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A Speculative Venture: Contemporary Art, History and Hill End

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A Speculative Venture: Contemporary Art, History and Hill End

Writing in his diary on 2 January 1949, Australian artist, Donald Friend (1915–1989), describes the events of the night before:

Last night there was an impromptu dance — I should say a drunken Breughel peasant romp — at the hall to celebrate the New Year. It was improvised suddenly on the spot by those who had not been invited, and were furious at being left out, to a dance in Sofala, to which the lucky ones went in a bus. Later they went round the village gate-stealing... . (Friend 633)

Friend writes from Hill End, an old gold-mining town about 300 kilometres west of Sydney and the dance took place in the 1890s Royal Hall. He first travelled there in August 1947 in the company of fellow artist, Russell Drysdale (1912–1981). The remnants of the gold rush — architectural grandeur, a scarred landscape, abandoned machinery — a small rural community, and cheap property prices provided the perfect location for Friend and his wartime friend and erstwhile lover, Donald Murray, to realise a dream of establishing themselves in the country.

A town character showed us round an old ruined village living in the memory of its former 50,000 inhabitants — and the fabulous tales of gold strikes. Now there are only a handful of rather sordid, jovial mad peasants who live by fossicking and rabbiting ... six rooms for 5/- per week ... the country, a garden, chickens and fruit trees and so on... . (538)

Friend found Hill End a captivating place to live and work for several years. Drysdale visited regularly and his Hill End works have come to occupy a central place in the canons of mid-twentieth century modernism in Australia, reinvigorating the nationalistic bush myth in the process (Haefliger 11; Hughes 67–68; Wilson 21–24). A flow of painters followed Friend and Drysdale through the 1950s, '60s and '70s: to visit Hill End was almost a rite of passage, and landscape the dominant theme.¹ The artists who spent time there in the 1950s are often referred to as the Hill End Group, and the town an artists' colony. The 1994 Art Gallery of New South Wales travelling exhibition, *The Artists of Hill End*, brought this artistic heritage to wide public attention, sealing its image within Australian modernism and refocusing artists' attention on the site's painting traditions.

In contrast to the focus on depicting a quintessential Australian experience which has dominated both the reception of modernist art from Hill End and the



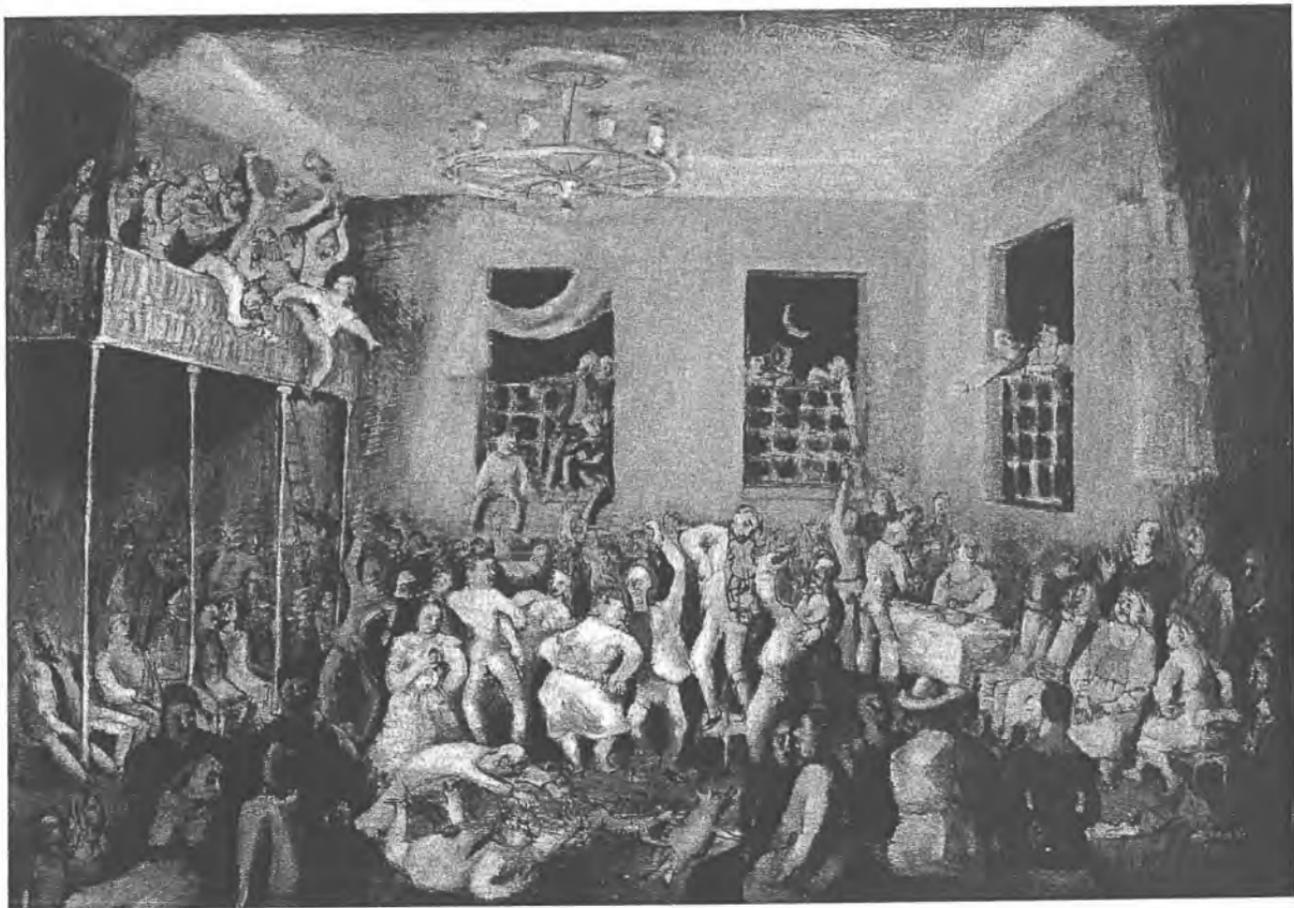
Russell Drysdale, *The Cricketers*, 1948, oil on hardboard 76.2 x 101.5 cm.

