

## Digging deep

Queensland artist Wendy McGrath explores landscape and embedded memory at an archeological dig on a Tasmanian convict site.

*The land speaks...  
the land does have a voice,  
a life of its own, a history  
of its own... we just need to  
pay attention.*

When making roads and bridges in the North and Midlands of Tasmania in the mid-19th century, convicts were confronted with the hard labour of having to break down the rocks that had been quarried. Working to the Macadam road system meant the rocks for this purpose had to be of a certain size: just big enough to fit into the convicts' mouths. This is not a visualisation to dwell on. Nevertheless, it is one that has remained with me as I have worked in recent years around the Kerry Lodge convict station and barracks, south of Launceston.

The Lodge, built around 1847, housed up to forty convicts at any one time. As I responded to this image of the mouth-sized rocks, the work *Macadamized* came into being. It is a drypoint etching I created on a card matrix, using

etching tools to score the surface, with glue textures for tone. The

image was made directly onto the plate with no preparatory drawings and emerged as I worked, as did other convict images made into a woodcut.

The journey to this point has evolved from the basis of being a landscape installation artist whose work is to listen and give voice to hidden histories. Digging deep metaphorically and physically, I attempt to bring landscape and history to life as a visual record through site-specific artworks, gathering materials from the site where possible, or using materials sympathetic to the site. My work investigates the concepts of embedded memory and vital materialism<sup>1</sup> in landscape sites and artefacts, and the mediums I use are site-specific installation, sculpture, printmaking, artist books and photography. I have a direct physical engagement with the landscape, the weather, and materials available, and am inspired by a belief in deep ecology, or the intrinsic value of all things animate or inanimate. Thus, my practice aims to be environmentally safe and 'treads lightly on the earth', using and teaching non-toxic printmaking.

Considering this practice of exploring the concepts of memory in landscape, and how our perception of landscape 'is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock',<sup>2</sup> I was excited at the invitation from curator Dr Karen Hall from the Tasmanian College of the Arts to participate in the Kerry

Lodge Art and Archaeology Project in Tasmania. This archaeological dig is a historically significant collaborative and transdisciplinary project spanning four years. The archaeological investigations which began in 2015 take place at various locations on

a farming property south of Launceston. The project brings together archaeologists from the Universities of Tasmania and Manchester, and up to ten artists at any one time to participate in the dig and creatively interpret the project. The artists can also work on the site dig as volunteers.

I arrived in Launceston ready for the Easter 2016 archaeology dig with camera, sketchbook and some prior knowledge of the convict history of Tasmania gained through research into my ancestor, John Lakeland, who was the Chief Superintendent of Convicts under Governor George Arthur. Being on site I couldn't help but wonder if my ancestor had had a hand in planning this convict barracks, a pinch point for travel between the North and the Midlands. I often sensed Lakeland's presence during later visits when I spent time alone walking the landscape in the glorious (rainy and cold) Tasmanian weather. This pervaded my thoughts and work, the history of Lakeland enmeshed with the history of the site, creating a kind of parallel universe where I was on site in the present but also on site imagining my distant ancestor. The research I had done informed my work to a degree, and the text on images came from a direct transcription of Lakeland's journals.

It was a source of wonder and intrigue to watch the dark past emerge two centimetres at a time, each day bringing a sense of apprehension and excitement as well as slight dread at what might be uncovered — confirmed when I learnt of labouring over mouth-sized rocks.

The intent of curator Karen Hall, as articulated in conversations, was to allow the artists to participate in any way they wished to work, to let the art project develop organically.

Each artist approached their involvement differently and had individual responses to the site including video, installation, sculpture, painting, printmaking, drawing and poetry.

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**opposite** Wendy McGrath, *Merino Cap (detail)*, 2016, intaglio etching, Hahnemühle etching paper, rusting, wax, linen thread, merino wool, 33 x 14 x 8 cm size of sculpture, unique state.

**right** Wendy McGrath, *Macadamized*, 2016, drypoint etching, Hahnemühle etching paper, 80 x 30 cm, edition of 3.