THE ISLAND COULD BE HEARD

BELINDA HOWDEN

BY NIGHT

DEB MANSFIELD

Are you sure you can't hear that?
Deb Mansfield, 2015, hand-woven photo tapestry, resin cleat, lighting, electrical cord

Belinda Howden is currently a PhD candidate at the Sydney College of the Arts. Her research focus is the island as a cultural object.
She has completed an island residency, Iceland, and worked on the islands of the Veneto.
Her most recent curatorial project *Ash Island and its Transformations* looked at the cultural significance of Ash Island of the Hunter River, NSW.
Howden is an ex-lighthouse keeper.

The Island Could be Heard by Night is a collaborative project between Belinda Howden and Deb Mansfield.
With a focus on Nobbys Headland, Newcastle NSW, the project began in July 2014. It was seen through to an exhibition at The Lock-Up, Newcastle, in May 2015.
This document is a record of the stories and visual works featured in *The Island Could be Heard by Night* followed by a transcript of a conversation held between the two islophiles. The subject of conversation is, of course, islands.

Deb Mansfield is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Newcastle. Her research focus is islands she cannot reach.
She has completed two island residencies: Newfoundland and Tasmania.
Her most recent solo exhibition *Some Rocky Socket* brought to light her personal and familial sea-faring histories.
Mansfield is an armchair traveller.

My Grandfather was born and raised in Broken Hill. A town defined by dust and mining, its airborne soil cast a rusted haze across his childhood. He played, happily enough, amongst the endless sunburnt days. But as a young man who would one day become a sailor, and then one day a Captain, he dreamt only of a salve. He wished for a wet to all that dry. A cool to all that heat.

My Grandfather told me that Broken Hill was known for its rich orebody, a stream of silver and zinc and lead that flowed beneath its streets. It was a stream that buoyed the economy and the conversations of his colleagues. The townspeople built their houses in the half-shadow of the capped mountain, the broken hill after which the town was named, and mutually agreed the hill definitely didn't look any different to yesterday.

My Grandfather said he never believed his teachers and friends and he never tired of his daily practice of questioning. 'Are you sure you can't hear that?' he would ask. Some of them relied on a convenient cough or a well-timed sneeze but most would just flatly respond, 'hear what?'

Hear What?
Belinda Howden, 2015, narrated fiction, 1min 20sec

Emotional distress and distaste for Newcastle (the explosion has never been any different)
Deb Mansfield, 2015, hand-woven photo tapestry, resin cleat, lighting, electrical cord

The island could be heard by night, a low reassuring groan that called out from the harbour. If she half listened, in the state between awake and asleep, it had a sort of rhythm to it like a heavy body, turning and rolling, sharing her bed.

She liked to think it was just the sound of stretching, the island yawning itself from the heat of the day into the cool of the night. But really it was the sound of defeat. Each night the island distantly mourned. Coiled in on itself it faced away and quietly waited for the comfort of another body against it.

On some nights and for no real reasons, the cracks and groans were louder than usual. It was on these nights the island punctuated her last thoughts of the evening: the twitching muscle in her leg, resolving to call her sister tomorrow, a list of clothes needed for her trip, the sinking softness of her pillow, that she must, she must leave this town.

The island could be heard by night
Belinda Howden, 2015, narrated fiction, 1min 5sec

Charles O'Hara Booth is a fair and good-tempered little partner
Deb Mansfield, 2015, hand-woven photo tapestry, resin cleat, lighting, electrical cord

In 1843, during the early years of European settlement of Newcastle, a Commandant by the name of Charles O'Hara Booth visited the expanding colony. According to Booths diaries his singular reason for making the lengthy voyage north was regarding a close acquaintance, a 'fair and good tempered little partner'. At the time of writing Booth was stationed in Port Arthur where he oversaw the daily operations of one of Australia's most significant penal colonies for reoffenders, a position he had occupied for the previous decade.

Booth was known as a strategic authoritarian. During his time at Port Arthur, he introduced the practice of keeping guard dogs at the narrow isthmus connecting Port Arthur to mainland Tasmania. In essence, this rendered the penal settlement an island as convicts had to swim and risk drowning in order to escape. In his second year as Commandant, Booth developed a satellite colony off the coast of Port Arthur, making use of the small island of Point Puer. This was an incarceration site for female and prepubescent male convicts and devised by Booth as a method in 'minimising the excesses of the body' between the sexes. Although his rationale was founded in Christian sentiment, the practice of increasingly scaled-down containment was a practical resolution to containing the body or self, in this instance unwanted pregnancy and increased strain on already minimal medical resources of an outlier colony.

