



## Trouble in Paradise: *Swelter* - An Artists' Project for the Palm House, Royal Botanic Gardens

Artists: Jackie Dunn, Anne Graham, Tom Arthur, Debra Phillips, Martin Sims, Nigel Helyer, Joan Grounds and Sherre Delys

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by Michael Goldberg

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Jackie Dunn, *Untitled*.

The Royal Botanic Gardens, set in thirty luxuriant hectares on the shores of Sydney Harbour's Farm Cove, is the main centre for enquiry and information relating to the study of botany and horticulture in the state of New South Wales. It is also promoted as a cultural and historical site of some significance. This is appropriate, given that this is the place where seven months after the First Fleet sailed into the Aboriginal Cadigal's *Warrang* (Sydney Cove) in 1788, horticultural and botanical activity, in the European sense, started.

Nine acres of land at the newly named Farm Cove were cleared to establish a government farm. The area was ultimately found to be unsuitable for cultivation with its poor soil and lack of a reliable water supply. Unlike the Aboriginal inhabitants who had enjoyed and used the area effectively for food gathering prior to European incursion, the first colonial farmers waged a constant battle against the elements, inappropriately prepared and hindered by their inability to comprehend a 'hostile' ecological frontier. The site of the first farm is maintained by the Gardens as a historical feature.

The First Farm Display, like every re-presentation of an historic site, draws on the cultural assumptions and resources of the institution that creates it. Decisions are made to emphasise some elements and to downplay others – inevitably to assert some truths and to ignore others.

In 1996 when I first explored the First Farm Display as a potential site for an installation I studied the extant visitor information signboards. I noted the absence of any references to the political milieu, inextricably caught up in the machinations of the British Empire, which had established the foundations of the Gardens. Instead I discovered descriptions of how Settler endeavour had begun to adapt and transform the environment through the use of agricultural tools. Texts and images alongside the manicured vegetable-patches and mini-orchards also detailed the seeds and plants carefully transported by the First-Fleeters from foreign climes. The descriptions, in keeping with the Gardens'



Anne Graham,  
*Violet glasshouse.*

conventions – which ignored Aboriginal languages – featured the formal Linnaean nomenclature. This was a legacy of the empirical approach to nature developed a short time before James Cook and Joseph Banks set sail in the Endeavour in 1768. In the Gardens I even came upon an illustrated panel commemorating the last resting place of the “Scottish Martyr – Joseph Gerrald, leading member of the British Reform Movement, tried for sedition in 1794 and sentenced to fourteen years transportation to New South Wales.”

The Gardens’ myopic and nostalgic views of the site’s history became the catalyst for *Ground Zero*, the installation I presented in *Australian Perspecta 1997: Between Art and Nature*. The work was located, adjacent to the First Farm Display, in the Palm House. This structure is believed to be the oldest surviving glasshouse in NSW, erected in 1876. It was built to display a variety of exotic plants which could not survive outdoors in Sydney, but currently functions as an ‘education centre’ and a venue for the display of flower paintings and related craftwork.

*Ground Zero* attempted to provide a context for the examination of historical amnesia. It functioned as a temporary museum, referencing that most effective of frontier agricultural tools, the firearm. In addition, the installation featured texts gleaned from Europeans ‘on the ground’ in 1788. These texts evoked a more accurate picture of the period directly after landfall. This is an account by William Bradley, First Lieutenant on HMS Sirius: *An officer and a party of men were sent from the Sirius to clear a way to a run of water on the southern side of the bay; the natives were well pleased with our people – until they began clearing the ground, at which they were displeased and wanted them to be gone.*

The *Swelter* project followed on from *Ground Zero* and was also an extension of my curatorial initiatives in other heritage sites in Sydney, particularly the *Artists in the House!* program for the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales. This earlier exhibition featured the work of fourteen artists over a twelve month period, working in Sydney’s Elizabeth Bay House. It was presented as a series of ‘interventions’ examining the presentation of the house-as-museum. The project also dealt with the Trust’s curatorial interpretation of the history of its original residents during the 1830s, the family-members of Alexander Macleay, Colonial Secretary.

*Swelter* comprised eight, month-long site-specific installations at the Palm House, and sought to focus on the socio-historical background and spatial qualities of the location and its surroundings. The works were intended to respectfully disturb conventional perceptions, and to invite a re-appraisal of the notions of both the ‘botanic garden’ and the ‘historic site’.



Tom Arthur,  
*Washington's Palms*.

