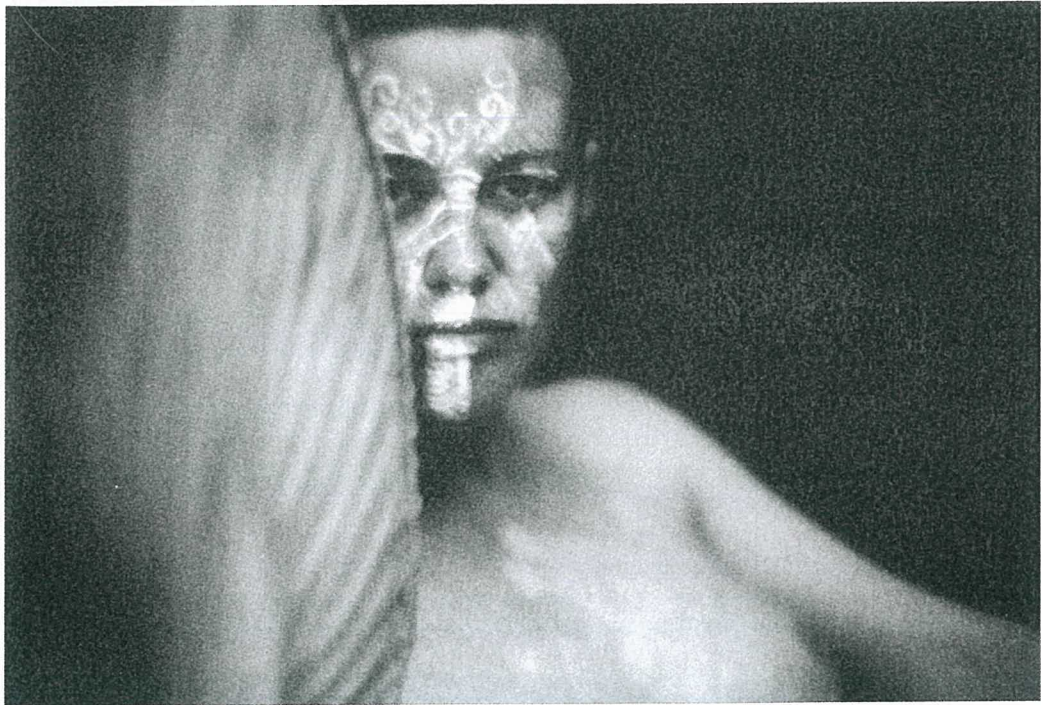


For artist Barbara Campbell, the attraction of the *Wunderkammer* that began at an early age has informed the work she has undertaken in museums. *Inflorescent* (2000) was a performance inspired by Sydney University's Macleay Museum. Campbell's take was unique in that not only did it highlight the institutional tendencies of the natural history collection with its origin in the gentleman-collector's cabinet of curiosities, it also extended its institutional critique to the conventions of the art museum, the tradition of the female nude and Orientalist discourses in art history. Since her first encounter with it, Campbell had wanted to work in the Macleay, that 'jewel box of a museum' that conformed the most to the *Wunderkammer* aesthetic that delighted her as child when visiting The Queensland Museum where her uncle was a curator: 'the whole sense of wonder when you're shown extraordinary, inexplicable objects without context in beautiful display cases, so framed for your viewing as important. Nostalgia is a strong impulse.'⁵¹ In *Inflorescent*, Campbell installed herself, naked and odalisque-style, in one of the wood-panelled exhibition nooks in the museum, her body covered in cycad frond patterns that only became visible under a UV light hidden in the palm leaf she used to gently fan herself. Campbell explains that,

I just wanted to be an object in the museum, I wanted to be treated the way anything else was that's on display. I was dealing with the politics of viewing, the techniques of the observer ... turning myself into an object or a specimen to be viewed. Because of course that is what's great about the Macleay, it's about ethnography and natural history and so I could be both those things.⁵²

While raising questions about the nature of spectatorship and the relationship between ethnography and natural history, *Inflorescent* also asks, given the aim of curators to enliven their collections, 'Does a living body among the museum objects make everything else dead or somehow more alive?'⁵³



2.4 Barbara Campbell, *Inflorescent* (2) (1999) Macleay Museum, The University of Sydney. Photo: Neil Roberts

Campbell next worked with the University of Melbourne's Grimwade collection during a residency there. Her research on the collection – made up of paintings, objects and furniture bequeathed to the university by one of Melbourne's industrial barons – uncovered some objects of particular fascination, including the so-called 'factory portrait' that depicts The Leech Aquarium (part of the family empire, it was used in the nineteenth century to store leeches before they were shipped to England for medical purposes) and a series of glass objects. Leeches and glass became key ciphers by which Campbell responded to the collection, culminating in a performance at the Ian Potter Museum.

