

UC Santa Cruz

Pacific Arts: The Journal of the Pacific Arts Association

Title

Ground into Place

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/05g769gk>

Journal

Pacific Arts: The Journal of the Pacific Arts Association, 22(2)

ISSN

1018-4252

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Publication Date

2022

DOI

10.5070/PC222259595

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Peer reviewed

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Ground into Place

Abstract

As a Trawlwoolway artist from Trouwunna, also known as Tasmania, I seek to challenge Western constructs of Australian colonial histories. I work to liberate Palawa cultural objects from their hidden status, often combining them with Western manufactured materials. I make art in response to legacies of colonial oppression and towards a full acknowledgement of Palawa presence.

Tasmanian bull kelp and industrially produced steel wool are signature materials in my practice. Bull kelp becomes an expression of Palawa presence, while steel wool denotes erasures and the attempted colonialist “scrubbing out” of Palawa identity. Both materials transform over time, referencing how, as Palawa people, we are adaptable and able to incorporate change as a part of our strong cultural continuum.

When installing my works in galleries and museum spaces, these sites often become my secondary studio. I use my signature materials in these spaces to literally and metaphorically disrupt colonial and institutional architecture. Such disruptions leave room for personal narratives to be formed. Some installation strategies that I employ include denying viewers access to my work and creating voids and dark spaces. These actions are utilised in the hope that they might ultimately inspire social and political change.

Keywords: *Palawa, bull kelp, steel wool, cultural continuum, First Nations, Australia, colonial history*

Through the 2021 “Grounded in Place” symposium that was the impetus for this paper, First Nations artists including myself were offered a generative space in which to develop cross-cultural dialogue. During these exchanges, it became clear that socio-political concerns for our First Nations communities and the ways that we navigate our worlds are paramount to the content of our works. Operating against a background of colonialist-attempted annihilations and persistent systemic racism, we seek to create openings to understanding and new ways of expressing our specific First Nations experiences.

The title of this paper aims to encapsulate the relentless pounding of fictitious colonial detritus that acts on Tasmanian Aboriginal people.¹ This colonial

rubbish includes the myth that Palawa people are extinct. The need to continually reject lies about our so-called extinction exacts a heavy toll on us, both individually and within our communities, and has led me to use my art as an act of resistance. As a socio-political artist, I work to assert Palawa presence and visibility.

Since the colonial presence began in Trouwunna, also known as Tasmania, in 1803, the Indigenous inhabitants have been subjected to intentional, government-sanctioned attempts of annihilation. These efforts included the instigation of martial law, the removal of our people from our lands, and our ongoing forced assimilation into the wider, non-Indigenous population.² Despite our continued existence, our extinction is believed as fact by many Australians today. However, we Palawa are adaptable; we continue to maintain strong connections to our community, our culture, and our place, and we keep our cultural selves firmly grounded on Country.

Through my maternal line, I claim connection to the ancestral Countries of Tebrakunna in north-east Trouwunna, and the Oyster Bay Nation of eastern Trouwunna. Additionally, I am connected to the Bass Strait Islands to the north-east of Trouwunna, where Palawa people were initially exiled and imprisoned by colonial governments. These islands subsequently became the home of my grandmothers and, later, my mother. Both the Bass Strait Islands and my Countries are the places that anchor me, sustain my identity, and support me to hold and practice from my inherited knowledge base. In these ways, I am affirmed in my ongoing, contemporary existence as a proud Trawlwoolway woman, knowing the places from which I claim my sovereign status.

Senior Trawlwoolway woman Aunty Patsy Cameron asserts that our island communities emerged as predominantly matriarchal societies.³ She states that even though Palawa women became linked to European male sealers and whalers inhabiting the Bass Strait Islands, our women were the foundational drivers of these isolated and marginalised communities.⁴ Historian Lynette Russell notes how Palawa women skilfully negotiated cultural borders and accommodated new lifestyles—they lived from their deep cultural bases while developing new strategies, new ceremonies, and even a new creole language.⁵ She adds that such competencies challenge the assumption that “native newcomer-engagements” simply consolidated the power relations of white men.⁶ It was Palawa women who demonstrated the strength of cultural survival and adaptability—strength that endures in contemporary times and in the face of ongoing denial.

