

CITY OF SYDNEY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ART & ARTISTS

Name: Fiona MacDonald

Date: 30 May 2013

Place: Cardigan Street, Stanmore

Interviewer: Deborah Beck

TRANSCRIPT

0.00 **DB:** This is an interview with artist, Fiona MacDonald. My name is Deborah Beck and the interview is taking place in my studio in Cardigan Street, Stanmore. It's the 30th of May 2013. The interview is part of the Art & Artists in Sydney Oral History Project which is being conducted on behalf of the City of Sydney's History Programme.

So I'd particularly like to talk to you today about your work in the City of Sydney collection and any other works completed around the City of Sydney, which seem to be quite a few and I had a read of what you've done. First of all I'd like to just clear up the fact there seem to be two Fiona MacDonalds. Is this correct?

FM: Yes, there are. There's several of us.

DB: Are there – artists?

FM: Yes, but there's another artist who's around the same age as I am who works with photography and at some point we were both put in an exhibition at the MCA and since then our CVs have been combined.

DB: Oh, no.

FM: And only just yesterday I discovered checking the DAAO [Design and Art Australia Online] site that some smart person has done it again, put me onto her site or her onto my site.

DB: Well, I actually read the DAAO so if there's any incorrect things I might have got them from there. There's a few things.

FM: Yes. So there's three of her exhibitions that have been included on mine.

DB: All right. Well, you'll have to correct me if I get that wrong.

FM: It's been as bad as actually years ago I used to get her tax slips and things like that. It's just really crazy.

DB: What a drag. That is annoying, isn't it?

FM: Yes. She does spell her name with a small 'd' now, I think.

DB: I did notice that, yes, so there's a slight difference but not much.

FM: It's not much. I just always figured that eventually people would get that there were two of us but it doesn't seem to have worked.

DB: No. But she's mainly Melbourne-based and you're mainly Sydney-based, I suppose.

FM: Yes. We do have cross-overs. We've met, we know each other and because she works with photography and I work with photography and things that are written about her work sometimes could sound like they could be about my work although we work completely differently with different issues but it's a minefield for young curators.

2.16 **DB: It is, I can imagine. So I'd better get this right. So it looks like from what I've read in the CV that you sent me that you've lived in quite a few different places in Australia yourself. So you were born in Rockhampton?**

FM: I was born in Rockhampton.

DB: O.K. And then you studied art in Brisbane, did your BA in Adelaide and your MFA at COFA in Sydney.

FM: Yes, that's right.

DB: So you've been around a lot?

FM: Yes. Well, not really. As a student went to Brisbane and then as soon as I finished that I went to Adelaide and finished that and then came back to Brisbane fairly soon after that to Sydney, so I've been in Sydney since 1980.

DB: So your main body of work's occurred around Sydney?

FM: Yes.

DB: O.K. So do you think that studying in different places has had any effect on the way you work as an artist?

FM: Probably. Yes, probably. Having come from a rural, regional, very regional background – Rockhampton's kind of the beef capital of the southern hemisphere and redneck town with a really interesting history as well, settler sort of frontier history, that's interesting and I think that's probably ultimately why I find Sydney so interesting is that it's the first kind of point of entry of western civilisation into Australia, which I find fascinating. And from there I worked regionally but the references often come can't be denied that they come back somehow to that first contact in Sydney so that's why I find it fascinating being in Sydney.

DB: So growing up in Rockhampton, when did you first become interested in art?

4.02 FM: I was always interested. It was what I was good at at school and I'd get patted on the head for being slightly ahead of other children so that made me think it was the thing I could do. Rockhampton's like – probably still is – quite a difficult town to live in and it's very practical and the sorts of jobs that you'd look at doing are very practical, like digging up coal or that sort of thing. So I suppose I came from a family that was really although just working class, actually had a strong interest in music and the arts, so I had that kind of home life.

DB: Yes, it helped.

FM: That encouraged me to think there was something else but to be honest I thought you had to be dead to be an artist when I was a teenager. And escaping to Brisbane to go to art school because I was one of the first input flushed through the education system when the fees were lifted in the early '70s, and when student living-away-from-home allowances were instituted and all of that, so I was benefited from those changes, kind of social engineering changes that were really desperately needed in Australia at the time.

DB: Was it a TAFE [Technical and Further Education] course that you did there?

FM: Actually, it was kind of a TAFE. It was the Queensland Technical College system and it was the Brisbane College of Art that now is part of Griffith University but back then I guess it was underneath the technical school so we started at eight o'clock in the morning and we got to draw plaster casts and things like that.