The Grimwade Effect is a good example of how the *process* of an artist's 'intervention' in a museum can be mutually enriching. Campbell's research brought her into contact with a range of experts, working across the spectrum from leech farming to glass blowing. As Campbell explains, 'any time that I have engaged with people who I wouldn't normally have anything to do with as an artist I feel that it's like Christmas, that my involvement in their expertise, practice, whatever, extends them in a completely unpredictable way and it's often about problem-solving'.⁵⁴ These unlikely collaborations can result in genuine knowledge exchange and serendipitous discoveries.⁵⁵

Campbell's concern with the interpretation of history – including art history – and issues of Australian identity, has drawn her in much of her practice to museums and collections. As curator and academic Sarah Miller writes, 'Campbell has described her function as that of a medium, directing our attention to the past and the present ghosts of our shared experience, a kind of "non-spiritual intermediary between latent historical material and living audience"'.⁵⁶ Her artworks generally rely on two methods: deep, preparatory research, and forcing a rereading of the institutional spaces of knowledge-creation by inserting her living, gendered body into them. Through the very medium of performance, moreover, she asks difficult questions of the museum: about its mission of preservation and its investment in permanence, about its predilection for dead specimens and biddable materials, about its ability to adequately represent human experience in all its immediacy. As the artist notes, 'having a body in the museum causes problems for the institution, and I wanted to create that problem, to have the problem present in the museum rather than gloss it over'.⁵⁷ Moreover, performance is ephemeral and happens in real time. Once passed, it cannot be experienced in the same way again: all we have are residues, vestiges and poor copies. As Clare Grant observes when writing about Campbell's performance, *Cloche*: 'So, we won't see this piece again. We'll see an installation in an anthropology museum. Both performer and audience have moved on'.⁵⁸

Fresh Glories at The National Portrait Gallery (1997) – part of the exhibition *Archives and the Everyday* curated by Trevor Smith for Canberra Contemporary Art Space – is a key work in Campbell's engagement with institutional histories. The location of the gallery in the national capital's Old Parliament House, overlooking the Aboriginal Tent Embassy (est. 1972), was central to the artist's response. Campbell's starting point was a famous photograph of Trukanini (also known as Truganini), an Aboriginal noblewoman renowned as a guide and interpreter, but also (erroneously) as The Last Tasmanian Aborigine. Trukanini was a Palawa woman from Lunawannalooa (Bruny Island), whose mother was killed and sister abducted by white sealers, whose husband/betrothed Paraweena was thrown overboard from a boat by white sealers (who cut off his hands when he tried to cling to the boat) and, despite serious run-ins with the law, lived to be an old woman before her death in 1876.⁵⁹

After consulting the Riawunna Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Launceston, Campbell decided not to use images of Trukanini in her work, and instead to focus on portraiture itself, and how portraits of Trukanini 'kept feeding upon themselves and feeding the market'.⁶⁰ Her performance in the gallery entailed radical reinterpretations of the processes of photographic reproduction and portrait-making that highlighted the portrait-makers themselves and the role of television in creating portraits of contemporary political figures. As Sarah Miller comments,

By refusing to generate further images of Trukanini, and preferring the creation of 'fresh' images of Australian politicians, Campbell draws careful attention to the colonial apparatus still at work in Australia today ... Her

*political decision transforms her performance from a merely formal examination of the genealogies of the visual representations of Trukanini into an assemblage of actions and materials which come to the spectator as ... moments from our shared colonial history, and a recognition of the troubled and traumatic disjunction between the lived experience of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.*⁶¹

The Portrait Gallery, recalls the artist, was 'really interested' in the work largely on account of the scholarship she had invested in the project, instead of merely using the space. Campbell continues,

*I don't go into the institution with an antagonistic approach. I feel like our history is part of who I am, and I want to engage with the material that's there, otherwise, what happens to it? It's got to be engaged with somehow; this is just my way of operating on it.*⁶²

The work transformed Campbell's practice. It turned her to questions of Australian identity, including reflecting on the effects of European modernism in Australia, and resulted in further excavations of museums and their collections.⁶³ Campbell's work on Trukanini provides a good context to consider the program of interventions in The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) that began in the late 1990s.

TASMANIAN MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY

Perhaps the most significant item in TMAG's collection for many years were the remains of Trukanini. In the 1879 Sydney Exhibition, Trukanini was described as 'the last of the Tasmanians', as a memento 'of a people which like most other dark races died out when brought into contact with civilised life.'⁶⁴ Imagined by non-Indigenous Australians as the last of her people (despite there now being approximately 8,000 Tasmanians self-identifying as Aboriginal), her bones were exhumed two years after her death and sent to the museum in Hobart, where they were on display from 1904 until 1947 (with a replica being displayed in the Museum of Victoria). Not until 1976, 100 years after her death, were Trukanini's remains returned to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community for cremation; her ashes were scattered in the water near her birthplace.⁶⁵

The story of Trukanini is a powerful example of the imperial ideology at the heart of Western collecting and exhibiting practices. Indeed, the early museum can be understood as a site of scientific racism. The publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) fuelled interest in Aboriginal people and property as objects of scientific curiosity. Their bodies and artefacts were relentlessly pursued, especially when they were perceived to have been unsullied by European influences and therefore gave the appearance of a prehistoric character. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries European constructions of human progress, Australian Aboriginal people were regarded as the least civilised of all people in the world. In this sense, possessing Aboriginal people in part had to do with constructing notions of 'white man's progress', alongside remembering Aboriginal people as a 'disappearing race'. Museum collections of Aboriginal breastplates are the most compelling example of this practice. These insignia were issued to Aboriginal people as a marker for non-Aboriginal people and often bore inscriptions describing the individual as the last of his or her 'tribe'. That these objects were collected by museums demonstrates their broader role in the techniques of colonisation, as we discuss in the following chapter.

