

WHY WEREN'T WE TOLD?



TWO TASMANIAN ARTISTS

by Pat Hickman

A long, broad cross of bonnets—a sea of 900 small christening bonnets—is installed in the yard of the Cascades Female Factory in South Hobart, Tasmania. The bonnets are like those worn by European women and infants in the 19th century. Why are they here now, in this place?

From time immemorial, the Aboriginal people of Tasmania lived on the land where tall stands of tea trees were a familiar sight. When Europeans arrived in Tasmania in the late 18th and early 19th century, they brought with them, or made from materials at hand, domestic objects of the homes they'd left behind. What does it mean that a bundle of tea tree sticks stand trapped in a chair frame?

While an artist-in-residence in Tasmania, Australia, in Spring 2008, I found art by **Christina Henri** and **Julie Gough** confronting history head on.

Christina Henri's art installations focus on women convicted of crimes and sent from Great Britain between the 1820s and 1870s. They were shipped to a dumping ground for "undesirables," banished to Tasmania or New South Wales, Australia. Their crimes were mostly petty: stealing a silk handkerchief, a shawl, a blanket, a pair of gloves, a loaf of bread. Caught, they faced the choice of being executed or exiled.

Arriving in Australia, they were named "convict women" in perpetuity, treated as whores, labeled as convicts, and incarcerated in places known as "female factories." The

TOP: **Christina Henri** *Departures and Arrivals* Calico bonnets, head forms, dowels. Installation at Yard One, Female Factory, South Hobart, Tasmania, 2004. TOP RIGHT: **Christina Henri** *Blessing of the Bonnets* Church service/performance at St David's Cathedral, Hobart, Tasmania, 2007. Photo: Josh McDonald. BOTTOM LEFT: **Christina Henri** *Departures and Arrivals* Calico bonnets, head forms, dowels. Installation at Hyde Park Barracks Museum, Sydney. Photo: John Menzies. BOTTOM RIGHT: **Christina Henri** *1000 Bonnet Display* installation. Photo: Josh McDonald.



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women produced goods on site that contributed to the growth of the colony. With good behavior, they could become domestic servants outside of the institution, but often returned pregnant for which further punishment was meted out.

Babies born to these women were taken from their mothers and often didn't survive. According to Henri, out of nearly 1,200 babies born between 1829 and 1877 at Cascades Female Factory nursery in South Hobart, Tasmania, approximately 900 died in infancy. Other researchers put the number as high as 1,148 babies known to have died between 1829 and 1856.

Records document the more than 25,000 convict women sent to Australia, but throughout most of the 20th century, families kept these ancestors hidden, their shame carried down through the generations. Today the stigma is fading as more and more families, including public figures like Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, publicly acknowledge female convicts in family lineage.

In 2004, Christina Henri sent out a call for the descendents of convict women to create plain calico bonnets in honor of their ancestors. Henri supplied the descendents with a colonial bonnet pattern. She asked them to embellish the bonnet with surface design: the name of the relative, some personal expression of their choice, as well as the maker's name on the inside hem.

Making a garment that a convict mother or her baby would have lacked in life and in death has touched a nerve. Families in England, Scotland, Ireland, Denmark, New Zealand, the United States, Canada, and across Australia have responded. Almost daily Henri receives a package containing a carefully created bonnet, sometimes with a poignant story attached. Thousands have flooded in, and her goal is to have one for each of the 25,566 women on record.

