



Annie Trevillian, *Haystack*, 2012, digital print on polyvoile, 230 x 200cm; from the *Remnants* series; image courtesy the artist

The Arts Future of the Past

What Still Remains, 2012 Canberra and Region Heritage Festival

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'Do you think we could do this with artists?' We'd been talking about the Canberra and Region Heritage Festival, an annual celebration of heritage in and around the ACT, but a challenge had been put forward: how could the festival's audience be diversified? 'We do tend to get the same demographic,' Heritage officers lamented, 'so it would be good see some new faces, and younger faces.' The response from management was swift and positive. 'Make it happen'. So with that, a new ACT Government program was born: What Still Remains – Fostering Creative Community Engagement in Heritage Places.

In 2007 I was lucky enough to experience first-hand the Port Arthur Project, a powerfully evocative initiative that involved contemporary visual artists creating site-specific ephemeral works at one of Australia's most iconic heritage places. The project, which was a partnership between the Ten Days on the Island Festival, the Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority, and the Tasmanian School of Art, was 'grounded in consultative research and community consultation, collaborative decision-making, and a commitment to the development of genuinely site-specific art work that reflects, interprets and elaborates Port Arthur'.¹ The test of success was set as 'visitor engagement, appreciation, and feedback'.² The latter is important for any government heritage agency or statutory authority, because the core mission is to protect and manage, but increasingly there is emphasis on connections and storytelling in an effort to engage the broadest possible spectrum of the community. In other words, why protect places if communities don't know about them, engage with them, find relevance beyond nostalgia?

The ACT Heritage Unit selected two Heritage Register-listed places for What Still Remains: the Ginninderra Blacksmith's Workshop and the Valley Ruin. Both these places were chosen because they are easy to access by the community, but – interestingly – there is little community awareness about their significance.

The Blacksmith's Workshop can be found in suburban Nicholls adjacent the Barton Highway. Constructed in 1859, it is one of the oldest buildings in the ACT, and is considered to be the only known example of a village blacksmith in the Territory; the last blacksmith to use the Workshop, Harry Curran, retired in the 1940s. The building is located on land privately leased by the Gold Creek Country Club and due to its simple timber and corrugated iron construction has required a program of conservation measures by the ACT Government.

Just ten minutes north of the Blacksmith's Workshop, the Valley Ruin is all that survives of a relatively humble pastoral homestead and associated outbuildings. Thomas and Catherine Gribble settled the Gungahlin area in the 1860s by building a timber-slab hut. To accommodate an expanding family, the Gribbles added a rammed earth – or 'pise' – dwelling sometime between 1874 and 1878, and then a stone dwelling in 1887. The Gribbles left the area in 1912, and the property was lived in continuously until 1964. In the early 1970s it suffered a fire, and the roof was removed for sale, which has resulted in significant degradation of the remaining walls.

In developing What Still Remains, the ACT Heritage Unit established a working group comprising representatives from the ACT Heritage Council, artsACT,

Canberra Contemporary Art Space, and Craft ACT: Canberra Craft and Design Centre. Referencing the Port Arthur Project, the brief required artists to focus on discovering 'concealed histories, untold stories, imagined lives and spaces, architectural remains, and physical traces'.⁵ However, in contrast to the Tasmanian initiative, What Still Remains gave each artist a different and in many ways contrasting site, and the community engagement components were as important as the fine-art outcome. The criteria for selecting the artists focussed on artistic rigour and clarity of vision, innovation and originality, and sensitivity to place. The creative process would need to be based on rigorous research and the sites left intact throughout.

The working group selected Annie Trevillian as the artist for The Valley Ruin site. Trevillian's practice is textile-based but she also works with painting, drawing, screenprinting, photography, and digital technology. During a residency at the Centre for Design and Printed Textiles in Montreal, Canada, Trevillian used a digital printer with fibre-reactive dyes on silk to create new work; this complemented her research in the Canberra School of Art's Inject Research Facility due to its capacity for wide-format digital printing on a range of media, and proved essential in the development of her What Still Remains project.

Titled *Remnants*, Trevillian delivered a finely wrought visual art outcome as well as a suite of community engagement activities. She produced sixteen large prints on poly-voile (a lightweight crisp fabric), which were hung in thematic groups around the Valley Ruin. The community were invited to an onsite artist's talk, at which consulting archaeologist Dr Peter Dowling gave an introduction to the history of the place. Trevillian also hung her work on selected days throughout the Heritage Festival, and approximately 100 people took these opportunities to visit and engage with the artist – and the place – one-on-one.

'With this project,' Trevillian says of *Remnants*, 'I couldn't go in pretending that there hadn't been research done on this place:

It's really helpful that the research is there. And you do have to dig. You have to go to the right people and get the right files. You have to go to different libraries. Because there's been so much written about the Valley Ruin, I didn't try to know everything. Instead, I just picked out bits that seemed important, and then I added my visual layer to it. But when I look at a historical photograph, it's different to how someone else looks at a photograph. Often I'll look at a photograph and think, 'Look at what they're wearing! Look at that hand-knit!'