DB: Good So I'll jump to Sydney now because we're mainly covering that period. Was your first exhibition at Mori Gallery or where did you first show in Sydney?

6.11 FM: Yes, first exhibition, solo show, was at Mori Gallery.

DB: And you stayed with Mori for many years.

FM: I stayed for ages. I think twenty five years I was with Mori Gallery.

DB: So it was first at Catherine Street [Leichhardt] and then in the city?

FM: Yes, yes.

DB: And what about now? Do you have a gallery representing you now?

FM: I'm represented by the Cross Art Projects which is a gallery run by Jo Holder who was at Mori Gallery for some time back at some point – it was five years or something.

DB: As an artist?

FM: No, as a curator. She joined Mori Gallery and she was the one who kind of brought photography into the gallery because she'd come from the ACP [Australian Centre for Photography]. It was those years when photography still wasn't really regarded as a kind of fine art so it was

hard to get exhibitions for photographers so she sort of spearheaded that.

DB: So Cross Art Projects in Kings Cross, aren't they?

FM: Yes, it's in Kings Cross in Lankelly [Place] - - -

DB: And do they run as a gallery?

FM: It's a curatorial space and Jo represents me as an artist and I work with her on curation as well so it's just a convenient thing.

DB: It's quite a small space, isn't it, so do you organise shows there?

FM: It's a small shopfront space and, yes, we do, we organise group shows and do projects off site. And I actually developed a practice which was quite off site. When I was at Mori Gallery I made exhibitions off site. The first one was at Elizabeth Bay House in 1989, end of '89, and that was when Peter Emmett was the curator there and he proved – I asked him if it would be possible to do an in-site kind of work at Elizabeth Bay House and he agreed and I took over what was the library – it still is the library but was Alexander McLeay's library so I did a series of collages specifically for that library space.

8.21 **DB: That was the first artist to use the space?**

FM: It was the first time.

DB: Because it's now used all the time, isn't it, for art installations?

FM: Yes, it was the first one. And, yes, there was a gap of a few years and then it became quite a common thing to have artists in that space.

DB: So you actually had Mori representing you but you suggested that you do something there?

FM: Yes, I just was looking at other off site, kind of doing projects that were about places and the specific histories of places and individuals and it seemed like it made sense if the possibility was there to try to do them in the historic place rather than try to transfer into a gallery white box kind of setup.

DB: What did it look like, that show? How did you

FM: It was a really funny thing – I didn't realise at the time – it was right at the time when they were refurbishing and they had decided to scrape back and find what the original colour scheme was. So it had gone from being Leslie Walford [interior decorator] designed space, which was very beautiful but it was comfortable eastern suburbs and from

when I first inspected it the library was library green walls, sort of mint green walls and very sort of staid. And I went away and I was making a collage at the time and I've selected a whole heap of material that sort of had a colour scheme that suited the scheme because I wanted things to actually just sit on the wall so people didn't notice them straight away and then once they'd looked for a little while they'd realise there was this interesting story happening. When I went back a couple of months later they'd scraped back the wall and decided they were going to paint it pale blue.

10.03 **DB: Quite yes.**

FM: Which was better, actually, it looked much better but it meant that I had to really rethink where I was going with the works that I'd done already and so I've made some new things to fit in. I was happier with the outcome.

DB: So were they collages?

FM: So it was essentially collages that had a moulding made that almost based on the kind of mouldings that they'd found for prints and things that they had on display in the space and they just hung on the wall in a traditional way but worked quite well.

DB: And were you still showing at Mori? So what sort of work would you show at Mori in that period?

FM: I've always kind of worked in series and so prior to that I was particularly interested in Paul Gauguin in the Pacific and I had come from this sort of making work that was about collage. It was paper collage but I was gradually getting more and more specific about sources, the source of the material I was working with and what it represented. So I'd gone from being fairly fantastically imaginatively responding to things that were happening around in research into the Pacific and our position in the Pacific as a country to being very specific about moments in time. So just prior to the Elizabeth Bay House I was working with Paul Gauguin and his practice in the South Pacific in relation to where he'd come from and how he had been treated since, art market-wise.

12.00 So it became kind of collecting collectors and in Elizabeth Bay House Alexander McLeay had the biggest collection of insects in Australia at the time so it was sort of a chance to actually play with that idea of collecting and the meanings that are put into collections and that naming of everything and that sort of colonial thing about possession through naming. So that was kind of what that body of work was about.

