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Environmentalists' art at an ecotourism lodge

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Julie Gough, *Some words for change*, annotated pages from a book, laminated, and pierced by teatree spears standing in a clearing in kunzia scrub. Courtesy the artist and Freycinet Experience Walk. Photograph by Simon Cuthbert.

Handle With Care was the title of this year's Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art. It expressed anxiety about our carelessly degraded environment, and the exhibition emphasised a particular aesthetic: the works were delicate and fragile.

On the East Coast of Tasmania in February, immediately before the big event in Adelaide, about 120 people were allowed to walk in small groups through delicate and fragile coastal heathland at Friendly Beaches on the Freycinet Peninsula. There they encountered nine works commissioned for *Ephemeral Art at the Invisible Lodge*. It was the second *Ephemeral Art* event (the first was two years ago) and a wonderful appetiser for the 10th *Adelaide Biennial* [reviewed in *AMA*#209]. The ephemeral works responded to particular micro-environments.

Joan Masterman – an ardent Sydney-based environmentalist who runs a summer-season eco-tourism adventure, the Freycinet Experience Walk, from her Friendly

Beaches Lodge – devised *Ephemeral Art*. David Handley, founding director of the huge *Sculpture by the Sea* summer events in Sydney and Perth, helps manage the small spin-off in Tasmania. Two sculptor colleagues from Sydney – Sasha Reid and *Sculpture by the Sea* board member Ron Robertson-Swann – provide on-site project management for the artists. Handley and Hobart-based dealer Dick Bett and critic Peter Timms constituted this year's curatorial panel.

The selected artists came to Freycinet a year ahead to choose their preferred sites. They were either Sydney-based artists who had made works for the first *Ephemeral Art*, or else were based in Tasmania. Therefore they all already knew about delicate, unspectacular coastal heathland, dune grasses and pure white beaches. (Unable to accept were Launceston-based Sieglinde Karl Spence, a veteran of the first project, and Hossein Valamanesh, a mainlander who has worked in Tasmania.)



LEFT: Peter Adams, *Mandala*, beach-sand mounds centred upon bamboo sticks, casuarina-cone finials. Courtesy the artist and Freycinet Experience Walk. RIGHT: Marcus Tatton, *unTitled*, sawn firewood logs stacked on steel armature. Courtesy the artist and Freycinet Experience Walk. Photographs by Simon Cuthbert.

Masterman is not an art collector; she dislikes the commodification of art. Christo's ephemeral *Wrapped Coast, Little Bay, Sydney*, to which her grandmother took her in 1969, was formative; so was a book on Andy Goldsworthy's ephemeral installations of natural materials. She first encountered *Sculpture by the Sea* events organised by David Handley in 1998 and 2001 in Tasmania at several sites near Port Arthur, notably at sculptor Peter Adams's Roaring Beach. Delighted responses from artists to the Masterman's bit of Tasmanian bush encouraged the ephemeral art project.

The commissioned artists were asked to use only local materials, and to make works that would decompose and return to nature, or else be removed after three weeks. The sites were concealed along faint trackways in the scrub. The tracks radiated from the 'invisible' ecotourism lodge concealed within the scrub. The Masterman's land is a privately owned sanctuary, an enclave inside Freycinet National Park; a covenant permits only ten in a group at any one time, always accompanied by a guide. Only two of the nine artists kept entirely to local materials. Nobody minded that they broke the rules.

Julie Gough, an Indigenous Tasmanian, imported all her materials and removed her work very promptly. The most fragile elements were pages from a book on which she had encircled 35 printed words in pen-and-ink, and

annotated each word with its Tasmanian Aboriginal translation: *booooo* (cattle), *bar* (sheep), *wetuppenner* (fence), *linghene* (fire a gun), *lughtoy* (gunpowder), *licummy* (rum), *nonegimerikeway* (white man), etc. The paper pages were laminated for protection during their three-week outdoor display impaled on teatree-stick Aboriginal spears. The sticks came from a plant nursery in Hobart, but Gough carved, sharpened, hardened and burnt them into weapons at Friendly Beaches. The final unfriendly installation, titled *Some words for change*, was sited in a disused vehicle track, a dead end in dense *kunzia* scrub.

