

**Gail Hocking**

**PERIPHERAL DISTURBANCE**

wandering between worlds



**The Guildhouse Collections Project**

Flinders University Art Museum

6 October – 30 November 2018



## Foreword

Established in 1966 for the purposes of education and research, the Flinders University Art Museum collections now comprise more than 8000 works of art. Spanning the 15th–21st centuries they represent various currents in Western art history as well as diverse indigenous visual art practices, including by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists. Together, the works in the Art Museum’s care constitute the most extensive public holding of art in South Australia after the state gallery, and represent one of the largest and most idiosyncratic university art collections in the nation.

The Guildhouse Collections Project delivered in partnership with the Art Museum, provides an extraordinary opportunity for artists to delve into this unique repository—to research, study and collaborate with curators and create new work for exhibition at the University’s expansive Bedford Park campus. By opening the collections in this way, not only do artists benefit from direct and extended engagement with works of art, but their readings and responses facilitate alternative ways of seeing, experiencing and understanding artworks and their histories for both the Art Museum and its audiences.

Gail Hocking’s engagement with Flinders has centred on the Ernabella Arts Archive; a collection owned by Ernabella Arts and held by the Art Museum for safekeeping and research. The archive features approximately 750 works from the 1940s to the present day by artists from Pukatja (Ernabella) in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands of far north-west South Australia. New work has emerged from the artist’s time spent with this collection, as well as wide reading and quiet meditation on the strength and resilience of Anangu women who navigate change through their art practices.

We thank Tjunkaya Tapaya of Ernabella Arts with Hannah Kothe (Art Centre Manager 2015–2018), who generously reflect on the artist’s work in their essay. Together they bring Anangu perspectives to the project and convey the power of art to communicate across cultures.

The Guildhouse Collections Project demonstrates the value of creating new and ambitious environments for artists, collections and audiences to coalesce. We gratefully acknowledge the Government of South Australia and the Copyright Agency Cultural Fund for their support of this initiative, and congratulate Gail Hocking on the thoughtful body of work created in response to her residency at the Art Museum.

Emma Fey  
Chief Executive Officer  
Guildhouse

Fiona Salmon  
Director  
Flinders University Art Museum

image front and inside cover

Gail Hocking  
Australian, born New Zealand (1963– )  
*A precarious resilience* (installation detail) 2018  
found eucalyptus branch, muslin, black cement, porcelain slip,  
blended soy wax with artist’s skin imprint, hairnets  
dimensions variable  
© the artist  
photograph Grant Hancock



## An imperfect chrysalis

Gail Hocking is an alchemist of matter. She manipulates materials into new forms which vibrate with meaning and embody alternate ways of seeing oneself and the world we share. The artist's approach to making is grounded in her continual search for the feeling of home and all this entails: belonging, love, connectedness and care.

In her desire to learn about the custodians of the northern part of the State, Hocking researched the Ernabella Arts Archive, a collection of approximately 750 artworks primarily made by women. As a group, archivally boxed and crated, wrapped and rolled, she considered it from the edges, paying sensory attention to the layers of prints, paintings and textiles; perceiving from a distance, Pukatja (Ernabella), a community in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands.

Philosopher Elizabeth Grosz refers to Aboriginal art of the Western Desert, not as representation but as: 'expression, extending out'.<sup>i</sup> It is this collective expression from the Pukatja region that Hocking felt and responded to in the development of *PERIPHERAL DISTURBANCE: wandering between worlds*, a multi-site exhibition across Flinders University's Bedford Park campus.

In the installation *Fragile echoes*, found eucalypt branches stand planted, bearing new roots in a temporary home above the lake on a grassy bank of the University. The grove of slender arboreal forms seem human in their size and posture. Awkward and exposed, their damaged limbs are dry from the sun and their bark-skin is flaked and cracked with time. Some wounds are bandaged: wrapped in nurturing muslin and sealed hard with cement stained white with colonial residue.

Each wound births an imperfect chrysalis, like a malformed blossom, coated with photo-luminescent paint which, in the slippery transition where twilight ends and night begins, radiates an unearthly blue and calls forth the supernatural. This is the crepuscular hour, when purple swamphens return to nest amongst the *minnokoora*,<sup>ii</sup> when possums emerge to hunt prey, and when Hocking invites the viewer into 'the gateway of the imaginary':<sup>iii</sup> to quieten, reflect and seek transformation. At this threshold of the unknown lies the artist's optimism—hope for change and a better future for the earth.