work of the Hill End Group and its successors, it can be argued that contemporary art has an important place in researching and interpreting the site of Hill End in ways that are accessible, speculative and open-ended. This article explores how the determinism of the twin mythologies — the artistic and the gold-rush heritages — is questioned through the work of contemporary artists, revealing a multiplicity of ways of engaging with Hill End's historicity and its landscape. The introduction of artists working in diverse media through a regional artists residency program has added new perspectives to both the landscape painting traditions and the 'glory day' historic interpretations of the site. Characterised by an exploratory approach which resists and reveals the fixity of cultural myths and master narratives, the contemporary art movement questions the universalist assumptions that dominated much modernist art.

Work by the Hill End Group has tended to be framed by critics and curators as an expression of the essence of both Australian landscape and landscape painting. Paintings by Drysdale such as *The Cricketers* (1948) are popularly perceived as encapsulating ideals of national identity along similar lines to the cultural concepts of bush realism that Henry Lawson's writing established. The stark, desolate backgrounds of Drysdale's surrealist-influenced works are contrasted with the endeavours of resilient individuals — the young cricketers are testimony to the endurance of Australian sporting values against all odds. The mythic value of *The Cricketers* is enhanced by its image of the abandoned built environment: it simultaneously invokes Australian history in terms of the gold boom and associates the urban with decadence and decay. If the concept of national identity associated with the bush myth was notorious for its exclusion of women, Indigenous people and urban/suburban life, the artistic traditions that came to be identified with Hill End were equally exclusive: painting was the medium that counted, landscape the subject of choice. A female artist such as Jean Bellette (1909–1991), for example, although a member of the Hill End Group, only achieved significant recognition through a retrospective exhibition in 2004; her interest in classicism sits uneasily with the populist focus of 'vernacular modernism' (Wilson 21–24).

Friend, a diverse artist, drew and painted landscapes and portraits from life, but was also attracted to representing Hill End through the mythologies about its spectacular heyday. *St Patrick's Night, Sally's Flat* (1948) is an imaginary depiction of a dance in a local hall during the area's wild and prosperous gold rush days. Friend frames both the past and the present as a 'Breughel peasant romp' or 'Bacchanal', indebted in part, as Gavin Wilson has noted, to colonial artist S.T. Gill's (1818–1880) goldfield watercolours such as *Subscription Ball, Ballarat* (1854) (Wilson 18–19) and also perhaps to descriptions such as those by the popular novelist, Rolf Boldrewood, in *Robbery Under Arms* (1888).