Artists were accorded free rein, with no curatorial constraints other than to keep to the preservation guidelines set down by the Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain Trust. These considerations focused on maintaining the integrity of the structural elements of the Palm House as well as the surrounding vegetation. The works that emerged were innovative and provocative (and indeed seldom respectful of convention). Principal themes revolved around notions of home, alienation and the uncanny.

The first installation set the tone. Jackie Dunn's untitled work offered the Palm House to the public with its floor deeply covered with straw into which small hollows lined with blankets had been burrowed – shelters eked out of a barren environment. Attempts at finding a secure home within the house of glass were frustrated at the outset by the transparency of the structure. Rough wooden barriers criss-crossed the windowpanes – as if those could prevent the *outside* from becoming *inside*. Two army tents hung inverted from the steel roof-trusses. With their voids exposed, they became becalmed keels; the *right-way-up* instantly became the way *down-under*.

*Glasshouses, even though created in the name of Science, were most often used in the 19th Century as spectacular showplaces for the exotic and foreign – indeed for displaced things: for plants that did not belong, that were away from home.* (Jackie Dunn)

This was followed by Anne Graham's *Violet Glasshouse*, an attempt to seek refuge in the gentility of an archetypal British glasshouse. Barely germinated blue-toned violets and pansies proliferated around orange plastic pools containing gurgling fountains. These resembled bell-shaped life rafts - and they were waterlogged to the brim. The almost soporific calm was syncopated on either side of the Palm House by ensembles of blue folding chairs and milk-crate tables. Blue, plastic curtains did little to temper the unexpected insertion of an Australian vernacular. Bottles of water, botanic reference books on the tabletops and transparencies of moonscapes pasted to windowpanes completed the invitation to sit and rest awhile.

*Glasshouses have a magical quality. They are also containers of worlds within worlds. Glasshouses can provide an exotic environment in a cold, inhospitable place – or the smell of home in foreign places.* (Anne Graham)



Debra Phillips,  
*Untitled*.

Tom Arthur's *Washington's Palms* defied the natural order of things. The installation was viewed through the glass of the locked Palm House door. One could scarcely hope to be able to describe all the elements of the work, or ascribe meaning to them here. Where would this surreal journey begin? With the taxidermied dog, its human skull devoid of a cranium, exposing the petfood-filled cavity? Or for that matter, with

the stuffed dog's feline counterpart, upright on its hind legs, transfixed, clawing at a mutilated portrait and the dog/man with the megaphone. Arthur's work paid homage to the mutability of language and to the beauty of its associative powers.

*The words 'Palm House' reminded me of a Currier and Ives print of George Washington dressed in Masonic Regalia, his palms bared to the fore. There is a species of palm which also bears his name (Washingtonia robusta); perhaps that is the connection. (Tom Arthur)*

On entering Debra Phillips' installation you were transported into the vast expanse of Lake George in the form of a huge photographic print leaning against the back wall of the Palm House. It resonated with the particular uncanny of that inhospitable, yet beautiful, place outside Canberra. There was no invitation to ground oneself – just a sense of melancholy. The marble feet of the sculptures *Discobolus* and *Summer* resting on the Palm House floor had literally been displaced, removed by the artist from the Gardens' 'sculpture graveyard'. Poster-sized images of two types of shoe buckle worn by Captain James Cook were stacked on the floor. The public was invited to take some of these with them.

*The attrition of statues has come from erosion and corrosion, from damage and vandalism and changes in public attitude. Many have long since been removed to languish in the "graveyard", while still others have been dismembered or dispersed. (Edward Wilson, Gardens' historian, cited by Debra Phillips)*

Martin Sims' *Frequency* alluded to the 'supercharged' domains of satellite, radio and television transmissions. From this virtual hothouse atmosphere of electronic particles, dense configurations of general and special purpose antennas hung down from the trusses of the Palm House – a hovering, threatening cloud of low flying backyard battle-stars. An incessant barrage of electronic noise filled the space, seeping through window-frames, startling passers-by with the intermittently recognisable cadences of arcade warfare. This was familiar territory, but not local – rather, global. The sounds were recorded in video game parlours in Tokyo, Kobe and Nagasaki. Electro-magnetic fields finally have us colonised.



Martin Sims,  
*Frequency*.

*... our vision is actually determined by our weight and oriented by the pull of earth's gravity, by the classic distinction between zenith and nadir. (Paul Virilio cited by Martin Sims)*

*Leaven*, Nigel Helyer's installation, stunk. The unmistakable odour of active yeast hit you on entering the Palm House. Depending on the direction of the wind as you walked

nearby, you could be forgiven for thinking that it may be a particular plant species' special ability to so violently offend. Helyer had transformed the glasshouse into an incubator. Nurturing and proliferation were his botanic cues. Sitting on metal-clad trestle tables, huge pots or vats were unable to contain their swelling, crusty tsunamis of sourdough. *Leaven* tread a fine line between the celebration of our staff of life or daily bread – and the horror of uncontrolled microbiological life forms.