The extent of correspondence between Booth and his 'fair and good tempered' acquaintance inspired him to make the five day journey from Port Arthur to Newcastle. The letters between the two were of a personal tone but it is Booth's diaries that expose a deeper intention: 'should she be willing, a commandant's wife can live a very satisfactory existence'.

Upon arrival Booth describes the early settlement of Newcastle, paying particular attention to Coal Island (Nobby's Headland):

...a tall and distinct outcrop. The rock emerges at the mouth of the Hunter River, bore South 82 degrees West, distance three or four Leagues from Colliers Point. Morisset [Lieutenant-Colonel James Thomas Morisset] *tells me works connecting the island to mainland will be complete soon – a construction of significant perseverance against the sea. Would it were mine, a fine residence it would make. Also a reliable boundary it would make – excellent for those in need of reformation.*

Unfortunately, Booth's expedition was misguided. According to chaplaincy records, the object of his desire was already wedded two months prior. He made the return trip south after staying only four days in Newcastle. Considering the short period of visitation, Booth was clearly disappointed. His entries during this period were brief, primarily describing his dissatisfaction with the township: '...a place comprised of vulgar characters. P[ort]. Arthur – a settlement of those double distilled in poor logic and wretched will – contains more civility.'

Despite his emotional distress and distaste for Newcastle, Booth remained fascinated by Coal Island and the return journey proved productive. Within the first three days he had roughly sketched a reformatory structure to be situated on the island. It was a basic incarnation of what would later be known as a panopticon.

On the fourth day of his journey Booth fell ill. Immediately upon arrival, having possibly contracted tuberculosis, he admitted himself to Lime Island – a smaller island off the coast of Point Puer designated as quarantine and hospital to the Port Arthur settlement. Medical records cleared Booth of tuberculosis, typhoid and other illnesses known at the time. However, due to the continuing nature of his fever he was retained for medical observation. Three weeks of a sustained delirium kept Booth in quarantine confinement and, in his absence, he was medically retired from his post as Commandant

of Port Arthur. On the morning of 15 June 1843 Booth was found dead having drowned during the night in a failed attempt to swim to shore.

Increasingly scaled-down containment
Belinda Howden, 2015, vinyl lettering, GT Pressura Regular, 180x180cm

Copper and Silver and Sonar
Deb Mansfield, 2015, hand-woven photo tapestry, resin cleat, lighting, electrical cord

For Nissologists, those who commit their life to the study of islands, the relationship between the centre and periphery is one that perpetually troubles their arguments. For many, knowing the centre comes at the cost of the periphery. It is to hear the heart but not feel the skin. And, vice versa. Those who place all their attention on the fragile boundary forget the very purpose of vigilance in the first place. In their arguments the centralists make wild claims like, 'the sea is history!' and 'the island is pure present!' Some would even go so far as to say, 'islands are our only hope. They are our only chance to create a perfect society.' To which the peripheralists would quickly retort, 'you fools, don't you know what's good for one isn't what's good for all?'

The arguments would play out in all sorts of fashions. Some centralists thought themselves clever and made it an intellectual pursuit. They talked down their peripheralist opponents with words like salvation and redemption, and made evocative statements about ground zeros and clean states and new beginnings. The equally persuasive peripheralists, however, were never short for answers. 'What about tradition?' they would ask. 'What about history? Who are we if we know nothing of who we were?'

At this, the more practically-minded centralists would take up arms and supplies and stores and they would relocate. Moving to a sister island they would prove to the peripheralists just how it could be done, the ease with which their ideal community could be established. It was a very convincing method. So much so the centralists saw a flurry of new followers, usually those on the fence or the weaker-willed peripheralists, proffering themselves as essential to the new world. The more hardened older peripheralists, however, would remain unmoved. Upon their island they reassured their younger counterparts. 'You just watch.'