It was a great sight to see at night, and people said like nothing else in the world just then. Every one turned out for an hour or two at night, and then was the time to see



Donald Friend, *St Patrick's Night, Sally's Flat*, 1948, oil, pen and ink on hardboard, 45 x 66 cm.

the Turon in its glory. Big sunburnt men, with beards, and red silk sashes round their waists, with a sheath-knife and revolvers mostly stuck in them, and broad-leaved felt hats on. There were Californians, then foreigners of all sorts —Frenchmen, Italians, Germans, Spaniards, Greeks, Negroes, Indians, Chinamen. They were a droll, strange, fierce-looking crowd. There weren't many women at first, but they came pretty thick after a bit. A couple of theatres were open, a circus, hotels with lots of plate-glass windows and splendid bars, alighted up, and the front of them anyhow, as handsome at first sight as Sydney or Melbourne.... It was like a fairy-story place, Jim said; he was pleased as a child with the glitter and show and strangeness of it all. (Boldrewood 225–26).

Nineteenth century representations such as Gill's watercolours and Boldrewood's description emphasise the 'glory days' of the gold rush, a celebratory image which has persisted in popular history and which Friend takes up with vigour in his diaries, drawings and paintings, including *Hillendiana* (1956), an exuberant series of illustrated gold rush tales.

Hill End's population might have dwindled through the twentieth century, but its reputation has steadily grown, both for its colonial gold rush heritage values and its significant place in Australian art history. Arguably, the heritage fascination with the site stems from the spectacular nature of its rise and fall: from fairly quiet beginnings in the 1850s, the Tambaroora/Hill End goldfields boomed to a population of over 10,000 during 1871 and 1872 but by July 1873 many of the newly-founded speculative companies had collapsed and the thriving inland town began to empty out (Hodge 77–86). A commercial photographer, Merlin Beaufoy, and his assistant, Charles Bayliss, were commissioned by the successful mining entrepreneur Bernard Holtermann to undertake a precise photographic documentation of the town and its environs in 1872. In the 1950s, the discovery of the Holtermann Collection, together with the 1951 gold rush centenary celebrations and publication of *Hillendiana*, added greatly to the perception that the site's past is readily accessible and to the focus on its 'glory days'. As Alan Mayne notes, the 'sense of a place frozen (or diminished) in time' has pervaded both histories and artistic representations of Hill End (44). As well, the documentary power of the Holtermann photographs, in addition to the romanticised narratives of the past, have fixed a narrative which not only excludes Wiradjuri ownership and presence at Hill End but also simplifies settlement history. To the three obsessions of popular history that Linda Young identifies — 'ancestor veneration, pioneer fetishism, genteel fantasy' (Young 178) — might be added a fourth for the art traditions that have become associated with Hill End: 'trapped in landscape'. Representation of an authentic landscape is the paradigm that both artists and audiences seek and are caught by, yet the landscape is one that can never be authentic and is always shaped by the cultural and artistic heroics of past endeavours, whether painters or gold-seekers.

At Hill End, the complexities of sustaining a viable, remote community are intertwined with tourism demand for popular history and with the issues of