At first sight it was a surprise plantation in a small clearing within graceful native bushland, and a visual play of strange white blossoms or fungi on the stiff plantation stalks. Soon we recognised the spears, and noticed the black-ink Aboriginal words on the white pages. Gough's catalogue note did not reveal that the pages came from Clive Turnbull's *Black War: The extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines* (first published 1948); it would have been overkill to emphasise that they are still here, not exterminated but changed. Gough knows that in 1831 during the so-called Black War, my white great-great-great-uncle Bartholomew was killed by Aborigines hurling the same kind of spears on a similar lonely track near similar sand dunes in a different part of Tasmania, and I would like to think she directed



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LEFT: Catherine Woo, *Processing plant* (detail), nine mounds: casuarina cones, banksia cones and flowers, green and dried bracken fern, various coastal-heathland twigs, charcoal, beach sand and ash, beach sand and salt, wombat scats, echidna spines; on beach-sand trackways. Courtesy the artist and Freycinet Experience Walk. RIGHT: Dean Chatwin, *Stick out*, casuarina-timber slat constructions on casuarina tree-stumps; casuarina-needle mat on timber decking. Courtesy the artist and Freycinet Experience Walk. Photographs by Simon Cuthbert.



Some words at me. It was the most successful work of hers I have seen, airy and delicate and visually inviting at first sight, savagely dangerous after close examination, with a great charge of extra meaning from its particular space, herded down a peninsula into a dead end.

Gough's work affected us partly because of its upright human scale. Catherine Woo's *Processing plant* instead made us think of the ground level inhabited by herbivorous marsupials. She used local materials. Low mounds of vegetable matter, some burnt by bushfire, some fresh, some reduced entirely to charcoal, lay near a mound of wombat poo, its cubic blocks processed ready for return to the soil. Other mounds of sand were mixed with salt, or fine grey ash, on winding tracks among shrubs just inside the dunes and thus a site of animal refuge from bushfire. A mound of echidna spines must have come from an incinerated ant-eating animal. The mounds were extremely seductive, their tones and their textured materials cunningly graded. But they were too numerous, too diverse, and too arbitrarily placed on white meandering trackways. In the Adelaide Biennial, Woo's equally seductive materiality, in cloudscapes made on aluminium by chemical processes, constituted a much happier serial work, held together by an old-faithful device, a grid.

Sasha Reid's *Tree in a tree*, the simplest work, went beyond human scale to the botanical sublime. A giant White gum (*Eucalyptus viminalis*) had survived the bushfire that almost destroyed Friendly Beaches Lodge two years ago. Adjacent coast wattles (*Acacia sophorae*) seldom survived and, dying, their bark peeled to expose smooth, reddened skin. Reid stripped a few branches down to total nudity and inserted them into the rough trunk of the gum; there the branches gave the illusion of a freakishly large wattle emerging from inside the huge gum tree, an alien birth.

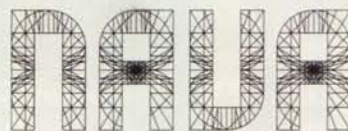
Friendly Beaches' great fire of 2006 inspired further works. Near Reid's *Tree in a tree* Colin Langridge installed a sound sculpture titled *Mourning call*. Seated on a box bench from which audio bird-calls emerged, one gazed straight into a charred, hollowed-out giant tree-stump and realised the bird calls were agitated, and were accompanied by the roaring wind that precedes bushfire.

On a site that had been 'back-burnt' to protect it from bushfire, Marcus Tatton's *unTitled* made a surrealist joke about firewood and fire places. He constructed an absurdly tall and elongated chimney, out of firewood logs. It mimicked the kind of structure usually made from brick or stone that often survives in Australia after a timber hut has been destroyed or abandoned – but its 'masonry' construction used

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