Being the creative agent of my own destiny, I express my cultural continuity as I adhere to cultural understandings, responsibilities, and protocols. My works carry both tangible and intangible aspects of culture based on what I experience and learn when I am on Country, viewing Tasmanian rock engravings and petroglyphs, holding artefacts, and being in the presence of the ancestors.

Two materials are signature to my art practice: bull kelp (*Durvillaea potatorum*) and steel wool. I continue the historic and contemporary Palawa use of bull kelp as a cultural material and I use steel wool to scour or scrub out colonialist notions of Palawa extinction. Bull kelp is a pliable algae that forms into dense ocean forests in the cool, coastal Trouwunnan waters and its shorelines, while steel wool is a harsh, industrially manufactured material. The bull kelp, a long-time element of Palawa material culture, solidifies cultural presence and continuity in my work. In contrast, the tough, abrasive steel wool references the harsh treatment of Indigenous Australian peoples since colonisation and the attempted “scrubbing away” of our cultures and identities. By using these two distinctly different materials, I address both grounded and “ground-in” aspects of Palawa life. While one is natural and the other machine-made, bull kelp and steel wool are both unstable materials, altering over the passage of time. Observing physical changes as the materials transform with time, I consider questions such as:

What is it that we remember?

Whose time are we on?

What are these linear constructs of past, present, and future?

In my work, I frequently re-use and re-configure bull kelp and steel wool, forging a dialogue between memories past and present. In the act of remembering, I take advantage of residues and fragments from previous forms.

Many of my art installations respond to the architecture of place. I frequently work to corrupt the conventional reading of the gallery, the institution, or the space. At times, I deny full viewing access, creating voids and dark spaces. At other times, I invite the audience to walk into and through the work. In this way, viewers become protagonists within the work, where they are able to develop their own narratives and form their own questions.



Figure 1. Mandy Quadrio, *Strike at the foundation*, 2020 (detail). Steel wool, 165 x 320 x 100 cm, installed in *Rite of Passage*, Queensland University of Technology Art Museum, March 7–May 10, 2020. Photograph courtesy of the artist



Figure 2. Mandy Quadrio, *Strike at the foundation* (detail), 2020. Steel wool, 165 x 320 x 100 cm, installed in *Rite of Passage*, Queensland University of Technology Art Museum, March 7–May 10, 2020. Photograph by Louis Lim. Courtesy of the artist

In the 2020 exhibition *Rite of Passage*, a survey of art by Indigenous women held at two prominent Queensland venues, my installation *Strike at the foundation* (2020) occupied an entire room.⁷ Utilising theatrical light beams that radiated out from the edges of a central support pillar (Fig. 1), I created voids and dark spaces on one side to draw attention to the omissions and erasures in Australian colonial histories. On the other side of the pillar, a drape of steel wool cascaded from the high ceiling and tumbled down across the floor (Fig. 2).⁸ Entangled folds contained secret pockets and hidden hollows. Voids and dark spaces regularly appear in my works, as I have many unknowns and dark holes in my personal history. My mother went missing when I was a baby, and her disappearance was never investigated. She has never been found. This is a personal example of how the Australian police force treat Indigenous women as indispensable and unimportant when they go missing.