*Seeds, like cooking receipts are designed to travel, designed to take hold. In a not too dissimilar manner, human culture is equipped with the capacity and the desire to take purchase on new terrain, to co-mingle (either peacefully, or with violence). (Nigel Helyer)*

Joan Grounds and Sherre Delys' collaborative installation *Familiceae Obligatum* opened just prior to the start of the holiday season. This work was a pastiche evoking memories of family gatherings, particularly the 'traditional' Christmas dinner. An inverted, appropriately frosted fir-tree hung from a Palm House roof-truss, presiding over these dysfunctional, yet somehow convivial family groupings of potted botanic species. Empty containers indicated that participants were yet to arrive. Concoctions of blood-and-bone festered in wineglasses. The Christmas turkey was mocked up from compounded horse-manure and the entire flyblown conglomeration was safely ensconced behind steel-mesh fencing. A hilarious 'Queen's Christmas Message' and other musical fare completed these iconoclastic festivities.



Nigel Helyer,  
*Leaven.*

Surprisingly, after beginning with gusto the initial enthusiasm expressed by the Royal Botanic Gardens Trust for the *Swelter* project soon diminished. Opening hours supervision of the Palm House, the responsibility of the Friends of the Gardens' committee, ceased as its members found the challenge of interpreting the works for the public overwhelming. Chief Executive and Director of the Trust, Frank Howarth, adopted a low profile regarding *Swelter*, later stating that "the project was responsible for considerable and lively debate and discussion among Gardens' stakeholders and regular visitors, in particular the Friends of the Gardens who struggled with the role and relevance of the project to the Gardens." He did concede, however, that *Swelter* "was successful in encouraging the visitation of a new audience to the Gardens whose interests lie more with the visual arts and crafts... this provided the gardens with the opportunity to interpret its role within the community and promote its core business – plants – to a new audience."

Was the project ultimately to be assessed in terms of its effectiveness as a marketing tool? The Trust's rationale was convenient, if somewhat idealistic, and certainly at odds with the intentions of the project which were to question the

rhetoric of the historic site as presented for public consumption.

At the time of writing there's an exhibition titled *The State of the Waratah* in the Palm House. The Waratah is the floral emblem of New South Wales and visitors to the show are urged by the signboard "to be inspired by early prints and drawings of Waratahs and eye-catching contemporary art, including photographs by Max Dupain (circa 1967 – 83), ceramics, paintings and glassware." The tired old nostalgic pitch to the public is evident again and the Palm House has returned to its former incarnation.



Joan Grounds & Sherre  
Delys, *Familiceae*  
*Obligatum*.

But something is different. Something has changed. Gone are most of the original First Farm signboards. The display is now called *Cadi Jam Ora – First Encounters*. The text panels now ask questions such as, "Who were the first Europeans to settle in Australia?" The Military seems to have been neglected, but we are told that seven hundred colonists were convicts; four of them black (no gender given); one hundred and eighty-eight were women; and there were twelve nationalities present. Another question: "How did the Aboriginal people react to the invaders?" No direct answer is given, but there is the acknowledgment that "within less than a year almost two-thirds of the Cadigal had been killed by smallpox, while those that remained were driven inland, far away from their ancestral land..."

Opposite the neat rows of cabbages, broad beans and carrots there are now informally landscaped clumps of indigenous plants – those used by the Cadigal people before invasion. Text panels provide not only common and Linnaean nomenclature, but the Cadigal language has been included as well (if only in a limited manner). Where the indigenous name has not been determined, this has been acknowledged.

Despite all these positive changes the First Encounters Display still has the appearance of a germinating theme-park. The paperbark humpy tied together with bailing wire and the discarded seashells next to its 'hearth' just don't sit right. The Gardens' red sightseeing 'choo-choo train' still motors past the Palm House every fifteen minutes, squawking its potted history, and nostalgic exhibitions like *State of the Waratah* still draw the crowds. As well they might.

But I do feel, that projects like *Ground Zero* and *Swelter*, despite their disapproving or indifferent reception, have in some small way managed to 'respectfully nudge' things on a little. Apart from the Scottish Martyr, Joseph Gerrard that is – he's still there, somewhere under the Banksias.

**Michael Goldberg**  
**2000**

Photo: Jaime Plaza &  
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