground, sometimes almost reflecting – in miniature – the undulations of a landscape. The objects are dissected untidily, as if in haste or rage, so that skeletal chairs are surrounded by their insides as evidence of destruction. Rather than refurbishment, some of the wooden furnishings undergo a kind of reversal back-to-nature, where Western Australian wildflowers including Kangaroo Paw, flowering silver gums and the long spike of a Xanthorrhoea emerge from their once-upholstered seats. In one instance, a chair is padded entirely by the soft layers of a Paperbark tree trunk.

Like New Zealand artist Michael Parekowhai's photographic series, *The consolation of philosophy: Piko nei te matenga* (2001) depicting bouquets of flowers shot against white backgrounds, Fernandez's work foregrounds seemingly benign signifiers; flowers and chairs, for our intense scrutiny. In Parekowhai's work, each floral image is titled with the names of battlefields upon which Maori soldiers fought in WW2. But on closer inspection, his bouquets appear to be comprised of plastic and imitation flowers.¹ In *(terra) australis incognita* the structure of each ravaged chair is very much intact. They are not destroyed through the process of disassembling, but instead their resilience presents a dual question about whether it may be possible to reconstruct the soft parts of the upholstery around a solid, fixed base, or whether to let nature take its course.

In most cases, the chairs in Fernandez's images face outwards, towards the gaze of the viewer, and so while the photographs do not represent people directly, they implicate Australians of the past through the antique nature of the chairs. As writer Geoff Dyer has remarked of a famous image by Walker Evans "Evans said he liked to 'suggest people sometimes by their absence'. Few things are more suggestive of absence than empty chairs".² The empty chairs in Fernandez's work provoke consideration of our post-colonial state, which still retains the foundations and vestiges of the initial impulses to settle an 'unknown southern land' in the first place – for property, profit and power. Still these impulses drive us today to bulldoze, uproot forests and displace ecologies.

The representation of wildflowers by the artist in juxtaposition with various colonial furnishings also refers to that nineteenth century scientific drive to catalogue and classify, echoing the somewhat familiar botanical and zoological drawings of Bauer, Leseur and Gould, among others. Expeditions to pictorially document native species of Australian flora and fauna were undertaken initially to take a measure of the worth of a place to be colonised for the appropriate powers, which ultimately led the same powers to clear the land of exactly those species for housing and agriculture. The Latin title of *[terra] australis incognito* invokes the idea of an expedition into the unknown and also alludes to the notion of a single Western system of nomenclature, brought about by the idea that the natural world was finite and contained and could be completely mapped and archived.ⁱⁱⁱ As if the index of a thing could stand in place of the thing itself.

These absences and unknowns; of people, of background, context and the void suggested by the exhibition's title are all devices employed by Fernandez to ask the viewer to fill them with their own knowledge, their thoughts on Australian history, politics and nationhood, but most particularly, where and how they situate themselves within it. Presented in the confined space of the Art Centre's hallway gallery, the images are printed and mounted as large, flat and frameless. Their borders almost blend into the walls to create a psychologically-charged and claustrophobic perspective. The white-out with which the images are surrounded becomes part of the space that we, as viewers, inhabit in the present. We fill the absences and we consider the impact of the past on our choices for the future.

As an artist, documentary photographer and curator, Eva Fernandez has maintained a continuing engagement with discourses around the fragile structures upon which Australian nationhood is founded. Her first curated exhibition for the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts in 2003, *Australiens* included the work of artists whose practices were concerned with the fabrication of Australian identity and of otherness in a growing climate of fear and racism around immigration and refuge. Her documentation of the working practice of female Indigenous artists including Tracey Moffatt and Dianne Jones has also influenced Fernandez's use of photography as a tool for the construction of truths, for setting scenes and manipulating viewer perception. In this series, Fernandez arranges seemingly quotidian objects that are highly suggestive of the impact of human beings on the cultures they create and the places they occupy. The absences they present create a space for the individual to contemplate their own politics and the role they may play in social change.

Bec Dean

Bec Dean is a curator and writer and Associate Director of Performance Space, Sydney.

Notes

i Viewed from the online collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa <http://collections.tepapa.govt.nz>

ii Thomas, s. 'Beautiful to the Eye or interesting to Science: the conundrum of natural-history art' *The Encounter 1802: Art of the Flinders and Baudin Voyages*, 2002, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, p. 16.

iii Dyer, G. *The Ongoing Moment*, 2005 Pantheon Books, New York, p. 207.



