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An archaeology of tapestry: contexts, signs and histories of contemporary practice

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AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF TAPESTRY:

CONTEXTS, SIGNS AND HISTORIES OF CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for
the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF CREATIVE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

DIANA WOOD CONROY

B.A. (Hons)

FACULTY OF CREATIVE ARTS

1995



CERTIFICATION

I certify that this work has not been submitted for a degree to any other university or institution, and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by any other person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

Diana Wood Conroy

11 January 1995

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ABSTRACT

The relevance of archaeological theory to contemporary craft, both through the discipline of academic investigation, and through an autobiographical voice in art practice, is the subject of this study. The sense of place, both classical and Aboriginal, is explored through letters and diaries from Greece in 1967 and from Bathurst Island in the Northern Territory in 1974.

In bringing archaeological theory to bear on contemporary tapestry and textiles the principal finding is the pertinence of a faceted materiality, visuality and textuality, in exploring the cultural meaning of a work. The profound differences between the two areas of tapestry and textiles are brought out by an analysis not only of the objects themselves, but also of the documents - the craft journals of the 1970s and 80s - that position them within the spaces of contemporary art/craft. This study provides a critical structure that locates tapestry and textiles between the inarticulate tactile characteristics of 'semiotic' fibre, and the coherent visuality of the 'symbolic' Fine Arts.

Archaeology excavates the un-imagined and brings it into consciousness. The fragmentary objects of the past examined here are the classical collections of the Nicholson Museum in the University of Sydney and the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. This study demonstrates that the relationship of the past to the present is a matter to be continually reassessed, both through academic research and art practice. The two exhibitions documented, *Archaeologies* and *Unwritten Country* open up connections between archaeology and Aboriginality, tapestry and drawing that interrogate fixed hierarchies of past and present.

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