Family footprints: tracing the past in the present through curatorial autobiographical practice

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FAMILY FOOTPRINTS

Tracing the Past in the Present through Curatorial

Autobiographical Practice

Master of Arts by Research

from

University of Wollongong

by

Anthony Bourke

Faculty of Creative Arts

2008
I, Anthony Bourke, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Arts by Research in the Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Anthony Bourke

Date:
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Abstract

The research is a study of a curatorial development, process and practice over ten years and three exhibitions that culminated in the exhibition *Lines in the Sand: Botany Bay Stories from 1770*, in 2008.

The accompanying written text charts the evolution from a 1998 exhibition *Flesh & Blood: A Story of Sydney, 1788-1998* where for the first time I synthesised various strands in my life: my career as a curator in Aboriginal art and relationships with several of the artists, an exploration of my own colonial family history, and a growing interest and expertise in colonial material.

*Flesh & Blood* has been described as a new form of curatorship (see Lawrenson): an exhibition that was both traditional and innovative, in which the past was brought into the present by the juxtaposition of appropriated images, and the weaving of Aboriginal and personal settler narratives for the first time. The inclusion of artworks by Aboriginal artists disrupted a linear European telling of history.

The concept I developed for the second exhibition in 2006, *EORA: Mapping Aboriginal Sydney, 1770-1850* was to identify and examine where possible the Aborigines dispossessed in those first years of settlement. This was a counterbalance to my family history and provided the opportunity to bring into the public arena the extraordinary scholarship of Keith Vincent Smith, the biographer of *King Bungaree* and *Bennelong*. The exhibition demonstrated how much information is now known about the Eora people and provided an opportunity for the Mitchell Library to showcase for the first time their colonial Indigenous material. While curatorially conservative, it was the most comprehensive exhibition of the subject matter ever assembled.

In 2006 I also commenced my Masters of Arts by Research at the University of
Wollongong in order to examine the third phase of my research: specific encounters between my family and Indigenous people. I started with Philip Gidley King, my maternal great-great-great-great-grandfather, as he was a First Fleeter as Second Lieutenant to Captain Arthur Phillip in 1788. Both these men experienced the first encounters with Aboriginal people in Botany Bay and their documentation has provided the official historical record, as the other better known and subsequently published journal writers arrived in Botany Bay several days after them. While I have other encounters to examine between my family and Indigenous people, the events of 1770 and 1788 are so fundamental as foundational narratives, that they have become the entire focus of this thesis.

As my reading and written research progressed, the visual images I discovered, or were familiar with, became an indispensable element of the project. With my background as a curator and the variety of visual imagery available, an exhibition emerged as the most effective means of articulating my thesis. *Lines in the Sand: Botany Bay Stories from 1770* also evolved into a quest to identify and articulate the Aboriginal perspective and voice, where possible, on the events of 1770 and 1788, and reflected the latest scholarship. The Aboriginal point of view has undoubtedly been best expressed by artists, particularly Gordon Bennett, and a younger generation such as Daniel Boyd and Jonathan Jones. Also incorporated again has been the most recent research of Keith Vincent Smith who has identified or verified several of the Aboriginal participants and eye witnesses of those first encounters.

In 2006 I moved to Bundeena in the Sutherland Shire, and was subsequently invited to propose an exhibition for the Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre. As the southern shore of Botany Bay is part of the Sutherland Shire, an exhibition about the responses to the events of 1770 and 1788 in Botany Bay was the logical outcome.
This provided the opportunity for me to present my ideas and research findings through a curatorial process that had been evolving over ten years. Rather than “conclusions”, my curatorial thesis illustrates how many different narratives contribute to a national narrative, and that there are many ways of interpreting and understanding history.
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