WHY WEREN’T WE TOLD?

TWO TASMANIAN ARTISTS

A long, bread cross of bonnets—a sea of tiny 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 18th 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 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 left behind. What does it mean that a bundle of tea tree sticks stand trapped in a chain frame?

While an artist-in-residence in Tasmania, Australia, in Spring 2008, I found art by Christina Hardt and Julie Gough confronting history head on. Their textiles installations focus on women convicted of crimes and sent from Great Britain between the 1830s and 1870s. They were shipped to a dumping ground for “undesirables,” settled in Tasmania or New South Wales, Australia. Their crimes were mostly petty, stealing a silk handkerchief, a shirt, a blanket, a pair of gloves; a lost of bread. Caught, they faced the choice of being executed or exiled.

Arriving in Australia, they were named “convict women” in severely treated as whores, labeled as convicts, and incarcerated in places known as “female factories.”

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.

Robert born to these women were taken from their mothers and often did not survive. According to Henri, out of nearly 1,200 babies born between 1829 and 1879 at Cascades Female Factory in South Hobart, Tasmania, approximately 600 died in infancy. Other researchers put the number as high as 1,148 babies known to have died between 1829 and 1839.

Records document the more than 25,000 convict women sent to Australia, but throughout most of the 19th century families kept their ancestors hidden, their shame carried down through the generations. Today the stigma is falling as more and more families, including public figures like Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, publicly acknowledge female convicts in family lineage.

In 2008, Christine Henri sent out a call for the descendants of convict women to create plain calico bonnets in honor of their ancestors. Henri supplied the descendants with a colonial bonnet pattern. She asked them to embellish the bonnet with surface design: the name of the relative, some personal connection of their choice, as well as the mother’s name on the inside hem.

Making a statement that a convict mother or her baby would have tucked 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 personal story attached. Thousands have flooded in, and her goal is to have an accurate bonnet for each of the 35,556 women on record.

When Henri was searching through death records, she found that the official impersonal form for recording infant births and deaths was "Infant and Dependent." 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, to the familiar to the unknown. Installations of these bonnets made by descendants or sympathizers have been created at convict sites in Tasmania and in Sydney. The inaugural showing of Dependent and Infant coincided with International Women’s Day in 2004 in Yarralumla at the Female Factory Site, South Hobart. Following its launch, this installation has toured extensively in Tasmania. Exhibition sites include the Rose Island Female Factory and George Town Female Factory, Port Arthur Historic Site, and Hyde Park Barracks in Sydney.

Henri has also orchestrated tours tied to the Punchbowl of the Bonnets: An Experiential Service at St. James Church in Edinburgh and another -stitching 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 female prisoners in Tasmania has been recorded and reimagined. Port Arthur is a coastal destination and showcase for male convict history, with acknowledged convict contributions to the social and cultural shaping of Tasmania. Very little attention, by comparison, has been given to female convicts as ancestors. Yet there was a critical discussion of their roles, both economic and cultural, in building Tasmania. Henri’s...
The act is changing fast. Her installations of 25,156 bone boxes will travel to Europe and North America in 2010-2011.

In 1997, Tasmanian historian Henry Reynolds wrote a book which gives this article its title. "Who Were We Sold?" The memoir is a personal search for the truth about Aboriginal history, a history that for generations sanitised or ignored the violence it was part and parcel of the relationship between European settlers and the Indigenous people. During the time that cannot women were being shipped to Tasmania, Aboriginals in Tasmania were fighting their homeland against the encroachment of wave after wave of European settlers. As recently as the mid-20th century, Tasmania had a no school incentive 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 her experience of her Aboriginal ancestors, people removed from Tasmania in the early 1800s. The work focuses on the continued Indigenous story. Gough encourages viewers to question the historical record, to acknowledge the experience of the marginalized and oppressed within colonial settler society. In her exhibition "Lapsing History", at the Bait Gallery in Hobart, February 2006, Gough explored her family's story. She found information from family records that related to her ancestors. The exhibition "Lapsing History" is a collection of personal stories from the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. The exhibition explores how the history of the Indigenous people is often hidden or overlooked.

The show was a ground-breaking exhibition, presenting the uncomfortable truth of child removal and forced removal of Indigenous children. It is one of the most significant exhibitions on the history of the Indigenous people. The exhibition "Lapsing History" is a collection of personal stories from the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. The exhibition explores how the history of the Indigenous people is often hidden or overlooked.

The history of Tasmania is an unknowable, concealed story. Gough's personal journey as an artist is one of facing this history, unraveling it, discovering the colonial context and its meaning. Through her work, viewers may realize their own participation in the continuing history of the Indigenous people.

The words of Christina Hotle and Julia Gough are significant, offering a voice to those who have been silenced. The challenging work of these two Tasmanian artists, together, raises important issues about the future of Indigenous people.