

Edith Cowan: An Extraordinary Woman



EVA FERNANDEZ

2021 ARTIST IN RESIDENCE
PARLIAMENT HOUSE OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA



2021 ARTIST IN RESIDENCE PROGRAMME PARLIAMENT HOUSE OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Edith Cowan: An Extraordinary Woman (1861-1932)

As the invited artist to undertake the 2021 Parliament House Artist Residency in collaboration with School of Arts & Humanities at Edith Cowan University, I have created a series of photographic works acknowledging and celebrating the revolutionary Edith Cowan on the centenary of becoming the first woman to be elected to an Australian parliament.

Through independent research and access to the Parliament's archives I have produced images that recreate narratives of Edith Cowan's journey while acknowledging her bravery, intelligence, and tenacity to become the first women to enter the male dominated domain of Western Australian parliament. I pay tribute to Edith Cowan's struggle coming from an early background of adversity to entering public life without inhibition, particularly given the attitudes and conservative mindset of the time.

My work challenges and confronts the structures of society of the time of Edith Cowan, and the attitudes and obstacles that women have had to overcome in order to attain political and legal representation. One hundred years after Australia elected its very first female parliamentarian, we've come a long way, but it appears there is still a long way to go.

My work also acknowledges the complexities of being a female politician in the contemporary political sphere as reflected in recent incidences of misconduct perpetrated against women within Parliament. My creative work takes form as a series of photographic images which play out narratives in the life of Edith Cowan, but also extend to the experience of other women who have come after her and continue to experience similar challenges.

Eva Fernández



CHILD PROTECTION

Edith Cowan was born in 1861 at a sheep station near Geraldton, the daughter of pastoralist and teacher and granddaughter of early settlers. When Edith was just seven years old, her mother died tragically during childbirth. Subsequently Edith was sent to boarding school in Perth and then to live with her grandparents in Guilford. Both her childhood and young adolescence were shattered by her mother's death as well as the ongoing trials and eventual hanging execution of her father, convicted of the murder of his second wife. In her early adulthood Edith Cowan became involved in community work in women and children's social issues and injustices in the legal system and campaigned for women's suffrage. She succeeded in campaigning for women's rights in parliament, equality within the legal profession and in the family as well as child protection as one of the founding members of the Children's Protection Society. This image represents Edith Cowan's work in the protection and welfare of children and mothers as well as symbolizing her own difficult start to life. In this image Edith can both be seen as the child and the adult, as her childhood experience led her to become committed to social reform to protect women and children.

Child Protection

Parliament House Residency 2021

Giclée prints on Hahnemühle photo rag paper

80cmH x 80cmW

Edition 1/6



ENGAGED

Engaged examines the discourse of gendered architectural space, recognising buildings as social objects in that they are invested with social meaning and social relationships. The kinds of spaces women have access to, or are denied, can either empower or render powerless, with the built environment largely created for a white, masculine subject. When Parliament House was designed and built there was no consideration of women occupying this space. Consequently, when Edith Cowan became the first women member, there were no female toilet facilities. Edith Cowan either had to walk home or alternatively was told to leave her shoes outside of the men's to inform any passersby that the facilities were engaged by a woman. The shoes of this image also represent women's fashion from this time and the laborious task of undoing laces signifying the extra complexities of being a female politician.

Engaged

2021

Giclée prints on Hahnemühle photo rag paper

80cmH x 80cmW

Edition 1/6



A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

This Diptych, with the structures of the staircase and colonnade, refer to the classic essay, *A Room of One's Own*, by Virginia Woolf first published in 1929, with the central theme that every woman needs her own space for self-expression and creativity, something that was permitted to men without question. As women did not have the power of their male counterparts, Woolf believed women's creativity had been systematically stifled throughout the ages.



A Room of One's Own (Staircase)

2021

Giclée prints on Hahnemühle photo rag paper

80cmH x 80cmW

Edition 1/6



A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

In these images a youthful effigy of Edith Cowan walks confidently within the historic, male dominated space of Parliament House. The placement of the figure walking up the staircase towards the light and, standing within the colonnade stoically out looking towards the future, reinterprets and reclaims this space for female presence and represents Edith Cowan's rise to power in Parliament.



A Room of One's Own (Colonade)

2021

Giclée prints on Hahnemühle photo rag paper

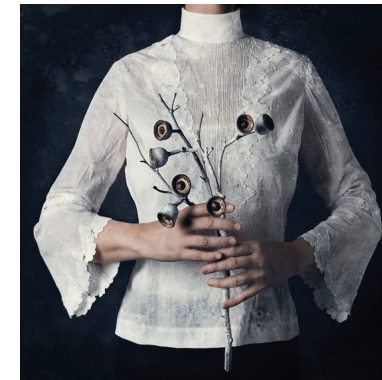
80cmH x 80cmW

Edition 1/6



TOUGH NUT TO CRACK

As a young woman Edith Cowan became involved in issues such as social justice, inequality of woman, and the welfare of disadvantaged groups, as well as actively engaging in numerous organisations and advocating for positive change. As a prominent member of the woman's suffrage movement, Edith Cowan saw women of WA granted the right to vote in 1899. In 1921, Edith Cowan's stood for the seat of West Perth and at the age of 59 won a surprising victory, becoming the first female member of Parliament in Australia. In the face of persistent opposition during her election campaign, referring to the seat of West Perth having been a 'tough nut to crack', Edith Cowan gave small silver brooches to the members of her Election Committee as a token of her appreciation.



Tough Nut to Crack 1

2021

Giclée prints on Hahnemühle photo rag paper

80cmH x 80cmW

Edition 1/6



TOUGH NUT TO CRACK

The brooches featured two gum leaves with a cracked gumnut between them, signifying her success. This symbol of the cracked gumnut has become iconic to Edith Cowan and features on the \$50 banknote made to symbolise that entry into Parliament was a 'tough nut to crack' for women. This diptych presents the hands of a young of female figure holding gum nuts in a struggle to break them. The loss of leaves symbolises the passing of time and challenges which women still face in Parliament today.



Tough Nut to Crack 2
 2021
 Giclée prints on Hahnemühle photo rag paper
 80cmH x 80cmW
 Edition 1/6



SPEAK

Speak references the 17th Century still-life paintings, with artists using symbolic objects to convey the passage of time, communicating worldly pleasures are not everlasting. Here, symbolic images such as the blown-out candle convey the passing of time, in this situation, preparing for a new era with the presence of women within the legal profession. Edith Cowan successfully moved for the passage of a Private Member's Bill to remove women's disqualification for entry into legal and other professions. The text of 'The Speakers' wig box, is partially covered by the branches of gum leaves with only the letters SPEAK visible, symbolizing Edith Cowan's pursuit to have women's voices heard. Edith Cowan was instrumental in giving women a voice in courts of law as legal professionals. In the very front of the image is a cracked gumnut, representing the progress made by this extraordinary woman.

Speak

2021

Giclée prints on Hahnemühle photo rag paper

80cmH x 80cmW

Edition 1/6



1.



2.



5.



6.



3.



4.



7.

Edith Cowan: An Extraordinary Woman (2021)

Giclée prints on Hahnemühle photo rag paper
80cmH x 80cmW, edition 1/6

1. Child Protection
2. Engaged
3. A Room of Ones Own - Staircase
4. A Room of Ones Own - Colonnade
5. Tough Nut to Crack 1
6. Tough Nut to Crack 2
7. Speak



SPEAK



Department of
Local Government, Sport
and Cultural Industries



Parliament
of Western Australia