Figure 3. Mandy Quadrio, *here lies lies* (detail), 2019. Steel wool, 250 x 120 x 50 cm, installed at Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, Tasmania, November 15–23, 2019. Photograph by Louis Lim. Courtesy of the artist

Whenever possible, I choose to corrupt and to challenge the viewing of stolid, fixed, Western architecture, with its oppressive, rigid, and patriarchal overlays and stories. In the steel wool and text-based installation *here lies lies* (2019),

shown at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) in Hobart, Trouwunna, I confronted long-held Western narratives of denial (Fig. 3). The TMAG building is particularly significant for me, as it is one of the oldest colonial buildings in Trouwunna.⁹ The assumed rights of invaders are evident in the museum’s placement on Palawa land without permission, without acknowledgement of the land’s original occupants, and with the establishment of lies as history. One of these lies is exemplified in the display of the skeletal remains of a Nuennonne woman named Truganini as an artefact of an extinct people. When Truganini died in 1876 she was described as the last “full blood” Tasmanian Aboriginal person; it was then inaccurately declared that Palawa people were extinct.¹⁰ Truganini’s skeleton was put on display in a glass vitrine inside the Tasmanian Museum from 1903 until 1947. Her bones were presented as bizarre evidence of the so-called “last Tasmanian Aborigine,” and were meant to signal the passing of a race of people.¹¹

Over its history, TMAG has long held and presented conquering and acquisitive narratives that have perpetuated the myth of Palawa extinction. In response to the museum’s narratives, I created the work *here lies lies* (2019). This work appeared in the subterranean depths of the darkened Bond Store Basement of the TMAG and it was in this space that I was able to bring my stories home.



Figure 4. Mandy Quadrio, *here lies lies* (detail), 2019. Steel wool, 400 x 80 x 100 cm, installed at Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, Tasmania, November 15–23, 2019. Photograph by Louis Lim. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 5. Mandy Quadrio, *here lies lies* (detail), 2019. Cast bronze text, 50 x 8 x 1 cm, installed at Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, Tasmania, November 15–23, 2019. Photograph by Louis Lim. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 6. Mandy Quadrio, *here lies* (detail), 2019. Sandstone block wall and cast resin text, dimensions variable, installed at Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, Tasmania, November 15–23, 2019. Photograph by Louis Lim. Courtesy of the artist

In presenting my opposition to inaccurate ethnographic representations of Tasmanian Aboriginal people, I cloaked a central, foundational pillar of the building in long, smooth swathes of coarse steel wool, prompting such questions as: What is buried here? I continued the *here lies lies* installation further into the darkened Bond Store Basement with a four-metre-long form shaped like a traditional Palawa boat, constructed from entangled steel wool and placed on the stone floor (Fig. 4). This vessel acted to describe and carry the history of my coastal people’s engagement with the sea. While making erased colonial histories visible, this canoe form was also interwoven with the more recent violent history of the enforced and undesired transportation and exile of my people to the Bass Strait Islands. In multiple places around the stone floor, I placed bronze castings of the words “here lies lies” (Fig. 5). The texts resembled tombstone inscriptions, implying a graveyard and the presence of death. These words were an utterance, a statement, that viewers stumbled and kicked over, implicating the viewer in this so-called history. Because the TMAG might still hold the bones of my ancestors, I used a large sandstone-block wall in the back room of the Museum’s basement to establish a metaphorical tombstone for my ancestors (Fig. 6). Embedded in the dirt at the base of this wall were the two words “here lies.” The installation *here lies lies* acted to bring together and house both the psychological residues and the physical markers of loss—my personal experience of loss and the broader losses that my people have experienced since invasion.



Figure 7. Mandy Quadrio, *her* (detail), 2020. Bull kelp, 250 x 40 x 20 cm, installed at Milani Gallery CARPARK space, Brisbane, Queensland, September 5–26, 2020. Courtesy of the artist