And they did just that, they watched. It was good practice for

peripheralists to stand at the edge observing the ocean but many now found their gaze rested on the centralists' island. From their vantage the centralists appeared always in progress. Every other day their farms expanded and every other week new houses were raised. Out of fear that the centralists might make an attempt to return, the peripheralists agreed they should increase their vigilance. Their township emptied out. Pausing business and abandoning their duties, the peripheralists now camped along the perimeter perennially scanning the horizon.

The centralists' life looked idyllic. Their new island existence was opportunity to begin again. And so, they rearranged their lives to reflect what they considered the highest order – everything for the greater good. The centralists decided they were allowed only to engage in occupations that benefitted the community. They banned the notion of private property and rid their existence of institutions like marriage, punishment, persecution, and the military. Leisure time was plenty, as everyone worked hard for the benefit of others, but they agreed that time was not to be used on deleterious practices such as gambling, imbibing, or hunting for sport.

As the township and their influence expanded across the island the centralists decided a small group dedicated to the centralist cause was needed, particularly to make decisions on behalf of those too busy with building and farming and teaching and caring. This group of centralists were small in numbers but efficient in enacting rules. As the centralists ever-increasing presence on the island had proven, they were nothing if not industrious. And together, the group decided industry was cornerstone to a centralists' way of life. They also decided if anything were to distract a centralist from their work it should be banned. Leisure time became a controlled terrain. Music was forbidden along with creating art, and the short hours in the evening that centralists once spent entertaining and telling stories to each other were now dedicated to thinking about

improving island productivity.

It was usual practice for centralists to congregate in the city centre every morning. At the beginning of each day they would take a moment to greet each other and dream quietly about the possibilities of their future together. It was a ritual the centralists enjoyed rehearsing. However, as their island existence became increasingly constrictive the older centralists grew weary of so much work and tired of the daily practice. Murmurs of misgivings began to spread. ‘I don’t feel like thinking about what I can do for my island today,’ one would suggest to the other. ‘Well, let’s be honest,’ the other would reply. ‘What has your island done for you lately?’ Uttered complaints about tired eyes and aching backs became more and more frequent until one day someone suggested the unforgivable, ‘can’t we just go back to the old ways?’

Across the way, the peripheralists were doing no better. Their vigilance was quickening their path to starvation. An increased dedication to the border meant food production had ground to a halt. The peripheralists lived on whatever the ocean washed up and their hungriness quickly became restlessness. Pointing at the centralists’ island, they would exclaim, ‘Look! They flourish while we sit here and watch’. As the desperation set in they would plea to each other. ‘We must escape this godforsaken place! If we don’t leave, we are as good as dead.’ ‘Can’t the elders see?’ the younger peripheralists would ask each other. ‘If we don’t leave there is no future. Leaving is our only hope.’

Centralists and Peripheralists
Belinda Howden, 2015, narrated fiction, 6min 20 sec

Three weeks of sustained delirium
Deb Mansfield, 2015, hand-woven photo tapestry, resin cleat, lighting, electrical cord

The island is a document of desire.

In 1770, when Cook spied the rocky outcrop floating in the then (to his knowledge) un-named harbour, he made it ugly: ‘A small clump of an island lying close to shore.’ Unforgettable and inessential. He nestled it close to the mainland – close to the known, the noteworthy – and scaled its matter down to that of little consequence. A small clump on the map.

Twenty seven years later and something changed, albeit not much. Perhaps just the title of the man. Shortland visited the town in search of making a name for himself. Coal was his currency and the island, a rich store. Two seams of hunger ran through his body: one at sea level washed visible by the salty tides, the other a thick black line drawn just above his eyes. ‘Commence digging’, he might have ordered his men. ‘Make it mine.’

Skipping forward another few years, twenty-one to be precise, and the rock quarried in hunger becomes a means to an end. Another man, this time Macquarie. This time the island must be made useful. ‘Rest its innards at its feet,’ he might have said. ‘Let us build a bridge made from its guts,’ he probably didn’t say, but rather dreamt himself saying in a reverie one hot night.

Thirty eight years is the time it can take to fold one landscape into another. Of course, most will tell you the mainland is the mother and the island a child, but how can you be sure? No time to think on that though, especially when there’s work to be done. The convicts build the missing Freudian link between homeland and hostile vessel while Macquarie calls out for England in his sleep.