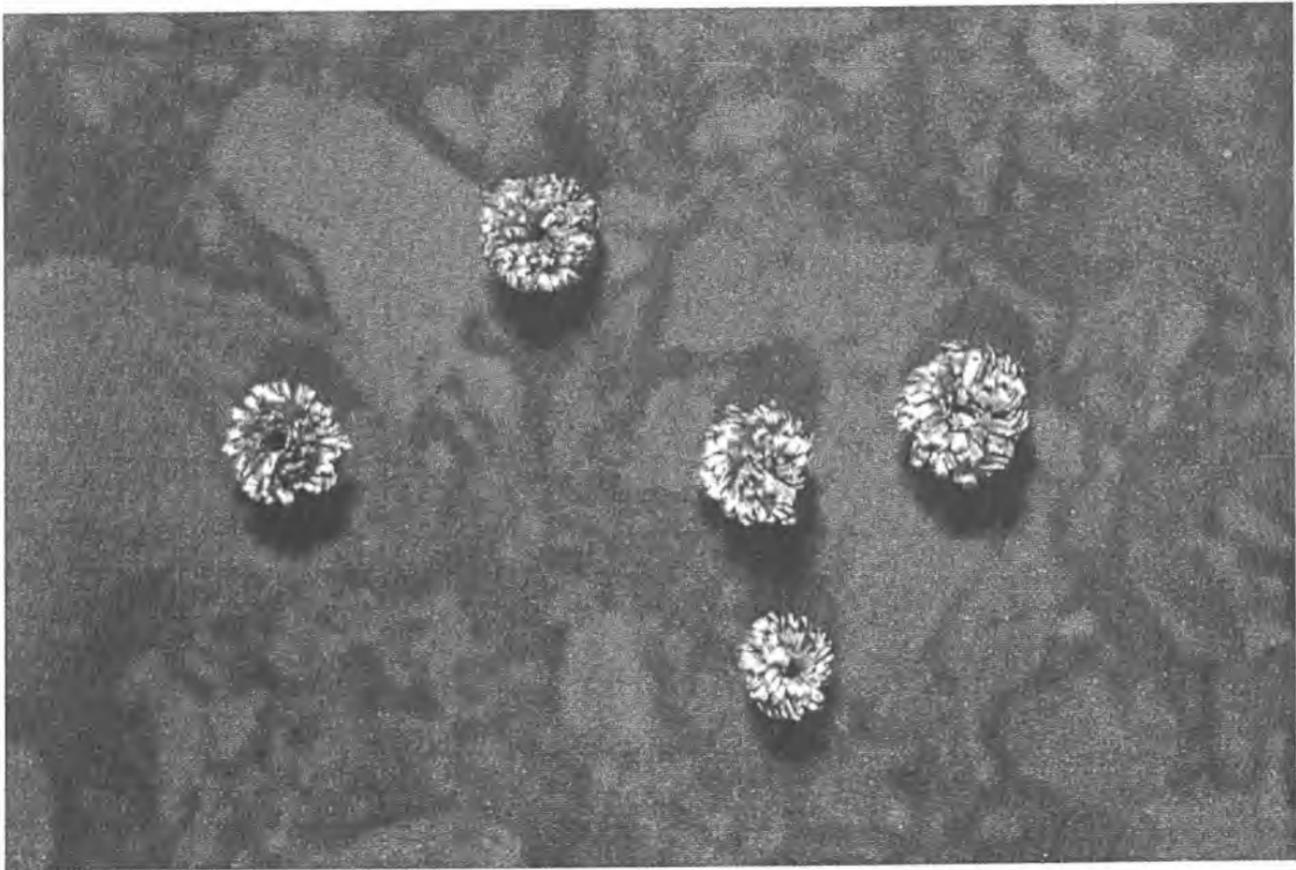


S.T. Gill, *Subscription Ball, Ballarat*, 1854, watercolour, 25.1 x 35.3 cm.

conservation, tenancy and provision of services that have accompanied the acquisition of much of the site by the NSW state government, through NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service. The site has been the subject of exhaustive documentation, both vernacular and official since the 1950s. Photographic and oral histories, memoirs, geological studies, conservation reports, management and master plans and a central place on school curricula have followed extensive acquisitions of land and buildings by NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) in 1967.² The artists colony has left its legacy too: both Jean Bellette with her husband, art critic and painter Paul Haefliger (1914–1982) and Donald Murray bequeathed their Hill End cottages to NPWS. Bellette and Haefliger, who were part of Friend's Sydney circle, bought their weekender in the early 1950s. They lived in Europe from 1957, keeping 'Haefliger's Cottage', as it came to be known, and returning occasionally. Their bequest of the cottage to NPWS on condition it become an artists' residency came to fruition in 1998 when Bathurst Regional Art Gallery launched the Hill End Artists in Residence program.³ In 2002 Friend's former cottage, also owned by NPWS, was renovated, using drawings in his diary as the basis for the building work, and introduced into the residency program.⁴ The residency program has actively sought proposals from artists working in a broad range of media, providing opportunities for artists such as those whose work is discussed below — Margaret West, Fiona Hiscock, Cathie Laudenbach and Julie-Anne Long — to engage with the site. Each of these artists has produced a body of work which references diverse mythologies and histories of the site: West, the quest for gold; Hiscock, the daily life and environmental impact of colonial settlement; Laudenbach, the tensions between heritage conservation and interpretation and contemporary life; and Long, issues of identity as well as art history traditions. While painters have continued to work imaginatively and productively at Hill End, artists such as these working through the residency program have diversified not only the representations of Hill End that have emerged but also the ways in which the community has engaged with the artists. Not least, on a practical level there is a recognition that the ebb and flow of artists and their associates contributes to the economic viability of the village, while exhibitions, community workshops and events provide a distinctive creative program for the region. Artistically, these works can be characterised in relation to Paul Carter's argument for the cultivation of 'mythopoetic invention'(174) by artists which challenges and illuminates not only the fixity of history but also the repetitions of myth:

Their way of seeing and understanding is both pointed and playful. Because of this they are not constrained by the eyewitness historian's unified perspective. Instead of shadowing his photographic series of unique events, they bring into focus the plural world of what happens. (173)

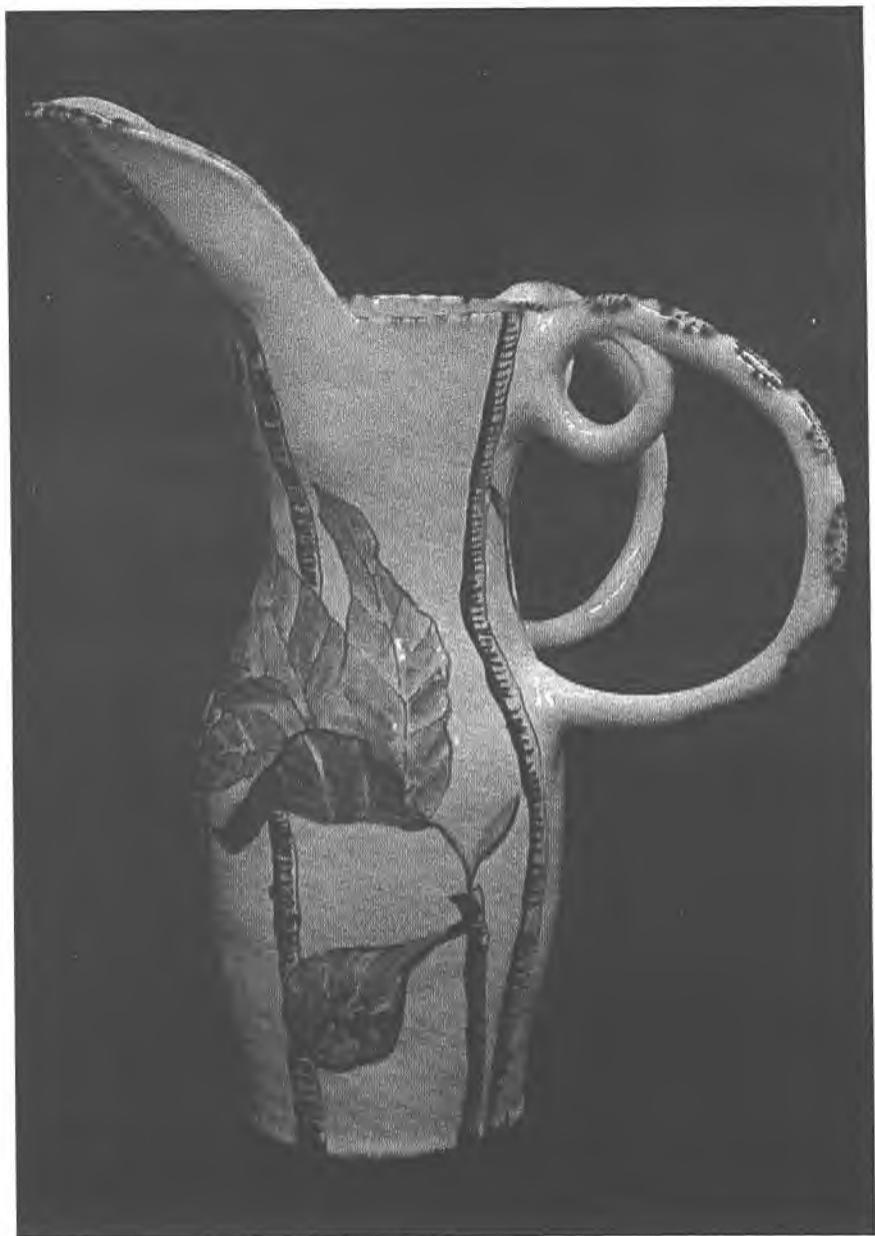
West was commissioned to make new work for *Auriferous: The Gold Project*, an exhibition devised at Bathurst in 2001 and funded by the Australia Council to