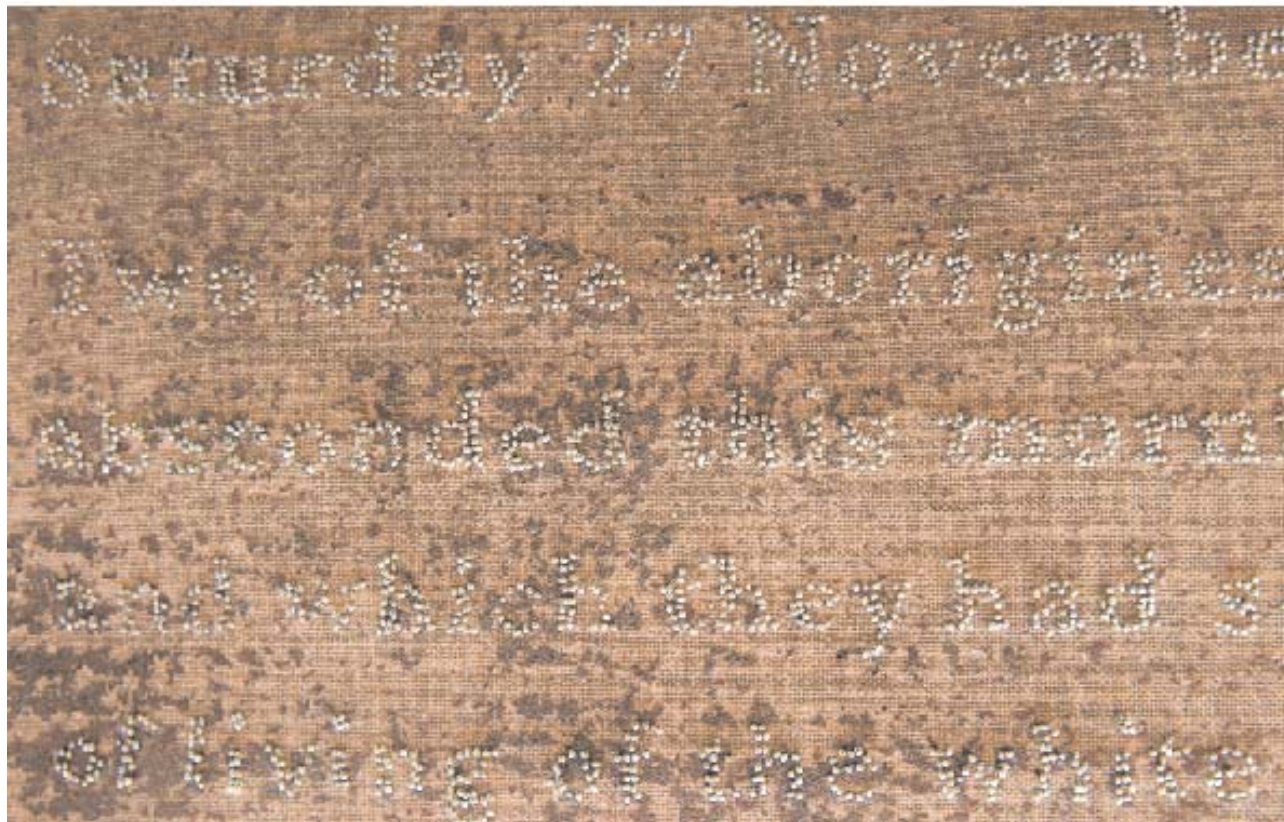
When Henri was searching through death records, she found that the official impersonal term for recording infant births and deaths was "Arrivals and Departures." She chose to reverse the order of the words in the title of her installation of bonnets, focusing on the cycle of the women's journeys from their homelands, from the familiar to the unknown. Installations of these bonnets, made by descendents or sympathizers, have been created at convict sites in Tasmania and in Sydney. The inaugural showing of *Departures and Arrivals* coincided with International Women's Day in 2004 in Yard One at the Female Factory Site, South Hobart. Following its launch, this installation has toured extensively in Tasmania. Exhibition sites include the Ross Female Factory and George Town Female Factory, Port Arthur Historic Site and Hyde Park Barracks in Sydney.

Henri has also orchestrated *Roses from the Heart*, a Blessing of the Bonnets Ecumenical Service at St. James Church in Cygnet and another Blessing of the Bonnets ceremony at St. David's Cathedral in Hobart. She continues to have these events throughout Australia and displays the bonnets in different locations throughout the country.

The history of male prisoners in Tasmania has been recorded and recognized. Port Arthur is a tourist destination and showcase for male convict history, with acknowledged convict contribution to the social and cultural shaping of Tasmania. Very little attention, by comparison, has been given to female convicts as ancestors nor has there been a critical discussion of their roles, both economic and cultural, in building Tasmania. Henri's

JULIE GOUGH *Some Tasmanian Aboriginal children bring with non-Aboriginal people before 1840.* Installation. Found chair, burnt tea tree sticks, 288cm x 80cm x 50cm, 2008. Photo: Jack Bett.
RIGHT: JULIE GOUGH *Head Count* Found chair with brass rods and black crow shells, 85.5cm x 43cm x 43cm, 2008. Photo: Jack Bett.





TWENTY-FIRST CENTURISTS

art is changing that. Her installations of 25,556 bonnets will travel to Europe and North America in 2010-2011.