DB: In 1988 Anne Oxley wrote an article about your work titled 'History through artist's eyes' which was interesting. So do you really feel there's that strong link between art and history for you with your work?

FM: I think so, yes. I've got friends, artist friends, who jokingly call me a history painter. There's a few artists, quite a few artists, a very close friend of mine, Narelle Jubelin, also works a lot with history and has done and I think there is this sort of interest in, perhaps even more so than other parts of the world is that we feel kind of aware of our displacement and how we've displaced. So I think a lot of Australian artists are very conscious of the difficulties of colonialism and displacement of culture and things like that. So, yes, Anne, she's pretty sharp.

DB: She picked up on that. And then I think it was '92 you did a work for the vestibule of the Mitchell Library – it was called 'Honeymoon'.

FM: Yes.

DB: Was that linked to the library or what was that work about?

FM: It was, Elizabeth Ellis was the curator of pictures at the time, and I had approached her about doing a project using material in the Mitchell and they had just taken possession of a large collection of glass plate negatives that belonged to the Dangar family but they hadn't been actually catalogued.

14.09 **DB: That's Anne Dangar, the painter, that we're talking about?**

FM: Yes. The family, it was quite an extensive family, obviously. But they'd taken possession of that but hadn't actually had the chance to do any work on it so it was sort of new ground and she just let me go through it and I realised how important they were as sort of an example of a successful commercial pastoralist family and also that they were right at that moment of Federation and so it was this really interesting opportunity to work with the people who were riding on the sheep's back literally through the wealth but also that that's also what Australia was doing at Federation and made a work that was about that.

DB: That was installed in the vestibule?

FM: That was installed in the vestibule.

DB: The front part of the Mitchell?

FM: Over the Tasman map.

DB: Over it?

FM: Yes. So it was two tables that were made in the shape of boats, little kind of dinghies, and in one of them I made a dress that was modelled on the shape of a dress that was in one of the photographs in their family album and it was made out of pages from the International Treaty Index that I'd found a copy of. So it was really about that kind of relationship of Australia and Australia's wealth in that context of the global commercial world, I guess, and the commercial realities. So they were a glass tabletop shaped like dinghies and the glass had etched onto it a tree that was also from their family album which was called the "Tree at the centre of the world".

16.09

So it was this sort of reference to where they came from in England being the centre of the world and yet they were displaced out into the colonies. But part of that sort of connection that they had through the networks that was kind of the family tree was quite evocative. And the other dinghy had a fleece. I got a beautiful merino fleece and stuffed that under the glass and then above that there was a kind of a sail shape that had woven images of one side a pair of women who were photographed on the family steam launch and on the other side of the sail there were two young men who were also photographed on that same launch at different times but there was this crossover and this sort of relationship and marrying and connecting that was going on between them and I was trying to sort of evoke that in the work.

DB: I wanted to ask you about the weaving of the photographs because I think from the research I've done there's lots of that going on in your work from about that period, was it? Or was it a bit earlier you were doing that?

FM: I think the early '90s I started weaving because I was working with Gauguin.

DB: That Gauguin one came from there.

FM: And I wanted to because I was working with lots of material about Gauguin, lots of reproductions of his work and photographs of his life in the South Pacific but very little actually about the people, the other people in the South Pacific that just happened to be there at the same time, who belonged there, and it was a way to actually get that reference to that culture into the work.

18.05

So it was a very strong layering in that he was transplanted onto, but in fact in my work he was kind of woven into something else that was a bigger, deeper sort of longer living culture.

DB: And then it's come into these photographs in the Mitchell?

FM: Yes. So in the Mitchell it was simply the same again but I changed the weave so that actually they looked like there was a breeze blowing so it had this sort of warp in it that gave it some form.

DB: So how do you actually physically do them? Did you print from the glass plates?

FM: No, didn't print from the actual plates. Did get reproductions of them, photographs of them, and then used those, blew them up and used those.

DB: And do you hand weave them?

FM: Yes.

DB: You do? There's a lot of work in each one, I would think.

FM: There's quite a bit of work in them, yes.

DB: I think they look wonderful. But another one that you did in the city area was 'Port' at the Museum of Sydney and that had weaving in it too, didn't it?

FM: That's right, yes. But then when I realised it was a way to introduce this kind of unrepresented cultural layer as a part of the conversation, I realised I could use it in a lot of different areas. And in the Museum of Sydney I think it was the year after they opened there was this project run by Ricky Subritzky who was the guy who set up the shop that was this beautiful almost like cabinet of curiosity, which is the way the shop was set up originally. And he'd got the permission to use the window boxes on Phillip Street to do an art project and he'd lined up a kind of programme for that.