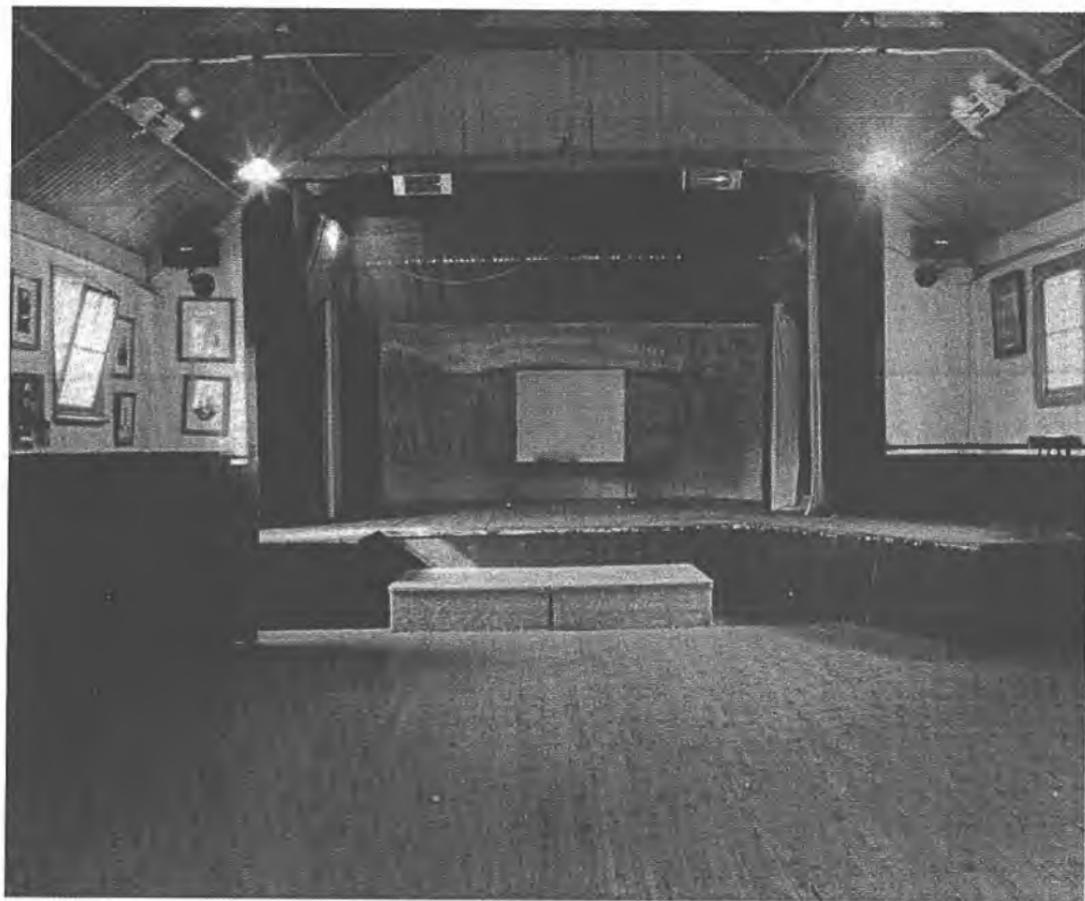
Margaret West, notes: *Hill End*, 2001, gold, various dimensions

mark the sesquicentenary of the announcement of the discovery of gold at Ophir, near Hill End, in 1851 — the event that triggered the gold rushes in NSW and Victoria. The exhibition proposed to insert a place for contemporary art in the celebratory, re-enactment-driven civic commemorations of such anniversaries, allowing for critical commentary on gold rush history and the place of gold in the popular imagination. The concept of auriferous, a geological term that means bearing or yielding gold, was interpreted by West through an investigation of the flora that grows on the hard, rocky terrain of Hill End. In *notes: Hill End* (2001) four species of small yellow flowers, identified by the explorer and botanist Allan Cunningham well before the gold rush and found by West still growing on the site, are represented in finely worked gold against a digitised, magnified image of the Hill End soil. Illustrative of the persistence and regeneration of nature, these works also reference human endeavours — not only traditions of working gold for ornamental purposes but also the transformations that all gold-seekers chase: ‘they speak of discretion and innocence, of enterprise and ambition, and, above all, of endurance’. (West qtd in Judd and Lawson 20) Geological, ecological, social and economic concerns that resonate through the histories of gold-mining and the gold rushes are brought to the surface in a kind of visual shorthand through West’s *notes*.