Ten years later, long after Macquarie’s body and dreams are dead, the island is granted a vision. One bright eye forever fixed on the ocean. Powered by 20,000 candles, every night the light searches

for a shred of sail. Protected by three men they huddle round making sure it doesn't blow out in one cold southerly gust. The island is granted a voice. Who knows when? You could probably look it up but it's better to listen for the answer. The tone sings with a strength that reverberates the chest, calling out to you and your cargo.

Seventy seven years on and the sons of the three men decide enough is enough. How archaic, they think, to follow in their fathers' footsteps. They get up from their huddled position to stretch their legs and with seasons' worth of knowledge collected under their skins they shake hands and say their goodbyes. The island is de-manned.

Two women stretch their legs too. Only, it's not then, it's now. Eighty years later. They climb the face of the island not as conquest but rather to uncover something. Perhaps to uncover something about themselves, but probably not.

One of the women is a Captain's granddaughter. She hates to be described like that, in relation to the men of her life, but she is aware of history's limitations. So, when she introduces herself as her grandfather's granddaughter she is really saying, 'the salt in my blood is thick.' As fate would have it, she suffers terrible sea-sickness and often needs to travel by armchair.

The other woman moonlights as a lighthouse keeper. She crafts her fictional life atop the island's crest. In the dark of winter, when no one visits, she choreographs her dances alone. The movements are swept over by the rhythmic spotlight. It reveals nothing, except maybe the shape of her limbs in space. She would never tell anyone she was a lighthouse keeper mainly because, categorically speaking, that would be fiction too.

As the two women climb the island they churn through their collective thoughts. Each step a new statement, a new idea. Some

sure-footed others a little crumbly. They reach the top and they decide the island is definitely not about them or their desires. They agree. That would be archaic too.

The island is a document of desire
Belinda Howden, 2015, narrated fiction, 4min 30sec

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN TWO ISLOPHILES

BELINDA HOWDEN

DEB MANSFIELD

When I moved to Newcastle in 2014 I was told there was this woman in town doing a PhD on islands. I got so excited there was another islophile in town that I joked I was going to make a papier-mâché island dress and stand out the front of your house serenading you. So I'm curious if you think humour is an emotion people associate with islands?

I think the mindset people have when looking to an island, or with the intention to inhabit it with ideas or narratives or philosophies, is desire. It's a space where people place their desires, it is so often a landscape of desire.

So do you think desire is humourless?

No, I think humour is just one aspect of that desire. That might be one person's particular way of approaching the space. I do think it's broader than that. In your case, you've nailed the humour of being an islophile – making this ridiculous costume and serenading another islophile.

Obviously, in regards to the papier-mâché island dress I was just joking, and most probably drinking at the time, but my gut feeling is that people are inherently serious about islands. I mean, I don't know what geographies would be humorous? Maybe the beachside?

But the beachside is pretty serious too. At least, in an Australian identity. It's an extremely contested border. It's the stage for a lot of our fights and our violent history. It's also a line of death. You literally have lifesavers on that border.

Absolutely.

I like the humour and the play we've brought into this project but in my own research I feel I approach the island with great seriousness, a sort of a gravity that other landscapes don't have.

I know, right? And, it's not a sublime gravity.

No, no its not. It's funereal or the nightmare of imprisonment.

The fantasy of escape.

Exactly. There is a continental freedom or freedom from the mainland.

Actually that is a sort of sublime. To me the island is serious because it is mythical. And, therefore, it could have all the answers but they could be all the wrong answers. You only get one attempt to get there. The myth isn't really to return, is it?

Yeah, you're right. There is a strange finality to it that we assume exists. Why do we assume that? Why is that not present in other landscapes? It seems like on an island you're saying, 'well, if this is it once...this is it forever.' Has it got something to do with the fact that it is bound? Or the concept of containment? Because containment lends itself to homogeneity doesn't it? We think the physical nature of an island is consistent. We assume the island isn't varied because we also assume there isn't much space for variation and this creates a sort of homogeneity. Everything becomes uniform across the landscape.

Do you think these assumptions are because we never actually go to 'the' island?

Are you talking about a hypothetical island or do you actually mean Nobby's Island?

See? This is what I mean. The reason that you just asked that question is because we find it hard to separate the island *real* from island *myth*. There is genuine confusion between myth and real. When we use the word island, the fact that we have to even clarify whether it is real or imagined goes to show how pervasive in human thinking and projection the mythological island is.