20.02

And I was part of that and had a beautiful vitrine made, and I made like a Maori kete shape that fitted into the vitrine, but it was made from posters they used to advertise the first show at the Museum of Sydney that had a beautiful big image of Balloderree [?] from the British Museum and I wove against that an early reproduction of a lithograph of Sydney, the port of Sydney. So the work was called 'Port' but there was this reference to kind of indigenous culture in the Pacific and that colonial trading kind of thing that was happening as well.

DB: So the double image I really like that. You look twice to see. It takes you a while to get both images.

FM: You get it straight away but they're also kind of slow because you pick up details over time. And the two windows beside originally I wasn't going to be in but the other people who were going to be in those spaces had pulled out or it had been rearranged and so I had those spaces as well. And I made another weaving from the same material and we pushed it up against the glass so it looked like inside the museum was all this sort of layer of weaving. I thought it looked really good.

DB: Great, yes. With works like that, do you get commissioned to do them or do you put a proposal in?

FM: That was a kind of commission; he approached me. I had been involved earlier because I had been asked to do a little postcard, promotional postcards for the museum. And what I had done is actually for the first time made a digital file for a lenticular postcard.

DB: What's lenticular?

FM: It was those ones that flicker, flicker cards. The brief was to make something that could be used as a lenticular postcard but it also needed to be about the history of Sydney.

22.08

And I decided that it would be really interesting to use weaving again and because it was lenticular and you go the flicker, so you got two sides of something I thought that way you can get the two sides of the weaving because with weaving you lose half of it that's covered by the warp or the weft. So I thought this would be an opportunity to do two weavings so you got the absolute complete image in the layering process so that when the card flickers your mind's actually getting all the material. And so I used Balloderree again – or this had been earlier; I used the image that they had of Balloderree which they had permission from the British Museum to use, and I used a beautiful portrait of Elizabeth Macarthur as well. So we made this kind of composed third being which was this woven together western European woman against Aboriginal man which actually was quite exciting in a way. It was this sort of frisson of something that was a kind of a reality that has happened to us over the generations of the sort of melding of culture and our genes have got mixed up and stuff like that. But this was a first point where Balloderree had a business with a canoe in Parramatta so you had this sort of like business happening in western Sydney and Elizabeth Macarthur had this kind of business which was much more successful and given a lot more breaks but there was this sort of relationship between them because their time overlapped.

24.04 And the other work I made was with the first nine governors woven against Colbee, so you could see this sort of image of the governors and this sort of shadowy outline of Colbee as kind of quite a strong shadow over the early government.

DB: What happened to those works - did they stay in the museum?

FM: Well, because they were digital the actual work was their postcard.

DB: It did become a postcard?

FM: Yes. So it was a digital file and it was made small so it wasn't actually made initially as an artwork that was processed that way. It was digitally sent off to China and printed as a postcard so there were thousands of them. I think they've probably - - -

DB: Still got them?

FM: Probably. Yes, I did make some after that just to see what they'd look like as a standard size and I think they've ended up in Macquarie Bank or somewhere like that.

DB: Good. In a collection somewhere would be good. So the first big piece you did, the basket one, did that end up anywhere?

FM: That went to the National Gallery.

DB: Great. It's fantastic if those works go into collections because more people see them, of course.

FM: That's right, yes.

DB: They have another life.

FM: Yes.

DB: So then came Palimpsest at Customs House.

FM: That's right. Sally Couacaud was the curator and she sort of convinced – I guess it was Frank Sartor [then Lord Mayor of Sydney] and the city council to do an art walk. But that was on the cards, an art walk, but the thing that I was asked to do it was advertised in the Sydney Morning Herald as an opportunity for artists to do an artwork for Customs House refurbishment. So I won it and it was like a competitive thing.

26.07 **DB: O.K. You had to put a proposal in?**

FM: I had to put a proposal in and go through that process of winning and then working out how - - -

DB: What you're going to do.

FM: Well, because it's that thing with public art where it has to exist in the real world and there's all these issues that you're not necessarily aware of or even the people commissioning aren't aware of at the start about what they really need out of a work. But it was originally going to be a glass path that led through the building and a ramp at the front that led through the building, through those tiles in the foyer which they were going to try and take out because there was an issue with some of the symbolism in the old tiles, and then take it right up to the back wall where they were going to have the big escalators. So that's what I won, it was 'Gold', and I'd worked out how to print onto glass, etch the glass and glaze the glass and it was going to be fabulous because it was like Customs was where all the money had come, the point where the gold and the wealth of Australia at some point has some sort of relationship with Customs. And so the other layer of wealth is also the culture and so I was acknowledging the indigenous culture and using imagery that I'd got permission for from the Lands Councils and also images from the Customs Service so it was also historically related to the Customs Service over the years. But then someone in one of the meetings when I finally got through the hurdle and everybody loved it except some guy said "We can't have gold on the ground because it will blind people" because it would shine.