For her community engagement component, Trevillian held an open day at Megalo Print Studio, which involved participants making a handkerchief using motifs inspired by the Valley Ruin, and she also connected with local school students with refugee backgrounds. As a



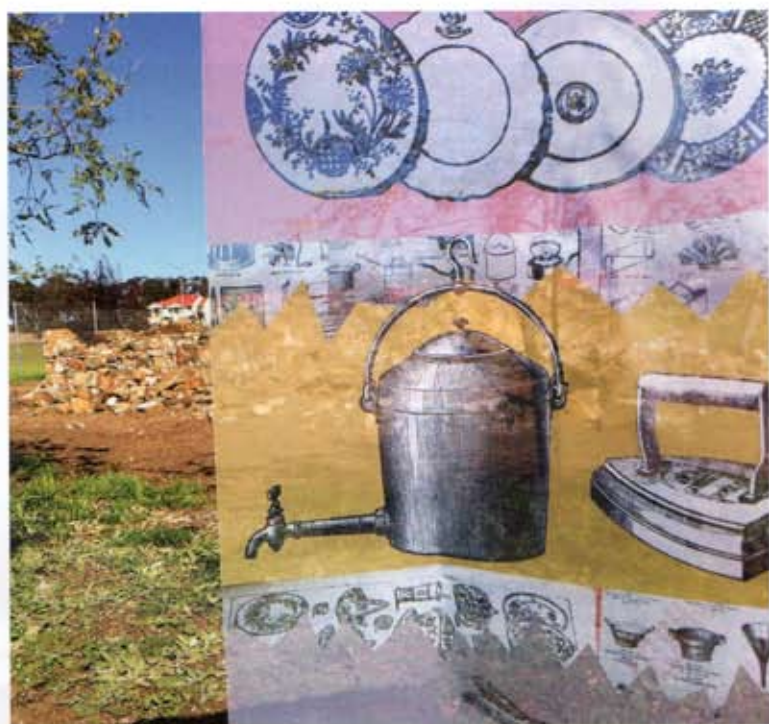
Blacksmith screening event documentation, inside the Ginninderra Blacksmith's Workshop, 28 April 2012; photo: Julia Karrer



Valley Ruin installation, 2012. with (background) *Remnants* digital prints on poly-voile by Annie Trevillian; variable sizes; photo: Steve Keough Photography

result, Trevillian's work has introduced a whole new audience to the Valley Ruin. 'This site was really interesting,' she says, 'because as a long-term Canberra resident, I hadn't even heard of it. But in fact that was pretty common for all the people who came to the various events. There was one fellow who cycled past regularly and he came across because he saw all the artworks and he said, 'I've always thought that this was just a pile of rocks'.

The What Still Remains working group chose Janice Kuczkowski as the artist for the Ginninderra Blacksmith's Workshop. Kuczkowski is a visual artist, curator, and arts worker. Her work has been screened and exhibited nationally in solo and group shows, as well as internationally at the Orebro International Video Art Festival in Sweden and the International Digital Art Awards in Beijing. Kuczkowski's practice focuses on video and photographic portraiture, and recently she has been exploring the idea of community-specific, socially-engaged art, an approach she applied with startling effect to her What Still Remains project, *Blacksmith*. Kuczkowski explains:



Annie Trevillian, *Pantry*, 2012, digital print on poly-voile, 115 x 200cm; from the *Remnants* series; image courtesy the artist



Janice Kuczowski (images) and Joseph Falsone (words), video stills from *Blacksmith*, 2012, high-definition digital video, 17:16min; image courtesy the artists

Because this didn't have a clear, underlying social issue that I was trying to make people aware of, it leaned more towards community-specific than socially engaged. But I still think that it's socially engaged, because my work is about trying to put forward an authentic or raw or vulnerable self. I think there's something really powerful and human in that. In the end, *Blacksmith* was about a story and a community, but I was still able to keep my aesthetic.

At its core, *Blacksmith* was the screening of a seventeen-minute video constructed around poetic monologues developed by ACT writer Joseph Falsone and read by people with connections to the place and local community leaders. However, Kuczowski added a range of other elements to the event: the Workshop was lit in striking colours, the National Trust held a sausage-sizzle, and Stuart Huys from Cultural Heritage Management Australia (who the ACT Heritage Unit had engaged to undertake archaeological investigations at the same time as the What Still Remains program) gave a presentation about his findings. Approximately 110 people

attended, including children, helping to wrap the place in a party-like atmosphere.

For Kuczowski, *Blacksmith* wasn't just about the facts of the place.

We're talking about life, we're talking about emotion. This project was about flesh and blood and life and death, and I think trying to tap into that side of things is more interesting at the end of the day, for me, coming from the artist point of view, rather than the dry facts.

For the ACT Heritage Unit, the What Still Remains project significantly increased the community's awareness of the Ginninderra Blacksmith's Workshop and the Valley Ruin, as well as actively engaged a new and diversified audience, particularly younger people. Through the multidimensional work of Trevillian and Kuczowski, more Canberrans know about these two Heritage-listed places and why they are important to the telling of the broader ACT story, which is timely considering it is Canberra's centenary in 2013. In many ways, Trevillian and Kuczowski became translators and facilitators, allowing the places to continue to tell their own story in their own voice but with the thrill and delight that only artists can bring. As Stuart Huys said at the *Blacksmith* event, 'This has to be the way of the future' – quite an odd thing to hear during a heritage festival from a man who is used to digging up the past.

1. Port Arthur Project: Rinterpreting Port Arthur Historic Site through contemporary visual art, Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania, 2007.
2. *ibid.*
3. *ibid.*

What Still Remains – Fostering Creative Community Engagement in Heritage Places ran as a pilot during the 2012 Canberra and Region Heritage Festival, which had the theme of 'innovation', 14 to 29 April 2012: www.environment.act.gov.au

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