I remember thinking at the beginning of the project...remember that day that we went up to Nobby's Headland together and took photos and hung out talking?

Yeah, and you told me about that light off the cliff.

The foghorn.

Yeah, the foghorn. That was amazing.

I recall from that day we had somehow agreed we were going to go there every Sunday.

Haha!

Fucking, when? I haven't been since. That was a year ago. Even the conception of the work has happened in the myth space. I don't actually ever go to the island.

I think that is really important to acknowledge.

Yeah, it's an imaginative space you're working in. And it's kind of visual. You still hold the visual of Nobby's in your mind's eye, or at least I did, but easily transplant other stories into that landscape, like the one about Broken Hill.

Years ago I did work about mangroves. I physically went there all the time. I mean, *all* the time. It didn't have the myth that is so heavily associated with the island. I agree with you. I don't feel like I have to go to the island either...which is wild!

Yeah it is. Last year I worked on an exhibition about Ash Island, which is set in the mangroves too, and just...every other weekend I was out there visiting the island. Not really by choice a lot of the time. I found I just had to keep going there.

Do you think it's because it is a flat island?

I'm not sure. I think it might be because it's an island lost. It physically isn't an island anymore, it was reshaped through amalgamation with other islands. It's lost its sense of containment or boundedness. But, there is still a residue like its namesake - Ash Island. It still has elements

of what we consider to be island-ness.

But, Nobby's is a lost island too. It's connected to Newcastle by the break wall. So, why go to Ash Island but not Nobby's? They're both lost.

Yeah, true. Maybe you're right, maybe it's because Ash Island is flat. But, Ash Island is tidal too and that gives it a different nature. The tides dominate, they make the landscape less about island-ness and more about filtration and cleansing.

Do you think the pointier or taller or bigger the island the less we feel inclined to visit it in the real? And we are more content to work with its myth. I love that idea of island hierarchy.

I couldn't say whether it's only height that produces that feeling. But, I have recently been thinking about the concept of size in my writing and research. I've been wondering whether the larger the island, or the more ballooned our sense of containment, the less likely the island is a location for desire. In other words, the tighter the boundary the more desire.

It might also work in reverse. At some point there is a moment where the island becomes too tiny. It doesn't hold the projection, it's just a rocky outcrop. It needs to hold the desire. And, for some people that geographic limit is hard to articulate.

Yeah, you're right.

Ok, can I ask you my next question? Over the past year we have met many times and talked at length about islands and false histories. One of our earliest conversations was about our love of the book *Atlas of Remote Islands: fifty islands I have never visited and never will* by German author Judith Schlansky. Do you see *The Island Could be Heard by Night* as a similar imagining? And, do you think Judith would like our exhibition?

Yeah, I think it is a similar imagining. I love that Judith uses the scientific as a point of departure. There are seeds of truth in her work. She has done her research and that's all you can do because, like she says,

she's never been to those islands and never will. But, the way she fabricates narrative around those seeds...

...and crosses time, which is what you've done with your writing too.

Yeah, so I feel like maybe she'd like it.

I hope she would like it. Judith's writing was my first departure from how I'd been working in regards to storytelling. It shifted how I make and how I want to make, which is why this collaboration has been...

...satisfying?

Yes.

Can I ask you a question? I came to you with the exhibition subject of Nobby's. How do you feel about your position as someone having recently moved to Newcastle in trying to tackle such a significant local icon?

I think taking on Nobby's came out of how difficult I found this town in my first year here.

How long have you been here, again?

Fifteen months.

Haha.

When I moved to Newcastle I was quite taken aback at how parochial the community is. There is a palpable contempt, or maybe snobbery, towards outsiders and other towns. Novocastrians are very proud of Nobby's and I don't think, as a newcomer, I could have responded to any other site. Nobby's is such a pious...

...symbol.

Yeah, a symbol of Novocastrian pride. The other day I read in the Herald, an opinion piece on the university by a PhD candidate there, Bronwyn

McDonald, where she wrote, “We are a parochial and committed bunch.”[1] I couldn’t believe she was using the word parochial as a positive. I couldn’t believe she was using the word parochial as a way to *describe a university*. There is a world beyond this town filled with interesting people and I’d say a lot of Novocastrians are interested in that. But I’m mentioning McDonalds line because it’s an attitude I have encountered quite a bit here. Celebrate the insular. It’s myopic and odd, and it permeates this town’s identity. But, that’s just my experience. What about you?