eva fernández biography

academic background

2006 Enrolled in Doctorate of Philosophy (Visual Arts), Edith Cowan University, Perth, WA
2002 Masters of Creative Arts, Edith Cowan University, Perth, WA
1996 Diploma of Applied Science – Photography, Central Institute of Technology, Perth, WA
1992 Bachelor of Visual Arts – Photography, Charles Sturt University, Albury, NSW

curated exhibitions

2009 *me-take: Indigenous self-representation in Photomedia*, Christian Thompson, Dianne Jones and Tony Albert, catalogue essay by Brenda L. Croft, Perth Centre for Photography, Perth, WA
2003 *austrALIENS*, PICA (Perth Institute of Contemporary Art), Perth, WA

solo exhibitions

2011 *(terra) australis incognita*, Fremantle Art Centre, Fremantle, WA
2004 *Queer Street*, Midsumma Festival, 96 Flinders St. Melbourne, VIC
2002 *Queer Valley High*, Pride Festival, Kurb Gallery, Northbridge, WA
1999 *Female Gaze*, Perth Centre for Photography, Perth, WA
1997 *Pride and Profligacy*, Perth Centre for Photography, Perth, WA

selected group exhibitions

2011 *Mid West Art Award*, Geraldton Regional Art Gallery, Geraldton, WA
2010 *Joondalup Invitation Art Award*, Joondalup and Ellenbrook Gallery, WA
2010 *Wallpaper*, Gallery Central, Perth, WA
2010 *Artists on the Walkpath*, Maylands Foreshore, Perth, WA
2010 *Diagram*, Junction Gallery, Midland, WA
2009 *Joondalup Invitation Art Award*, Joondalup, WA
2009 *Transient States*, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, Perth WA
2008 *Field Day 2*, Ballidu Art Centre, Ballidu, WA
2008 *Mine Own Executioner*, Mundaring Art Centre, Mundaring, WA
2008 *Sir Charles Gairdiner Award*, Gallery Central, Perth, WA
2008 *CLIP Award*, Perth Centre for Photography, Perth, WA
2008 *Increment*, Ellenbrook Gallery, Perth, WA
2007 *Joondalup Invitation Art Award*, Joondalup, WA
2007 *Phosphorus 15 celebrating 15 years of the Perth Centre of Photography*, PCP, Perth, WA
2006 *Tryst*, FotoFreo Festival, Fremantle Art Centre, Fremantle, WA
2006 *Curtin Staff Show*, Moores Building, Fremantle, WA
2006 *Joondalup Invitation Art Award*, Joondalup, WA
2005 *until there's a cure-remembrance, reflection & celebration*, Perth Town Hall, Perth, WA
2005 *Sir Charles Gairdiner Award*, Church Gallery, Perth, WA
2005 *Joondalup Invitation Art Award*, Joondalup, WA
2003 *Mixed Tape*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, WA
2003 *Joondalup Invitation Art Award*, Joondalup, WA
2002 *Femail: exhibition by women photographic artists in Australia*, Adelaide Festival Centre, SA
2002 *Mnemotech: sense+scape+time+memory*, PICA, Perth, WA
2002 *Joondalup Invitation Art Award*, Joondalup, WA
2002 *Refugee*, Junction Gallery, Midland, WA
2001 *Girls on Film*, Art Gallery of WA, Perth WA

selected professional experience in arts

1998-2011	Polytechnic West	Lecturer
2007-10	Perth Centre for Photography	Exhibition Coordinator
2004-06	Curtin University of Technology	Lecturer
2002	Edith Cowan University	Lecturer
1997	Tracey Moffatt	Videographer <i>Heaven</i>
1988	Tracey Moffatt	Stills Photographer <i>Night Cries</i>
1988	Tracey Moffatt	Stills photographer <i>Something More</i>

selected published articles and reviews

Fernández, Eva	(2009) <i>me-take: Indigenous self-representation in photomedia</i> , [exhibition catalogue] Perth, PCP
Armstrong, Drew	(2004) <i>ArtsTalk</i> , Interviewed for documentary on local artists aired ABC 2005.
Fernández, Eva	(2003) <i>austrALIENS</i> , [exhibition catalogue] Perth, PICA
Snell, Ted	(2003, August 18) <i>Strangers within</i> , The Australian, p. 6
Blond, Simon	(2003, August 2) <i>Confronting views of Australia</i> , The West Australian, p. 13
Sputore, Cara	(2003, July 29) <i>Spotlight on our identity</i> , Guardian Express, p. 13
McGrath, Judith	(2003, August) <i>Alien nation</i> , Xpress, p. 26
Nicholls, Andrew	(2002, November) <i>From local to global</i> , Shout, p. 8
Allen, Elizabeth	(2001) <i>Introducing Western Australian Artists</i> , Crossing Cultures Conference Report, pp. 29-34

selected grants and awards

2010 Western Australian Department of Culture and the Arts, Development Grant
2008 Sir Charles Gardiner Award (honourable mention)
2006 Australian Post-Graduate Award
2006 Edith Cowan University Research Excellence Award
2003 Joondalup Invitation Art Award, Joondalup resort award of excellence

collections

Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, WA
Central Institute of Technology, Perth, WA
Joondalup City Council, Joondalup, WA
Polytechnic West, Midland, WA
Murdoch University, Perth, WA
Charles Sturt University, Albury, NSW



Eucalyptus erythrocorys 2011