28.07 **DB: Shiny, yes.**

FM: Even though I'd knocked it back because it was a very heavily etched surface because you needed to be able to walk over it, it needed to have good grip and that was a lot of text from the Customs Service archives and stuff.

DB: How frustrating.

FM: Yes.

DB: So what did you end up doing there then?

FM: So the tiles got pushed to the side so they just became the side of the ramp and you couldn't walk on them. The tiles that were the historic marble inlay tiles in the foyer were left there because they decided that the symbolism was - - -

DB: Not so bad.

FM: - - - not so bad and it didn't go into the building so it was reduced substantially.

DB: So no gold?

FM: The gold actually became what I used to apply the symbols and then I had a white glaze put on the back. It actually was quite nice; it looked like sand. You know, as you walk around the harbour you see where the water's lapping over the sand you get this lovely green; it was like that.

DB: So that was commissioned by the Sydney City Council, wasn't it? So is that a permanent work – how long did it stay there?

FM: No. I had to sign over and say that it would last twenty five years and then I went to live in Detroit for two years and when I came back they wanted to take it up because I think the design of the building just wasn't working for them so they had to actually rethink the entrances to the building and things like that.

DB: Yes. They've changed over the years a lot, hasn't it.

FM: So I think the plaque for the work is still up on the wall but the tiles we had to take them out. So the tiles would be in storage somewhere at the City Council.

30.02 **DB: So that work basically has images and text and pattern and all sorts of different things so obviously the name Palimpsest really suited it very well.**

FM: Yes, it was.

DB: Is the use of text really important in your work? It seems to be from what I've seen.

FM: I think a lot of the times it has been. Because I work with existing historical documents, usually images, a lot of things aren't photographed or there hasn't been an image so it's a text that relates to the history. So that's when I use the text.

DB: Do you make it readable so people can read it?

FM: It wasn't readable in that work. It was really layers and layers of text so it looked bureaucratic because it was about the Customs Service.

DB: But other words are readable?

FM: Yes. I've got more selective over time and jumping forward to 2010 the work that the City Council has, the 'Native Stranger' has text. So there's this binary text that has English and the Eora word with the same meaning in the background of the work. And with that body of

the prints that the council has, at the same time I made another group of work using similar sort of material that was fourteen photo-based prints that were landscape images of Kurnell and that first landing point of Cook and that first interaction and I used quite a bit of text that came from those days, things from Cook's journal and other journals but also reports of what Indigenous people like Maroot for instance reported were being said by his people at the same time so there was this sort of layering.

32.13 But then also I've got permission to use a phrase of Kevin Gilbert's and there's Marcia Langton and so there's this sort of text, phrases, specific phrases that refer to that work.

DB: So I might go onto that one, actually. So it's in the City of Sydney Civic Collection. Did you know the council had a collection?

FM: Not really, no.

DB: That's interesting. And how did it actually happen that the work was acquired?

FM: Well, I had actually met Margaret Betteridge [Curator, Sydney Town Hall collection] because I had done with Jisuk Han, who I met originally at the Museum of Sydney, who's a 3D designer architect, really creative driving force, and she works occasionally with Margaret on varying projects, so I had met Margaret through Jasook and then Margaret made me aware that there was a collection.

DB: And did she see the work in an exhibition or something?

FM: Yes, those prints were shown at the Cross Art Projects Jo curated which used that work and also the work of Mulkun Wirrpanda from Yirrkala so there was sort of two. My work was about water and Sydney and people meeting, and Mulkun's work is about water to Blue Mud Bay and the water there and telling a story to non-Indigenous people about ownership of land and relationship to water and land. So that's, I think, where Margaret might have seen that work initially.

DB: So can you just describe the work, the collection?

34.03 FM: It's a seven part artwork of reasonably large prints – they're digital prints – and it relates to an artwork that I did for the International Airport Transit Lounge B on the airside.

DB: At Mascot?