I would say I have an oscillating love-hate relationship with Newcastle. I’m not from here so I don’t have that staunch Newcastle pride you’re talking about. There are so many fantastic ways to live a well-lived life here. But, in so many other ways it is unsatisfying. Newcastle has a sort of perpetual nature to it, a nature of never becoming. To tackle Nobby’s is ambitious because it really is Newcastle’s icon. I think part of making it our subject is to address the myth of that pride. For me, that’s where the false histories come in. We are creating a space and moment to re-write the myth, or at least to unveil aspects of it. You know?

Absolutely. But, to be honest, this is a slightly scary topic to be talking about.

Shall we move on then?

Ok, let’s do that. As an islophile, do you hate it when people ask you the ‘what would you take to a deserted island’ scenario?

I’ve never had that! You are officially the first person to have ever asked me.

Bullshit.

Seriously!

How have you gotten this far in life and not had that question?

Wait, do you mean in general? Or, because I’m researching islands?

No, I mean in general. I thought you would have played this game because you are an islophile. You love islands. But, if people did ask you the deserted island question, how would you respond?

I would probably be a fucking smart arse. I'd say, 'it depends what you consider deserted because I've read a book about the idea of kinship on the island. And, just because it's not occupied by humans doesn't mean the island is deserted. What about all other classes of life forms? Like, plants and animals?' Haha.

Well I ask because my last question is: What would you take to a deserted island?

Great.

And, you're allowed three things.

Jesus, I don't know.

What about Judith Schlansky's...

Yes! That is exactly what I was thinking! An atlas of islands that I will never visit.

That is the best answer. The second thing?

Another copy of Judith Schalansky in case the first one gets ruined.

I think that is a personality thing.

Yeah, and water. What about you? You can't get out of answering that.

I would be very practical. I would take fire, somehow, fire things. I would take my German winter feather doona. I would really miss that. And then chocolate.

That's not practical at all!

I know, but it's kind of emotionally practical. Because I think, quite rightly, I'd die within three days.

Oh yeah, totally. There definitely isn't a Tom Hanks situation happening for you.

I think even knowing that, I'm like, 'I'll give that to you island. You can kill me. You can kill me.'

See, that's where the gravity of the landscape comes in again. Immediately you think of the island as a keeper of death.

Yeah, and we may as well go out with two copies of Judith Schlansky's book. You know...as the island's volcano erupts and the lava takes over...

...yeah. Even if I'm parasitic, lying on my side, I'll be flicking through...

...when you've got chronic diarrhoea...

Yeah, yeah. Dysentery...

So, moving on from the dysentery, Bel. What are your questions?

I wanted to talk about two key ideas. The first is collaboration. What was it like to be exposed to a different methodology? And what does collaboration mean to you?

I think this collaboration is incredibly positive. Before, when you said you came to me with the idea of Nobby's...

...you think you had the idea for this exhibition?

Yep, I did. In my head I had already rewritten history.

I can absolutely tell you, after you made your papier-mâché island dress joke, I said, 'well we should probably do a project together.'

I suppose it shows how positive I think the collaboration has been. If it

was negative I'd be saying..

...oh, it's Bel's shit idea. I've been dragged along by this shit idea that she's cooked up without me. I had nothing to do with it.

Yep. Exactly.

Well then, it's actually fantastic that you consider it your idea.

Initially though, I was freaking out because you didn't have a practice that I thought was extensive.

Yeah, or even very clear.

But I knew I just wanted to do something with you. I think the way you and I talk about our research is very much aligned. And, we are very generous with each other. There is a real respect and we've become friends because of it. In our area of academia that doesn't get spoken about much.

Yeah, I think collaboration is a word too easily thrown around. I don't think a lot of people know what it is. What we have done so far is more successful than some of my experiences in curating. And, that job is mostly a supportive position. I've found even in a role like that you've got to fight for something to happen, you know? It can be like pulling teeth. It gets pretty scary if you're trying to realise a project with someone you've not got a lot of confidence in. And, that works both ways, especially if the connectivity is lacking.
But, if we are talking in an industry sense people use the word collaboration for funding, marketing and all sorts of things. The definition of how collaboration works and what it means for those involved goes unarticulated. It seems like good collaboration can generate new knowledge and not just tick the box. But, because collaboration is process-based it can be, at times, quite invisible and hard to define.