Hiscock turned to domestic colonial life and the accompanying introduced flora in the body of ceramic works that she created following her residency at Haefliger’s Cottage in 2002. Using coiling technique, she hand-built a collection of vessels loosely based on early colonial domestic objects such as water pitchers, basins and mixing bowls. On site, Hiscock made watercolour studies of plant species which have been growing in gardens such as Haefliger’s since their introduction in the nineteenth century — figs, plums, quinces, briar roses, blackberries and pears: ‘when exploring the area I found many remnant gardens and orchards, and was told that early European settlers all tended to grow the same hardy and productive plant species’ (Hiscock). These images were drawn on the unfired surface with lead pencil; ceramic stains and coloured oxides were used to build up layers of soft colour wash; the work was then both bisque and glaze fired. The sense of careful crafting that emanates from the hand-building and decorating processes, and the use of botanical imagery, are a reminder of the work of settlement, especially women’s work. Oversized and extravagant, inexact in shape but robust, these works gesture towards both the practical and decorative functions of domestic ware. Hiscock’s body of work is informed by research into botanical drawing and colonial domestic objects, but it resists both ‘pioneer fetishism’ and ‘genteel fantasy’. The pots do not claim to be representative of a specific domestic life and in their relaxed formalism they draw on contemporary ceramic traditions as well as colonial. Hiscock’s works play on the heritage obsession with material culture providing a looser bridge to the past than the precise placement of objects in a reconstructed environment that house museums favour in presenting colonial domestic life.



Fiona Hiscock, *Hill End double handled fig pitcher*, 2003, high-fired earthenware, hand-painted and glazed, 47 x 36 x 26 cm.



Catherine Laudenbach, *Hall 1*, 2001, Type C print, 1000 x 800 mm.

Like Friend's fantastic imaginings, which discern and suggest the raucous presence of the past in the present, Laudenbach's photographs centre on sites of human activity. In her Hill End body of work, completed during a 2001 residency and in subsequent visits to the town, Laudenbach has photographed various interiors. These include *Bedroom* (2001), *Craigmoor* (2001) — a bedroom in an intact house museum — and *Hall 1* and *3* (2005). The power of Laudenbach's photographs lies in their suggestiveness: there are no people in any of the images, yet the presence of bodies and personas, of the used lives of these interiors, is very strong. Laudenbach's photographs appear direct and documentary in their presentation, however the selection of site and what is contained within the frame of the photograph is critical to reading these works. In *Hall 1*, the viewer is positioned at the entry to the Royal Hall. Contemporary use is evident alongside the visible heritage structures of the hall: framed historic photographs, lighting and a large LCD screen in front of a painted backdrop of a gold rush scene on the stage. Laudenbach's work is often interpreted through the ghostly presences that its absences suggest or propose. Through the image's gesture towards continuity of usage, as well as its sense of a stage set waiting for action, it is easy to populate the hall with imaginary crowds from the 1870s through to the 1940s and on to 2005. However, where Friend charts the fall from a 'fabulous' past to the 'sordid, jovial mad peasants' of the 1950s, Laudenbach declines to fix the human presence as well as refute the Holtermann claim to comprehensive documentary in a photograph which exposes the practices and mediations of representation: the 'frozen' time of historical photographs on the wall of a carefully conserved building; the gold-rush narrative and realist theatre implicit in the stage set; the unknown projection planned for the screen; and an emphasis on the viewer to make meaning of the image.

On 4 December 2004 the Royal Hall was full again. Locals and Sydneysiders were there for some fun; a 'romp' of a night by all accounts, watching and eventually participating in *The Nun's Picnic*, a performance directed and choreographed by Julie-Anne Long (b. 1961). Long collaborated with film-maker Samuel James, photographer Heidrun Lohr and others⁵ on the performance and an installation conceived during Long's 2003 residency and informed by Jeffrey Smart's (b. 1921) iconic Hill End painting, *The Picnic (Nun's Picnic)* (1957). Long disrupts the more usual curiosity about Smart's painting (Did he actually see the nuns having a picnic? Would nuns in that kind of habit have been at Hill End? Is this a surrealist-influenced image?) with a performance approach:

I was attracted to the sense of displacement of the human figures in this painting. I asked myself what is the nun's relationship to this landscape? What could be my relationship to this landscape? I was interested in my body as an abstract component of the composition of this performed landscape. (Long)

Long and Lohr worked together on a series of photographs of the nuns wandering through Hill End, inspired in part by the mid-nineteenth century Parisian



Jeffrey Smart, *Nun's Picnic*, 1957, oil on board, 34.5 x 43 cm.

partnership of Virginia Oldoini, Countess de Castiglione, and photographer Pierre-Louis Pierson, that produced hundreds of images of the Countess in various costumes, often as characters from opera, theatre or history. At Hill End the Nun's Project Team explored the new persona that costuming creates:

Wearing the nun's habit around the village and into the bush became very important for the character that emerged. By displacing myself and my collaborators, I was hoping to inspire a different version of ourselves as we landed in this foreign landscape. (Long online)