FM: At Mascot for 2000, the year of the [Sydney] Olympics. So for people who were leaving after having visited Australia they would see on the

wall – it was twenty six metres long; it was a bulkhead in one of the transit lounges – they would see this, the ribbon shape of the coastline from Rose Bay to Botany Bay which is what you see if you happen to be sitting on the left side of the plane as you take off. So it was that shape of the coastline and interposed over that were shapes, silhouettes that related to the history of that area. So it was Banks, Joseph Banks [botanist with Cook voyage], a funny caricature. There was kind of a humourous thing happening and I'd found a really amazing image of Joseph Banks as a caricature of him called the 'Dandy Macaroni', or something like that that's in the National Library, where he's sort of very dandyish but his leg's completely wrapped up in bandaging because he suffered from gout so he's like a slightly amusing character, and an Aboriginal man that was also an image from the Mitchell, who had a spear and was very laconically handing a fish to someone. It was like "You can visit. You're welcome to come here but please don't stay", you know, "We'll give you something to eat but you've got to go. Don't hang around".

DB: Don't stay, yes.

FM: And there was an image that I liked to call my Barangaroo [powerful Indigenous woman in early Sydney] who's the woman in a little boat, in one of those little 'nowees', canoe, with a baby in her arm and a little fire and a fishing line in the water.

36.12

So out of these kinds of images I made a silhouette that was cut out of aluminium. So most of the shapes are like one metre up to two metre in general sort of size and they were inserted along this bulkhead. So I had also the little 'Etruria', the little ship in the background of Wedgwood's Sydney Cove coin, his funny little ship that was sailing in, and a picture of the Ella [prominent Indigenous rugby union family] children meeting the French Consul General in 1964 down at La Perouse. So there were these – Snake Man from La Perouse and xanthorrhoea [Australian plant] and some cockatoos - but all referenced from existing archives and with very specific histories. And then a layer of text as well which was the two languages and the Eora words for new things that they'd encountered when the settlers and the colonists came, and also the text that Cook wrote in his journal at Botany Bay, about people who live in complete kind of paradisiacal existence and don't need anything, and seemed to have a wonderful life kind of way that he had made this reference about how he saw the life of the Indigenous people in the east coast of Australia at the time, as a kind of a double-edged thing.

DB: Yes. There's just a huge amount of research you do for each work by the sound of it.

38.03 FM: Oh, it's really slow.

DB: So you go

FM: Yes, but for that project, because it was a public art project, there was some funding. I worked with a 3D designer who we could sort of solve the construction issues with, and Jo Holder on that project had actually worked as the kind of historian. So usually when I do a project – after the Customs House I thought “This could be really good if I had more resources” and I could really do something that had more depth and more knowledge base. So after the Customs House I made a project with Kathryn Grant, KFG Design, at Bondi. ‘Time Walk’ we called it and it was thirty two rondels that were history of place and then we had an historian, Melanie Karis [?], working with us on that.

DB: So you get an historian to give you some information or do research, do you?

FM: So I thought “Well, what we need to do is if there's a certain amount of money available for the project then it would be really good if we could actually divide it up and employ people who could do different things” so I could say “Well, I'm really interested in this particular area” and get some assistance in actually doing the research because otherwise you just take forever to complete the work. So that was a really nice way of working.

DB: And how does the Mascot [Sydney Airport] one link to the one in the City [of Sydney] Collection?

FM: Well, that work came down again too, it's come down because they've extended. And we had kind of a legend which explained all the different elements in the work that was on display in the terminal and Jo Holder was on my case about “It's come down. You've got no record. Why don't you do something like publish it somehow”.

40.07 And I thought “Well, I'll make a print so I'll do this print that's about it”. So it's different but the same, using the same material and making it more accessible in the sense that it's a print that can go into a collection or whatever. And so instead of a blue anodised aluminium coastline I made a red fabric shape that followed the coastline and used a background that's a photograph of the sea from Kurnell and then there's this sort of shadowy silhouette repeat pattern in the background as well. And so it's probably more dense than the original sculpture was visually but it works in a different format in a way.

DB: And that's the one that's got text across? Do they work as a panel, the seven works?

FM: Individually they stand alone which is the way I always try and work. Although I try and work in series I'm aware that no one can usually buy the whole set so I have to make work that stands alone individually. So they work individually on their own but as a group they make a long kind of frieze that is that coastline with that layer of history over it.

DB: So how would you feel about where the council would hang it or do you feel like you'd like to have a say in that?

FM: I'd like to be included but it's not necessary, really. I think that it would be nice if it was all hung in a set but if it's not then they were designed to work individually.

DB: That's good. So does this work sort of fit in with your ideas about social and cultural identity? That theme seems to be going through your work.

