

# THE MIDLANDS WHIMSY AND PATHOS



Image Detail *Midlands History - Women*, 2012

— MANDY HUNNIFORD —

## THE MIDLANDS WHIMSY AND PATHOS

Whimsy is defined as a quaint and fanciful idea, and pathos as a quality that evokes pity or sadness. Between these two contradictory words is the paradox that is Tasmania – a quaint and fanciful idea of a wild and magical place that is the locus of overwhelming sadness and loss. Mandy Hunniford works in this in-between space.

I have known Mandy since the late 1980s. She was a student in the textiles department at the art school in Launceston, predominantly a group of strong women, intensely engaged with making through the medium and materiality of fibre. Her preferred approach was reinterpreting responses to landscape through collage – textures, colours and shapes coalescing into mood and expression.

Hard work has always been her ethos. We all have to deal with the 24 hours of each day that we are granted. This can be a tall order, as life and pain can intervene. Art is one option for creating a meaningful place in which to absorb life. In recognition of this potential, Mandy's art practice represents both communication and self-healing; the one begets and feeds the other.

Our origins also determine much of who we are and what we become. Early memories, perhaps made even before we are aware we have a memory, re-emerge in many and varied ways throughout our lives, inflecting everything we do. Mandy spent her early childhood in Queenstown, as generations of her family had done before her. The significance of this place permeates her work. Colour and form are the primary motifs of this stark and strangely beautiful landscape. Colour and form are also the hallmarks of Mandy's imagery, shifting over time from abstraction to figuration and, with the addition of text, into history and storytelling.

**Image** Detail *Midlands History* - Palawa, 2012



The intensely simplified landscape, specific to Queenstown's mining heritage and wrought from humanity's interaction with the earth, is an undercurrent that replays constantly, extending its original boundaries to places beyond and back again. Recently Mandy and her partner bought a studio in Queenstown that is reinventing itself as a centre for creativity. Mandy regularly retreats to the solace of this unique landscape, reconnecting with its complex and deeply personal histories.

While in recent times Mandy has shown a suite of works pertaining to Queenstown's story, for this latest exhibition her focus is the Midlands, the swathe of fertile land that connects one end of this beautiful island to the other. The subject is different, yet her original visual references remain distilled in the surfaces of these pictures.

Many artists have interpreted the landscape of the Midlands over the

decades. Colonial artist John Glover imagined the First Tasmanians living on their land in the years immediately following the failed yet devastating assault of the Black Line. Mandy's friend and fellow printmaker, the late and wonderful Bea Maddock, noticed the saltpans of Tunbridge frequented by Aboriginal peoples across the vastness of time. Philip Wolfhagen appreciates the shift of light as the day departs, leaving the memory of ancient souls living on in the shadows. As these artists attest through their work, this was and is contested land. Its beauty is underscored by bloody massacres and retaliatory guerrilla warfare. It is a place to be reckoned with.

As a committed Tasmanian, Mandy feels our complex colonial past with its momentary triumphs and deep traumas. Her pictorial iconography is distilled from a lifetime in this place and a consequent awareness that few things last.

**Image** *The Midlands Garden 3, 2009*



But hers is not a heavy hand. The artist prefers to draw the viewer into the stories that can so readily transform into romanticism and nostalgia before revealing their incongruities.

A sparse paddock holds the silence of a 'female factory' that both incarcerated and protected women and their children in the fragile beginnings of this far-away penal colony. In a township on the brink of extinction, a tiny white chapel sits in another dry paddock trying against the odds to recreate the mother country. A grand institution destroyed by changing times remains nothing more than a ghostly shell of crumbling brick, its mysterious presence in the middle of a flourishing orchard now only a matter for speculation. A colonial viaduct harking back to ancient iconography via the tumultuous industrial revolution, hangs onto usefulness by a tenuous commercial thread.

The fragility of the landscape is ever-present. Voracious appetites and harsh footfalls of introduced fauna wreak havoc on the fragile soils, and imported plant species destroy the balance that had been carefully managed by the original Tasmanians over millennia. To protest this destruction dead trees painted red and yellow become markers. Despite wishful thinking, manicured gardens and irrigated paddocks fail to fully transpose European dreams onto the harsh reality of this delicate antipodean environment. Ignorance and carelessness give way to dust bowl.

An almond garden hangs on to its glory in isolated remnants, an echo of colonial ambition. Cyprus trees planted long ago stand guard on denuded hills, their original purpose as symbols of remembrance fading into irony. Topiary creatures, fanciful anachronisms in this fast-lane world, are sustained by

Image Horton College Remains and the Female Factory, Ross, 2011



popular demand and a wistful desire for brief encounters with the time before technology took over.

This is both a beautiful and a painfully harsh country. Crash markers and roadside memorials to the dead attest to the price we are willing to pay for getting from A to B in an acceptable time. Made in permanent stone or from transient flowers, these contemporary sacred places intersect with ancient songlines.

Words appear. This ancient language may exist only in fragments and approximations, but it is not gone. It evolves, growing stronger word by word. Some words are not quite right, slips and errors collected through colonial ears. By letting mistakes remain, the artist draws attention to colonial disinterest and its ongoing legacy.

Many of the iconic forms the artist depicts are in a state of decay. Others

may remain in material form but their purpose is corroded or forgotten, for Tasmania is the island of the great forgetting. It lives under the illusion that a clean slate is necessary for progress; but hidden stories will corrode. The river of blood still flows.

How do we fit into this landscape? Naming what is hidden is one step towards redemption. By making history visible, the artist acknowledges her own sense of responsibility and the possibility for art to play a role in this accounting. She does this with gentle clarity; in seeking to make the complexity somehow manageable, she defines a pragmatic sensibility rather than a romantic persuasion. A surface of joyous hues, symmetry and resolve belies the disturbance that rumbles beneath. Whimsy dissolves into pathos.

Jane Deeth, October 2018

Image *The Black Line* 2011



**Mandy Hunniford**  
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