Beyond referencing historical trauma, I also present works that celebrate my womanhood and cultural strengths and richness. The three-room installation *her* (2020) acted as both a celebration of and a memorial for my mother, who disappeared without trace when I was a baby (Fig. 7). I will forever lament her disappearance. I actively presented her and the memories that I hold of her in the partially demolished basement of the Milani Gallery's CARPARK space in Brisbane, which could also be read as an archaeological dig or even a forensic site. I used dried and aged tendrils of thick bull kelp to create a body shape on the floor, one with a mummy-like, skin-like surface that enveloped trauma in search of beauty. Occupying a separate room, a canoe-like form made from rusted steel wool was created as an emotional vessel to carry the stories of my mother and grandmother, who, under forced dispersal, had to leave their Tasmanian homeland (Fig. 8). Invoking a bodily affect, the interior of the canoe hinted at the interiority of the female body. I metaphorically floated between inserting myself, then my mother, then my grandmother, and then I found myself offering a space for other Indigenous women to find safe harbour in this vessel.



Figure 8. Mandy Quadrio, *her* (detail), 2020. Rusted steel wool, 150 x 70 x 50 cm, installed at Milani Gallery CARPARK space, Brisbane, Queensland, September 5–26, 2020. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 9. Mandy Quadrio, *her* (detail), 2020. Steel wool and bull kelp, 250 x 200 x 20 cm, installed at Milani Gallery CARPARK space, Brisbane, Queensland, September 5–26, 2020. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 10. Mandy Quadrio, installation view of the exhibition *The Country Within*, 2019. Left to right: *From the tide*, bull kelp and tea tree spear; *Dancing on Tebrakunna*, bull kelp and steel grid; and *Speaking with Alizon*, bull kelp and bullet belt; dimensions variable; installed at the Belltower Gallery, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, Queensland, June 22–August 17, 2019. Photograph by Carl Warner. Courtesy of the artist

The last piece in the installation *her* included a three-metre-wide suspended relief (Fig. 9). Consisting of both smooth and entangled fibres, this sinuous, swollen, and animated architectural piece was constructed from steel wool and bull kelp. As a monument to my mother, this work referred to living, culturally present Palawa women and our female bodies. This is a form that, despite grinding histories, is based in contemporary presence and herstories.

Another installation affirming my Palawa existence was *The Country Within* (2019) held at the Belltower Gallery, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. Within this exhibition, I presented the work *Dancing on Tebrakunna*: long, abstract forms of stitched and bound bull kelp suspended from a rectangular steel grid (Fig. 10). Oiled and ochred, the strong bull kelp membranes enacted a healing of the psychic wounds that I have carried from the oppressive influences of colonisation. In the gaps and spaces between the forms, I enabled my stories to be present and to be re-activated.



Figure 11. Mandy Quadrio, *Dancing on Tebrakunna* (detail), 2019. Bull kelp and steel grid, dimensions variable, installed at the Belltower Gallery, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, Queensland, June 22–August 17, 2019. Courtesy of the artist

Being an organic, algal material, bull kelp responds to changes in atmospheric pressure and humidity. I can manipulate and control the kelp to an extent, but when it is exposed to environmental variations, it resists any form of control; it can shrink, expand, soften, harden, become brittle, or go limp. It performs. Responding to the environment of the Belltower Gallery, where large doors onto the street were frequently opened, the bull kelp forms moved and changed shape on a continual basis. These material transformations were unpredictable and I found myself having to surrender to the changes. Entering a performative mode, I allowed the hanging sculptural forms to gently dance and move freely in the breezes. In addition to the daily changes of the bull kelp, the gallery's night-time lighting also activated the material and it performed in further unexpected ways. The illumination of *Dancing on Tebrakunna's* steel support threw a delicate, mesh-like, cartographic grid-like shadow on the concrete floor that interwove with the bull kelp's shadows and contributed a further complexity to the reading of the work (Fig. 11). This acted to represent how elements of my Trawlwoolway cultural expression and Western influences were dancing together.