*Fragile echoes* is inspired by the enduring sanctity of waterholes for Anangu (Western Desert Aboriginal people). For the artist, the work is a meditation on their significance, primarily for women, as birthing spaces of which to return, to reflect and to reunite with family and Country; where, across generations of women, cultural teaching and learning takes place. As an outsider, Hocking pays homage to these sacred sites and acknowledges them as incomprehensible realms of understanding for non-Indigenous peoples.

image Gail Hocking  
Australian, born New Zealand (1963–)  
*Fragile echoes* (installation detail) 2018  
found eucalyptus branches, muslin, white cement,  
water-based photo-luminescent paint, dimensions variable  
© the artist  
photograph Grant Hancock

Across the way, tucked inside the University's Hub sits the sculpture *A precarious resilience*. A rogue branch embedded in concrete is black as if burnt by a scrub fire and sprouts new life. Numerous shoots of hand-cast porcelain oyster shells suspend inside delicate brown hairnets, like miracle babies: cradled in the precarious balance between life and death... saved (we hope)... by the mother tree and the artist as mother and grandmother.

Wax moulds of Hocking's hands, which have raised two daughters into adulthood and now guide their offspring, reside in each shell. A yielding material, the wax is textured with prints of the artist's skin. Skin on skin. At once held and holding, the tiny hybrid creatures mirror female genitalia, evoking the goddess Aphrodite from Greek mythology who was 'conceived in an oyster shell': a symbol of fertility, love and sex.

As depicted in 17th century Dutch painting however, the oyster can represent indulgence and excess—mirrored in contemporary society with oyster reefs being one of the most exploited marine habitats on the planet.<sup>iv</sup> Their demise reflects our consumer habits. But perhaps oysters are also a sign of hope: one of many solutions to global warming with their remarkable ability *en masse* to filter large bodies of water; provide homes for innumerable marine creatures; and reduce coastal erosion.

For Hocking, the intimate act of becoming the oyster calls upon her memories of collecting them along the beaches of her childhood home in Opunake, Aotearoa (New Zealand), and speaks to her belief of the interconnectedness of all things. It honours the critical importance of healthy animals and their environments, especially for Indigenous peoples, and in this sense was inspired by the animated paintings and screenprints of animals by Pitjantjatjara artist Nura Rupert.

Nearby, hangs the installation *Perceiving invisible connections*. Black and chestnut-brown ponytails, made from horse and human hair, cascade like waterfalls from five long tubes of steel that arc and bend to an unknown rhythm. Creases form at each inner curve like bunched skin. Mirror-polished, the sinuous tubes reflect slithers of the onlooker and their environment. They momentarily subsume us. For a flicker of time we are conjured within the work and implicated in this confusing mess of the world. We cannot escape.

Mimicking the pull of the earth's magnetic field and acknowledging its force as a protector of all life from the decimating power of the sun, Hocking embeds rare earth magnets within the hair. In their irresistible presence, the inner workings of a pile of iron filings transform. Atoms align, propelling the iron particles as if under a trance: to gather, climb and mingle with gravity and form micro clumps of dark icicles amongst the hair. They navigate perpetual motion like the compass that constantly seeks true north.

The remaining filings not cast under this spell soon will be. The movement of air created by passers-by, air conditioning units, or the industrial fan above, causes wisps of hair to quiver and sweep against the filings: tracing, erasing and retracing like fingers drawing into red sand. The artwork becomes both kinetic and performative and, for Hocking, is a respectful nod to the practice of ephemeral sand drawing by Anangu women as a tool for intergenerational sharing of cultural knowledge.

In *PERIPHERAL DISTURBANCE: wandering between worlds*, time, memory and love cycle in a matrilineal ecosystem where bodies of water, land, animals and humans correlate. Hocking's work, inspired by her interpretation of the 'expression' of the Ernabella Arts Archive, is filtered through the lens of her personal experience, beliefs and unique material language. She seeks to evoke a sense of vulnerability and in doing so invites the viewer to shed their skin and become the oyster, the horse, the tree, the lake; to connect.

Nic Brown  
Collections Curator  
Flinders University Art Museum

<sup>i</sup> E Grosz, 'Living art and the art of life: women's painting from the Western Desert', in P Curtin, ed, *Before and after science: 2010 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2010, p16.

<sup>ii</sup> *Minnokoora* is the Kurna word for bulrush.

<sup>iii</sup> I McLean, *White Aborigines: identity, politics in Australian art*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p2.

<sup>iv</sup> D McAfee and S Connell, 'Huge restored reef aims to bring South Australia's oysters back from the brink', *The Conversation*, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/huge-restored-reef-aims-to-bring-south-australias-oysters-back-from-the-brink-77405>, accessed 4 September 2018.



## The sounds of an archive

Objects hold and share knowledge, as do their makers, Country and cultural practices. The knowledge shared by an object is silent: it does not answer back or question assumptions. Instead, an object allows the beholder to bring to it their own perspective and experience.