42.06 FM: That's really important. It's like "Who are we? Where are we going?"

DB: Yes, all that.

FM: "Where have we been and where are we going and can we take all this into account? How do we deal with all this information in a way that's really useful for making decisions about the future?" I think that's important as well. And so that's kind of the most recent purchase by the council, I think, has been the Green Bans work from the Green Bans Art Walk and Exhibition project of – when was it – 2011.

DB: Yes.

FM: And at this time when you see the work of the early '70s which is actually the work that the BLF did and those activists did at that time is really important for shaping how Sydney looks and why we've got some of the beautiful buildings that we have and some of the open spaces that we have is because there were battles fought back then. And so I just thought that it would be really kind of timely to make some work, my effort, to bring that knowledge to the current generation. Because my daughter's like twenty three and no idea.

DB: Wouldn't even know what a Green Ban was, never heard of that

FM: Yes. But we had a lot of young people involved and interested and they were just like "Wow. Really?" because I suppose also they're so interested in defunct technology and there's this interest in what's

happened before and the quaint things that we did in the '70s. But to actually be able to layer into that knowledge about all those funny things that we used to do, the reality of fighting to hold onto things for future generations which are now enjoying them you think "Well, it didn't just happen. It was a battle".

44.14 And that's the thing for young people now. My own daughter's really interested in environmental issues and it's kind of like an encouragement to young people too to say "Right, O.K. Well, you might have to actually break a few eggs to make the omelette. Really think about the future". It's something that you have to actually care about, future generations; otherwise it doesn't exist.

DB: It's called 'Local Studies 3'. Where did the project come from?

FM: Yes. I've been working on local studies projects, different projects in different places and it's probably a bit of a clumsy name but the local studies angle is really important to me. I'm only using material that's available to everybody and it's just that I interpret it my way but it's accessible. Usually the material that I use is accessible because it's in municipal collections, in library collections in the local study corner in the filing cabinet with clippings. And so, yes, I had done a project in Rockhampton years ago that was about that local history up there and I keep returning to the home town to do more work along those lines. And I had done a project in Wollongong as well using the local municipal library collection. That was about the union movement in Wollongong and May Days and that sort of group struggle and so that fell into that category.

46.01 **DB: So where did you do the research for the Green Bans – when was that?**

FM: It was in Sydney Trades Hall, the Trades Hall Collection in the Mitchell [part of NSW State Library] and a little bit down in Canberra at the National Library. And once again assisted by Jo Holder who's got quite a vast knowledge of that kind of area as well so a pretty amazing resource to have on my team.

DB: Do you involve people like Jack Munday – did you talk to him?

FM: Yes, yes. He was fantastic because we approached Big Fag Press and we knew they'd just taken up residence down in - - -

DB: What are they called?

FM: Big Fag Press. Big Fag Press is this big Swiss pre-press press for doing rapid checking. They're out of date now – they bought it for fifty

dollars – but it functions as this fantastic offset press. And we knew they were moving into the garage at the back of Firstdraft [artist-run space] and we'd met them before and we were interested in where they were going. So we went down and proposed that we do a walk between there where they were going to be and where Jo is up in Kings Cross down through Woolloomooloo and just do it like stations of the cross, down Victoria Street and Juanita Nielsen's place and then the terraces on Victoria Street and then down through Woolloomooloo and come out the other end at their place at Firstdraft Depot.

DB: The Depot, yes. That's like the gallery sort of there, their studio area?

FM: Yes. So they thought that sounded great and that we'd do a map of the walk. So Jo worked with Pat Armstrong from Big Fag Press and designed a map that had all the information about where we were going on the walks.

48.03 It's a really intense amount of stuff. We created a website and I made artwork that was based on material that was about that history as well. And, yes, we went on a couple of preliminary walks to work out what was there, what was important and how we would take groups of people through and Jack Munday came along on the walks with us and he was fantastic. He came on one of the preliminary walks and then he opened our exhibition and then came on another walk.

DB: Great. Because he's eighty now.

FM: Yes, he's in his eighties now.

DB: In his eighties, yes.

FM: We organised a car. Didn't want to take the car. And we went and talked to the old union leaders. Joe Owens was still alive so we had Joe Owens outside the Victoria Street terraces, talking about what it was like for him.

DB: So you had people placed around and took everyone on a walk?