Do you think a collaboration like this will reoccur for either of us again during our PhD's or do you think it is a one-off thing?

I don't know. I think it is too soon to say. I need to digest what has happened because it has taken me by surprise. When I approached you with project...

I think we've already established that you didn't....

Haha. Anyway, when I approached you I put myself in a supporting role. In my head the writing was supposed to support the exhibition, which is what I'm comfortable with. Coming out onto stage with you and being given equal weight in terms of exhibition content and visibility was unexpected. I think it's a lot to say right now whether it's a one-off or if what we have done has actually worked.

And this is interesting, us reflecting on the exhibition because we haven't even installed it yet. We haven't seen the work up and finished.

I know!

But we are so confident in it.

Yeah. I think having a conversation about the exhibition as if it's already happened is completely in sync with everything else we have done.

Yeah, delusional.

Haha, exactly.
So, the other topic I wanted to ask you about is gender. You've already mentioned the fact that this is a two-woman show. What do you think of this? There are moments in the exhibition that address issues of gender, making use of male subjects such as grandfathers and Commandants. Is this something you were expecting or intending? What is your understanding of how this subject emerged?

I think there are structures of how we typically read island histories and storytelling. I'm sick of reading or hearing about men - white men - who've done something on the land in Australia. So I like that we are using false histories. But, what I really want to say is I like that we are lying. I like that we are lying in these sea-faring, white, male spaces of

storytelling. This is why I appropriated Karsh's portrait of Hemingway and merged it with my own. I hated the *Old Man and the Sea*. That book annoys the shit out of me. To me it's just a big cock-in-hand, fucking repeat of the male 'struggle'. The man that goes to battle with himself, with the sea or whatever lives in it... I'm bored of it. I like that we're giving Charles O'Hara Booth this mutated Hemmingway portrait. It seems fitting.
I don't think you can move through the art world, or society, as a female and not be thinking about gender. I really don't have space for people that don't. And it doesn't have to be the thing that I talk about the most, but I would be foolish not to think about it. I'm a 38 year old female artist who works at a tertiary level of research. I would say gender discrimination is real and prevalent. You?

Well one of the stories, *Centralists and Peripheralists*, has been written almost entirely out of my disgust for... you know, the subject of that story is utopianism – the idea that we can live a better way and we can lead a better life. But, the scholarship around this subject is quite literally men, across time, yelling at each other. And to me... I think, well...you're all wrong. That's the point right? They're all wrong. There is no right. Why do these scholars think they have the voice to say what should or shouldn't be? The arrogance of it is overwhelming. Who says they know how everyone else should live? Most the time the models, if you look closely at them, don't factor women. There is no sense of childcare, the role and value of women's work, or even a basic premise of what it is to be female.

Absolutely.

So, in that sense, one of the stories has been written from my distaste at that discovery. I find it interesting that I've chosen to write some of the other stories through male subjects although I'm unsure as to whether that helps or hinders female representation in island storytelling and histories.

Yeah, I agree. What do women in sea-faring stories even look like? What's that visual?

And, what's their role?

Normally for watery, sea-faring stories our options are Ophelia...

...or Mills and Boon. I mean, what are the women doing in these water stories?

You know, when they aren't *fetching* it...

Haha.

But, seriously. We can see the gap of female representation in island storytelling and island myth. From the beginning, I think our main subject was island myth but we've nicely woven the subject of female representation into the exhibition too. I think it is interesting for young women to make work about characters like Charles O'Hara Booth, using traditional historical vernaculars, because these vernaculars are a sort of comfortable space for audiences.

Exactly. I think in an exhibition about a landscape like Nobby's there is a sense of anticipation, maybe even an expectation, that these historic modes will be present. It feels like there is an underlying assumption that the exhibition and our work will be didactic in some way or another. I think that assumption has a lot to do with the subject matter and a standardisation of the way we come to understand history, landscape and the intersection of the two. Of course that assumption is so fucking boring and makes for boring artwork, too. But, I think making use of those historic modes as a way to insert a different narrative is much more revealing. It gives you space as a writer or an artist, a space to engage with a poetic truth. Your position is less bound to the arguable truths of history and more open to questioning, exploring the very modes we use to know ourselves.