Figure 12. Mandy Quadrio, *Face to face to face*, 2019. Digital photographs, bullet belt, and bull kelp, 600 x 84 x 20 cm, in BEAUT (Brisbane and Elsewhere Art UnTriennial), Kuiper Projects, Brisbane, Queensland, April 26–May 5, 2019. Photograph by Kyle Weise. Courtesy of the artist

In a further act of resistance, I created the work *Face to face to face* for the Brisbane and Elsewhere Art UnTriennial (BEAUT) in 2019 (Fig. 12). In this series of self-portraits, I chose to question stereotypical notions of identity. I attempt to peer out through a somewhat formless brown stocking in order to challenge assumptions that are frequently made about identity. In this work, I address questions that I am frequently confronted by, such as “Is she brown enough to be Aboriginal?” and “Is she too white to be Aboriginal?” I am repeatedly asked by non-Indigenous people to validate my Palawa identity because I don’t fit into often-held stereotypes of what an Aboriginal Australian should look like. Attached to one of the photographic images was a colonial bullet belt. Referencing violent contact histories, this belt framed and applied a crushing erasure to my face. Inserted into the bullet capsules of the belt were strong sinews of Trouwunna bull kelp that acted to render the bullet belt impotent and to diminish its threat to my existence.

As I work to assert the continuum of Palawa existence, I use my signature materials for their aesthetic, symbolic, and cultural relevance. While the bull kelp is a potent signifier of Palawa existence, I work the harsh, abrasive steel wool with a resolve to show that my people will not disappear. I invite my materials to transform as I engage with conversations and considerations around colonialism, history, and race while grounding my Palawa presence.

Mandy Quadrio is a proud Trawlwoolway, Tasmanian Aboriginal woman with strong connections to her ancestral Countries of Tebrakunna, north-east Trouwunna, and the Oyster Bay Nation of eastern Trouwunna, Australia. A visual artist currently based in Meanjin, also known as Brisbane, she works across sculpture, installation, photography, and mixed media. She was recently awarded a doctorate of visual art from the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, Brisbane, Queensland. Through her practice, Quadrio reimagines cultural artefacts and found objects to achieve public and personal meaning through the politics of their materiality. She acts to counter the pervasive myth of Palawa extinction and to foreground historic and contemporary Palawa lived experience.

Notes

¹ “Palawa” is a word that Tasmanian Aboriginal people use to define themselves. See N.J.B. Plomley, *A Word-List of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Languages* (Launceston: Foot and Playsted, 1976), 316.

² “Trouwunna” is the name used for the island of Tasmania. Plomley, *A Word-List of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Languages*, 70.

³ Patsy Cameron, “Pallawah Women: Their Historic Contribution to Our Survival. Part 1: A Matriarchal Heritage,” *Tasmanian Historical Research Association* 41, no. 2 (1994): 65–67.

⁴ Cameron, “Pallawah Women,” 42-43.

⁵ Lynette Russell, *Roving Mariners: Australian Aboriginal Whalers and Sealers in the Southern Oceans, 1790–1870* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 102.

⁶ Russell, *Roving Mariners*, 102.

⁷ *Rite of Passage*, curated by Shannon Brett, was held at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Art Museum, Brisbane, from March 7 to May 10, 2020. The show then toured to NorthSite Contemporary Arts, Cairns, from September 24 to November 21, 2020. It featured the work of eleven Indigenous Australian female artists, including myself.

⁸ The central pillar within my installation at the QUT Art Museum was physically “extended” by sixty centimetres along the length of the ceiling. This artificial extension was then draped in steel wool. Given that this work was site-specific and could only exist in this space, it did not travel to the second iteration of the exhibition. Instead, a separate steel wool dilly bag was presented at the Cairns presentation of the show.

⁹ The Tasmanian Museum was established in 1843 by The Royal Society, the oldest Royal Society outside of England. See <https://www.tmag.tas.gov.au>.

¹⁰ “Full blood” is a racist description used to define Aboriginal people in terms of blood quantum.

¹¹ See John J. Cove, *What the Bones Say: Tasmanian Aborigines, Science and Domination* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1995), 50.