Paradoxically, listening, or to use the Pitjantjatjara term, *kulini*, is still required. *Kulini* translates most simply as: ‘to listen’. An expanded definition casts light on how one might listen ethically to an object.<sup>i</sup> In the Pitjantjatjara dictionary the word *kulini* has nine separate definitions:

1. Listen. To heed; 2. Hear; 3. Think about, consider;
4. Decide; 5. Know about; 6. Understand; 7. Remember;
8. Feel; 9. Have a premonition from a sensation in the body.<sup>ii</sup>

When reflecting on Gail Hocking’s research into the archive of Ernabella Arts and her responsive new work, the concept of *kulini* is helpful. While there was nothing aural about Hocking’s engagement with the archive or the community more broadly, her process did involve an act of listening or *kulini*. Her contact with the work occurred in the climate-controlled and hushed environment of the Flinders University Art Museum collection facility. White-gloved, silent and mostly alone, she viewed the archive of early works by many still living Ernabella artists; pieces include works on paper, canvas and cloth, batik, and others handwoven from sheep fleece or built from clay.

What Hocking gleans reflects both her own experience as well as a registering of common experience, with an understanding of her position as an outsider—a peripheral player granted a glimpse into another’s culture. As educator and academic Sam Osborne suggests, listening or *kulini* through an Anangu (Western Desert Aboriginal) lens, ‘engages the intellect and draws on experiences and memory’,<sup>iii</sup> qualities evident in Hocking’s thoughtful works. Themes of motherhood, the bonds of womanhood and knowledge sharing stand out, as does her appreciation of a connection to what she refers to as ‘non-human others’.<sup>iv</sup> In an Anangu sense this is considered connection to Country and *Tjukurpa*, and sits at the centre of what holds culture together.



images above and below

Tjungkaya Tapaya  
 Australian, Pitjantjatjara people (1947–)  
*Untitled (batik)* (detail) undated  
 batik, coloured dyes on silk, 90 x 90 cm  
 Ernabella Arts Archive TAN 1264.079  
 Flinders University Art Museum Collection  
 © the artist / Ernabella Arts Incorporated

Nyuwara Kanngitja Tapaya  
 Australian, Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara people  
 (1971–c2005)  
*Ini wiya (untitled)* (detail) 1996  
 etching, ink on paper, artist’s proof, 38x26.9 cm  
 Ernabella Arts Archive TAN 1264.102  
 Flinders University Art Museum Collection  
 © the estate of the artist/Ernabella Arts Incorporated

The means by which Hocking has garnered her knowledge of the Ernabella women and their work however, is vastly different to how information is gained and shared within an Anangu context. For Anangu, the transmission of knowledge, particularly across generations, is aural; it is enacted and living. Most often it involves narrative storytelling, observation, demonstration and instruction.

In reflecting on what Hocking has learnt of Ernabella artists from their archive, senior Ernabella artist and community leader Tjunkaya Tapaya considers the way she gathers her own knowledge of Country and culture and applies this to her work as an artist:

Panya ngunytjulu kamilu tjanaya mai kunakanti atulpai apungka kala nyakupai. Munuya pulkara kilinankupai unytjuntju munuya mai uninyalpa uralpai. Palula nguruya rungalpailta tjiwangka tjungaringka. Munulanya ungupailta kala ngalkula paltja alatjitu nyinara inkapai. Panya nganananya ngunytjulu mamalu tjana katira nintilpai kala nyakula nintiringkupai. Munula mukuringanyi alpamilantjaku. Ngayulu nintiringangi ngayuku ngunytjungka munu anangu kutjupa tjuṭa-ngka kulu. Nyara palula nguru ngayulu pulkaringkula workaringi craft roommangka artist. Ngayulu nintini ngayaku unṭalpa panya walka ngayuku munu Tjukurpa kulu. Kuwari ngayulu nintini puliri tjuta.

I recall my mother and my grandmother and all the women would be there pounding *kunakanti* [a native grass] with their stone tools, and we would watch them at work. They would clean and process them until all the chaff was gone, and all they had was clean seed left. Then they would grind them up with their *tjiwa* and *tjungari* grindstones. Once prepared, they would give us the food, and we would eat and be completely satisfied, and then we would go off to play. Our mothers and fathers took us children everywhere in the bush and showed us around our whole Country so we could learn. I spent my childhood and adolescence learning in this way from my parents and other relations and once I was old enough I joined the craft room and became an artist. I shared my skills and knowledge with my [late] daughter and now I pass them on the next generation, my granddaughters.<sup>v</sup>

In comparing these two methods of knowledge-gathering, what must be remembered is that Anangu artists create works of art in part to share their Country and culture with outsiders, knowing that what outsiders can glean from their work is limited. These limits are by design: sacred and spiritual meanings are made purposefully unavailable to the outsider. They are held close and are instead shared within families across generations. The act of creating works of art is an act of cultural maintenance. As Tapaya remarks:

Palula ngurula pukuḷpa workaripai ngura uwankarangka munula tjukurpa kuḷpu kanyinma tjitji maḷatja tjuṭala pulkara nintinma tjara nintiringkula ngura walytjangku atunymankunytjaku.