The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) is positioned deep within complex histories of colonisation and imperialism, while being an 'integrated museum' encompassing geology, anthropology, zoology, art and history (somewhat similar to The Australian Museum discussed in the next chapter). As the second site of permanent settlement by the British, being an important node in nineteenth-century sea-trading routes and 'as the zone of the most nearly successful Aboriginal genocide, Tasmania epitomises imperial philosophy and activity'.⁶⁶ The story of Trukanini highlights further this positioning of both the state of Tasmania and TMAG.

- 45 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the avant-garde*, trans. from the German by Michael Shaw; foreword by Jochen Schulte-Sasse (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
- 46 Caroline Rasmussen, 'A Dedicated Director was of Paramount Importance: Professor McCoy moves the Museum to the University of Melbourne 1856–1857', in *A Museum for the People: a History of Museum Victoria and its Predecessors 1854–2000*, ed. Caroline Rasmussen (Melbourne: Scribe, 2001), 32.
- 47 Beth Jackson, 'Wunderkammern: Actual and Virtual', *Artlink*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (1999): 28.
- 48 Jackson, 'Wunderkammern: Actual and Virtual', 29.
- 49 Jackson, 'Wunderkammern: Actual and Virtual', 29.
- 50 Jackson, 'Wunderkammern: Actual and Virtual', 29.
- 51 Barbara Campbell, interview, 2012.
- 52 Campbell, interview, 2012.
- 53 Campbell, interview, 2012.
- 54 Campbell, interview, 2012.
- 55 In this case, Campbell put in touch a seasoned DIY leech wrangler with a PhD student looking into captive breeding to further research on how to provide the far cheaper and effective real creatures to meet medical demand rather than develop synthetic substitutes: 'I thought, "wow, who said performance art was useless to the medical profession?"' Campbell, interview, 2012.
- 56 Sarah Miller, 'Introduction: Flesh Winnow and the Rhetoric of the Pose', in *Flesh Winnow: Barbara Campbell, Six performances 1997–2001*, eds Laura Ginters and Barbara Campbell (Sydney: Power Publications, 2002), 3.
- 57 Campbell, interview, 2012. In *The Grimwade Effect*, for example, where Campbell was laid out on a wooden slab while leeches burrowed into her skin, the performer realised (a little too late!) that she had not factored in that the gallery's air conditioning is set for objects not people. The low temperature meant she had to begin the leeches' work for them by piercing her own skin.
- 58 Clare Grant, 'What's Left: Cloche', in *Flesh Winnow*, 42.
- 59 David Hansen, 'Seeing Truganini', *Australian Book Review* (May 2010): 45.
- 60 Campbell, interview, 2012.
- 61 Sarah Miller, 'Introduction: Flesh Winnow and the Rhetoric of the Pose', in *Flesh Winnow*, 4.
- 62 Campbell, interview, 2012.
- 63 Sarah Miller, 'Introduction: Flesh Winnow and the Rhetoric of the Pose', in *Flesh Winnow*, 5.
- 64 *Notes on the 1879 Sydney Exhibition* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1880), 290.
- 65 Hansen, 'Seeing Truganini', 45.
- 66 David Hansen, 'The TMAG Commissions 1998', *Artlink*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (1999): 18.
- 67 Quoted in Hansen, 'The TMAG Commissions 1998', 19.
- 68 Hansen, 'The TMAG Commissions 1998', 21.
- 69 Hansen, 'Seeing Truganini', 46.
- 70 Hansen, 'Seeing Truganini', 51.
- 71 Hansen, 'Seeing Truganini', 51, emphasis in original.
- 72 Hansen, 'Seeing Truganini', 51.
- 73 AccessArt Centre for Learning and Discovery, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. *Patricia Piccinini: Evolution*. Interpretive Resource. Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, shown at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, 12 March–4 June, 2009, 2.
- 74 AccessArt, 2009, 8.
- 75 Hansen, 'Seeing Truganini', 46.
- 76 Linda Sproul, interviewed by Jennifer Barrett and Jacqueline Milner, Melbourne Museum, 16 June 2005. When she moved to her role as cultural producer and in interview, she described the liberating nature of her role at the Melbourne Museum.
- 77 Sproul, interview, 2005.
- 78 Sproul, interview, 2005.