The goldfields provided plenty of chances for disguise and reinvention, as the bushrangers in *Robbery Under Arms* recognise: 'We let our hair grow long, and made friends with some Americans, so we began to talk a little like them, just for fun, and most people took us for Yankees. We didn't mind that' (Boldrewood 226). *The Nun's Picnic* not only understands identity as performative, but by the humour and disjunction of using not only nuns, but nuns from a 'great' Australian painting, as its characters it also undoes some of the essentialist claims that have been made for the modernist paintings of the Hill End Group and their relationship to Australian identity. Although Friend may have 'patronised, caricatured, and fundamentally misunderstood' the locals (Mayne 124), he also established strong friendships in a community which appreciated his artistic achievements. The Nun's Project Team's performance at the Royal Hall created a local event which brought the artist/performers and their urban audience together with the local community. In doing so, *The Nun's Picnic* dismantles some of the grand claims about art history and national identity that have emerged around Hill End and returns to the sense of fun that Friend found there. The performance suggests that the site is an active and flexible place, a landscape to walk through, a hall to party in, much more than a remnant of or monument to former times.

At Hill End histories of colonisation, the gold-rushes and Australian art collide to form powerful myths about national identity and heritage. Artists who work actively with the myths that surround the site not only engage with critical thinking about those myths but also suggest new dimensions for conceptualising the place and its histories. The works created by each of these artists – Long and the Nun's Project Team, Laudénbach, Hiscock and West – through their explorations of Hill End expose some of the narratives of history and art history that have tended to fix the place in the cultural imaginary. They enable audiences to escape the trap of landscape and to wander a little more freely in the past and present.

NOTES

- ¹ Artists working at Hill End have included Margaret Olley, David Strachan, Jeffrey Smart, John Olsen, John Firth Smith and Brett Whiteley; the National Art School had a tradition of student excursions to the Hill End and Sofala 'painting grounds'.



Julie-Anne Long, Michael Whaite and Narelle Benjamin in *Nun*, 2003,
digital photograph by Heidrun Lohr.

- 2 Some examples are: Houghton, P.D. et al, *Land Resources and Land Use Study: Hill End and Environs*, Soil Conservation Service of New South Wales, Sydney, 1981; NPWS, *Hill End Historic Site: Draft Plan of Management*, The Service, Sydney, 1988; *Hill End: Draft Development Control Plan*, Evans Shire Council, Bathurst, NSW, 1990; NPWS, *Hill End Historic Site, Quartz Roasting Pits Complex: Conservation and Interpretation Plan*, The Service, Sydney, 1997; NPWS et al, *Hill End Historic Site Masterplan*, NPWS, Sydney, 2004; Brian Hodge, *Valleys of Gold: The Goldfields Story, 1851-1861, Book I*, Cambaroora Star Publications, Penhurst, N.S.W., 1976 and two later books; Bruce Goodwin, *Gold and People: Recollections of Hill End, 1920s to 1960s*, B. Goodwin, Frenchs Forest, N.S.W, c1992; Keast Burke, *Gold and Silver: An Album of Hill End and Gulgong Photographs from the Holtermann Collection*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1973; Barbara G Mullins and Margaret Martin, photographs by Douglass Baglin, *Historic Hill End*, Reed, Terrey Hills, NSW, 1976; Marje Prior, *We've Watched the Logs Burn: An Oral History of the Hill End Mining Community, Bathurst NSW: On The Stone*, forthcoming in 2005 from interviews conducted in 1981–82. A scholarly history of Hill End was commissioned by NPWS and published in 2003 (Alan Mayne, *Hill End: An Historic Australian Goldfields Landscape*, Melbourne UP, Carlton, Vic., 2003); this work, which emphasises the survival of the a viable community at Hill End, informed the 2004 master plan.
- 3 Gavin Wilson, curator of *The Artists of Hill End* exhibition, initiated a one-off series of residencies, managed by Bathurst Regional Art Gallery with support from Evans Shire Council and NPWS, in the cottage in 1994 as part of the lead-up to the exhibition. This led to works by Wendy Sharpe, Peter Wright, Tom Spence and others being exhibited alongside the main body of older Hill End works.
- 4 The refurbishment of Murray's Cottage and the residency program have both received support from the NSW Ministry for the Arts.
- 5 The Nun's Project Team also included performers/collaborators Narelle Benjamin, Kathy Cogill, Martin del Amo, Rakini Devi, Bernadette Walong, Michael Whaites; music advisor Drew Crawford; painter Lucy Culliton.

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