FM: We had stations all the way where we had people who had specific knowledge of an area to talk. So we had Joe Owens. I think we did like five or six walks over a series of weekends and it was kind of handled by Performance Space. They took on the bookings and they were fantastic with just all the logistics. And so we started in Cross Art and there'd be a general talk. So one day we had Wendy Bacon kicking off at the gallery and then taking down and then handing over to Joe Owens and then going down the steps and talking to someone else

who had lived at the time and had been forced out by the carryon of the developers. And then further on we had someone talking about that Tom Uren Square where there's a lovely - I think it's a Margel Hinder fountain that doesn't do the fountain thing but it's a beautiful sculpture.

50.14

Christopher Dean, who's a local Kings Cross art historian/artist, talked there and then we went further on and we had Marilyn Fairskye talk about the murals and we had Michael Dysart talking about his designs for that area, the buildings that he designed for the Housing Commission after the battles had been won and we had Col James as well outside the old tea house. So it was a fantastic opportunity for people to actually see and meet these gentlemen mostly. Col James has died and Joe Owens has died.

DB: So this was only last year, wasn't it?

FM: It was two years ago, 2011.

DB: Two years ago. And your artworks were shown in Cross Art?

FM: So I'd made a series of watercolours and also two prints with the Big Fag Press that were about Woolloomooloo and Victoria Street and the characters.

DB: You mean just from the time the project - - -

FM: So images that collaged together. One was a page out of Brenda Humble's(?) amazing scrapbook and then just photographs. We had the photographer who'd actually photographed - Marian Marrison who'd been invited up from Tasmania at the time in the '70s to photograph what was happening, and they published a little book called 'The Green Bans' and so she had pictures of characters who were alive and kicking and fighting then and she actually presented a series of her photographs down in the Depot Gallery at Big Fag, the Firstdraft Depot.

52.12

Yes, it was an opportunity to pull people in. We had Michelle Blakeney who's a local woman from Woolloomooloo make some photographs, photo project as part of the process as well. Tried to include people; I suppose it was kind of a memorial process. And here's putting a plug in for future. We'd really like to work some sort of Green Plaque process out for Green Ban areas because there were like forty two of them around Sydney. And I know Sydney City Council has several sort of really key places and it'd be nice to have some like historical Green Plaques around.

DB: Yes, of course, just to recognise them, absolutely.

FM: At some point.

DB: So the Council [City of Sydney] bought some of those works, did they?

FM: So the Council bought the two prints and also a series of watercolours which were part of that exhibition at Cross Art that also included artwork that was historic artwork by people who were involved, artists who'd been involved in the Green Bans.

DB: At the time?

FM: At the time, yes. There were a couple of other things that we couldn't quite – there was one that we definitely knew about but there were other ones that there was a little bit of doubt over who had actually done what. So there was an old poster and there was an old poster that we think was made by Margaret Grafton but there's been some dispute about whether she actually did. Yes, so those works went into the collection of the council and I thought that was fantastic.

DB: It's great.

54.00 FM: Because that will really layer in information for people that's kind of not in your face but it's there, it's some recognition that that's part of the history of contemporary Sydney.

DB: And what about plans for the future? Are you planning any work in Sydney now?

FM: Yes, definitely. We want to kick on with the Green Bans thing. I think that would be really good to make some – there was a good portrait of Jack Munday in that group that the council purchased but I thought it would be really nice to also make - - -

DB: A photographic portrait, sorry?

FM: No, it was a watercolour portrait, overlaid kind of portrait, and I'd also like to do a portrait of Col James, him having passed, and Joe Owens and those sort of key figures and also people who were involved in The Rocks. I'm really interested in kicking on that. I'm really interested in the things that people were doing that were community based, really practical community based organisational things like that. The kindergarten that was set up down in Woolloomooloo as well that's still there and things like that, I think they're really valuable and they're under pressure and they mightn't last much longer because they're under pressure and it'd be just really nice to actually acknowledge their existence in a kind of semi-permanent way, in an archival way. I know

some of the material that I worked with for those watercolours someone had found on the tip and had realised, fortunately, what they were and had given them to Trades Hall. So they'd come out of someone's house after they'd died, probably, and there'd been a shoebox full of really interesting photographic kind of stuff.

56.02 **DB: Thank heavens someone was vigilant at the tip.**

FM: You hear stories like that all the time and it's true. People just don't know what to do with it so it's too difficult and then occasionally they get saved and you can turn them into something that sort of makes sense of it.

DB: Well, thank heavens for people like you doing this. It's wonderful. All right, well that's probably all I need to talk about today.

FM: Right, O.K.

DB: Is that good?

FM: Yes.

DB: O.K. Well, thanks so much for that. It's

FM: My pleasure.

Interview ends