In 1999 Tasmanian historian Henry Reynolds wrote a book which gives this article its title: *Why Weren't We Told?* The memoir is "a personal search for the truth" about Australian history, a history that for generations sanitized or ignored the violence that was part and parcel of the relationship between European settlers and the indigenous people. During the time that convict women were being shipped to Tasmania, Aboriginals in Tasmania were defending their homeland against the encroachment of ever increasing numbers of Europeans. As recently as the mid-20th century, Tasmanians attending school learned nothing of the 19th century battles, only that there were no Aboriginals on their island. To this day, descendants of Aboriginals are grappling with this assertion and proving it wrong.

Julie Gough's artwork derives from the experience of her Aboriginal ancestors, people removed from Tasmania in the early 1800s. The work focuses on the omitted indigenous story. Gough encourages viewers to question the historic record, to acknowledge the experience of the marginalized and oppressed within colonial settler society. In her exhibition, *Fugitive History*, at the Bett Gallery in Hobart, Spring 2008, Gough explored her family's story. *Head Count* (2008) is constructed from found chairs, brass rods, and crow shells making an abacus. For Gough, the shells represent families forcibly dislocated from the coast. Aboriginal loss is counted—attention must be paid to these missing people, to this lost time.

In *Some words for change* 2008, tea tree sticks pierce through torn pages of inaccurate history, from the book *Black War*, published in 1948 by Clive Turnbull.

Gough reads hills and roadways, mapped and charted paths, as much as library texts and archives. She researches magistrate reports, newspaper accounts, government documents, and baptism records of Tasmanian Aboriginal children (property) living with non-Aboriginal people from the early to mid 1800s. In *Some Tasmanian Aboriginal children living with non-Aboriginal people before 1840* (2008), the confining skeletal structure of a found chair is filled with a bundle of burnt tea tree sticks. Gough's writes about this work:

"...I have a list of 209 children, including one of my ancestors...compiled over the past decade. I am now trying to piece together their lives, their locations, their longevity... This artwork

consists of unfinished tea-tree 'spears' held within the framework of an old chair, whose legs are burnt... These spears each have a section peeled away to reveal the bare wood into each of which I have burnt the name of one of these lost children... The chair holds the children captive, but together, united. The chair might represent home for some, but is here performing an unnatural act, almost lion-taming in its desperate rendition of domestication, of control."

Incident reports (2008) is based on carefully researched incidents against Aboriginal people up to 1831. A Tasmanian oak bookshelf is filled with reference books, but they are solid, burnt, Tasmanian oak and will not open. Book titles make reference to site names or to names, such as "Ben Lomand," for Aboriginal children who were baptized and recorded in church records.

The chase 2008 is a found leatherette chaise lounge, representing the comfortable upper class life of white settlers in Tasmania. Its surface is pierced by tens of thousands of steel pins, the heads spelling out words. The text is a report in the *Hobart Town Courier*, November 27, 1830, of the attempted escape of two Aboriginals. It ends with these words: "The blacks made every effort to escape. Several persons at work in the bush fled at the sight of them. Nothing can tame them."

The history of Tasmania is an elusive, concealed story. Gough's personal journey as an artist is one of facing this history, unraveling it, slowly comprehending colonial contact and its meaning. Through her work, viewers may realize their own proximity to or complicity in this complicated past.

The works of Christina Henri and Julie Gough raise questions, locating stories within the documented version of a forgotten past, giving voice to those who have been silenced. The challenging work of these two Tasmanian artists, separately yet together, cries out: *Why Weren't We Told?*

I am indebted to both of these artists for our conversations and communication and to Julie Gough for written statements about her own artwork and to Christina Henri for the loan of her MFA thesis, *Redeeming Memories: A Visual Investigation into the Lives of Convict Women*, University of Tasmania, Hobart, August 2007.

—Pat Hickman is a studio artist living and working in New York, president of the Textile Society of America. An Artist-in-Residency Program took her to the University of Tasmania, Launceston, February-April, 2008. To learn more about Christina Henri's ongoing installations, e-mail her at cjhenr@gmail.com; Julie Gough's work is available through Bett Gallery in Hobart: dick@bettgallery.com.au.

TOP: JULIE GOUGH *Some Words for Change* 33 tea tree sticks, paper, plastic, wax, approx. 120cm x 300cm x 220cm, 2008. Photo: Jack Bett
 BOTTOM: JULIE GOUGH *The Chase* Detail. Found chaise lounge, leatherette, steel pins, 97cm x 182cm x 52cm, 2008. Photo: Jack Bett.