Well, I think your writing is beautiful. The thing I really enjoy about it, which is probably what I enjoy about my work too, is that we neaten everything. We neaten everything that we are kind of angry about, for want of a better word. When I read your first piece of writing for the show I thought we absolutely have to call our exhibition *The Island Could be Heard by Night*, as these were the words that stood out to me immediately. The sentence conjures up everything we have been trying to achieve, a tangible false

history. It is incredibly seductive and inherently visual.

Actually that is a good segue because we haven't spoken about the visuals of your work. For example, the exploding island image. How did you come up with that particular image?

I find that image a little bit uneasy, in a good way. I created the 'island' from appropriated mainland imagery so it's not a real island at all. I don't love that island because it's not an island. A lot of my imagery draws on appropriated islands, just not this work.

So basically it is a bitten off piece of mainland.

Yes. I used a piece of mainland imagery, flipped it and pushed it in a bit so it wasn't totally mirrored. But if you look at it closely it's mirrored enough to be distasteful. If you're an islophile it's distasteful. It's too perfect. We know how islands should look.

Yep.

And then I added a mine explosion to the image. So, the island is about to die anyway or, at least, be severely altered. An island exploding is less distasteful than a faux island. And, I used the pink at the top of the explosion because I knew it was a good way to give people an obvious untruth. Without the pink, I think the viewer would hone in on the faux island too quickly. The explosion weirdly comforts the viewer. If they're trouble by the island's pink explosion, they've missed the fact that the island doesn't even exist. On some level I think everyone is going to recgonise it is fiction and that's the same with your writing. You've used a historical vernacular to dazzle and distract the audience, and I've done the same with the explosion.

The explosion works so well too because Nobby's once was an island the community actually wanted to blow up. And, they half did.

Boom...If someone can look at my work and feel slightly unsure or confused but still using a seductive aesthetic, then that's what I'm aiming for. I like *dis-ease*. And I think that is where you and I connect. We

both work with disturbance.

Yeah, I agree. I think disturbance is core to what we've been doing in this project. For both of us, there is an attempt to usurp people's assumptions.

The more I move through the art world, through academia and being an artist, there are these spaces where you are meant to be...

...truthful.

Yeah. But, if your practice is to question and query then I think we should be having a crack at those assumptions too.

Yeah, agreed. I really enjoy the fact that I've disguised the Charles O'Hara Booth story as wall text. I love the idea that people will potentially read it as truth. My curatorial understanding of wall text is to help anchor an exhibition with a background truth – information about the artist or the subject that the audience might need. In this case though, the wall text is fiction. And yet, because of those assumptions, the audience will still approach that story as the historic anchor.

And those two front rooms are domestic, historical, fact telling, architectural spaces.

Yeah, that's right.

And that's where the two biggest lies of the exhibition are sitting.

Exactly. It's so wonderful your exploding island and the Booth story will sit opposite each other in those rooms.

I know. It's the lie and the lie.

I haven't told you this before but I sent the Booth story to someone for editing. There was a comment against one section where they said the language was too evocative. And, it dawned on me. They were reading the story as if it were history.

No, I didn't tell them it was fiction, not at all. I couldn't believe I actually had a moment where I was like, ' oh, they've read it as history'. Immediately, I had a kind of defensive response. I thought, 'no, that's not right. I want the subtle evocation. I want the reader to go into that that evocative space.'

Exactly.

Exactly.

...yeah, to realise the disturbances are working.

Had you told them that it was...

So maybe you can't make the vernacular so strict.

...like the mirroring of the island...

To get the edit back and find out...

The disturbances are working.

L: *A reliable boundary (and this is where Bel was found)* R: *The island punctuated her last thoughts of the evening*
Deb Mansfield, 2015, hand-woven photo tapestry, resin cleat, lighting, electrical cord

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[1] McDonald, Bronwyn 'Newcastle University a Unique Place', *Newcastle Herald,* April 14, 2015, http://www.theherald.com.au/story/3011442/opinion-newcastle-university-a-unique-place/?cs=4522

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