We work in our art centre to create artworks that keep culture strong and vibrant for the children and young people, so they can learn to carry on our culture and to look after our own lands.<sup>vi</sup>

In a way, what Hocking has perceived in the artworks made by the Ernabella women are precisely the messages Tapaya and others wish to convey to those outside their culture: messages of their resilience and the strength of their cultural practices, their families and their connection to Country and law.

Hannah Kothe  
Art Centre Manager (2015–2018)  
Ernabella Arts

Tjunkaya Tapaya  
Artist and Deputy Chair  
Ernabella Arts

<sup>i</sup> Sam Osborne unpacks this concept at length in S Osborne, 'Kulini: Framing Ethical Listening and Power-Sensitive Dialogue in Remote Aboriginal Education and Research', *Learning Communities: International Journal of Learning in Social Contexts*, Vol 22, 2017, pp26–37.

<sup>ii</sup> Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara to English Dictionary, ed & rev C Goddard, IAD Press, Alice Springs, 1992, p44.

<sup>iii</sup> Osborne, op cit, p32.

<sup>iv</sup> G Hocking, personal communication, 17 August 2018.

<sup>v</sup> Tjunkaya Tapaya's Pitjantjatjara contribution is translated by Linda Rive, August 2018.

<sup>vi</sup> *ibid.*



## Artist statement

Through my installations I attempt to evoke a sense of vulnerability and transience that might speak of shared human and non-human entanglements.

My subjective experience leading a nomadic lifestyle and living in a constant state of flux between cultures fuels my investigative practice. I believe there is a continual leaking of intangible information through this convergence of and interrelationship between diverse peoples, environments, languages and ideas. This experience, for me, gives rise to unexpected insights which reveal the tenuous position I hold, with what I call, 'non-human others': environments, objects, machines and animals. I feel a perpetual redefining of my sense of attachment and connection to this shared world and ecological and territorial spaces.

The Ernabella Arts Archive is a living document that reflects transformation, adaptation and cultural change. Researching this collection has engendered within me a deep respect for a culture and community that I perceive as having critical awareness of interconnectedness between humans and non-human others. As an artist, woman and mother, I was profoundly affected by the sensitivity and resilience of women in the Pukatja (Ernabella) community who share knowledge and affirm their connection to the land and people through their art and ephemeral sand drawings. As an outsider I stand at the periphery, catching rare glances into their fluid relationship between Country and family.

*PERIPHERAL DISTURBANCE: wandering between worlds* is not a direct, visual translation of the collective Ernabella artworks. Rather, it is a nuanced reflection that references my fleeting glimpses, via the archive, into a collective intimacy between people, the land and earth-others. Through my installations I attempt to evoke a sense of vulnerability and transience that might speak of shared human and non-human entanglements.

Gail Hocking  
Artist-in-resident  
Flinders University Art Museum

image Gail Hocking  
Australian, born New Zealand (1963– )  
*Perceiving invisible connections* (installation detail) 2018  
mirror-polished stainless steel, animal and human hair, iron filings,  
rare earth magnets, dimensions variable  
© the artist  
photograph Grant Hancock

## Artist biography

Born in Opunake, Aotearoa (New Zealand) in 1963, Gail Hocking graduated with a Master of Visual Arts (Research) from the University of South Australia in 2017. She completed a Bachelor of Visual Arts (Honours) in 2014 at the same institution and a Bachelor of Visual Arts at Curtin University in 2007.

Hocking was awarded the FELTspace Philanthropic Award in 2015 and shortlisted for the Country Arts SA Breaking Ground Award in 2011. She has undertaken residencies at Cultivamos Cultura, São Luis, Portugal; Vancouver Arts Centre, Western Australia; and Central Art Studios, South Australia. She has also received public art commissions from Country Arts SA; the City of Holdfast Bay and City of Norwood Councils of South Australia; and Denmark Arts, Western Australia.

Hocking has exhibited widely, including at the Depot Artspace, Auckland; Gallery-Smith, Melbourne; the Faculty of Fine Arts Gallery of Lisbon, Portugal; and the Fremantle Arts Centre, Western Australia. Hocking's projects have been supported by numerous grants from Arts SA.

**image** Gail Hocking  
Australian, born New Zealand (1963–)  
*Fragile echoes* (installation detail) 2018  
found eucalyptus branches, muslin, white cement,  
water-based photo-luminescent paint, dimensions variable  
© the artist  
photograph Grant Hancock





## **The Guildhouse Collections Project**

Flinders University Art Museum

6 October – 30 November 2018

**Gail Hocking**

### **PERIPHERAL DISTURBANCE**

wandering between worlds

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