

PATCHES
OF **light**



Patches of Light by Sue Pedley and Peggy Pedley is a collaborative exhibition featuring artists from two generations of one family. Their shared project is several things at once: an ongoing artistic conversation between a daughter and a mother, a model of feminist artistic enterprise and an historical reckoning with one family's past and the larger history of colonisation in Tasmania. Evoking in its title the shifting movement of light across a forest floor, *Patches of Light* invites its audience to look again at events that history has relegated to the shadows. If we believe artist Judy Watson, art is a healing process.¹ To the task of reparation, artists Sue and Peggy Pedley bring their richly inventive creative vocabulary of materials, skills and processes.

'Patches of Light invites its audience to look again at events that history has relegated to the shadows.'

Both are prolific and inventive artists. Professionally trained in Australia and Germany, Sue has been making work and exhibiting it in this country and elsewhere since 1984. I wrote on her work in 1997, and it was a joyful thing to do; so much artistic invention and spontaneity can not help but be contagious. The playfulness in her work is not there for its own sake only, it is a force for releasing energies, unlocking creativity and fostering change. Sue is equally an artist of place – different places over time, yet always approached with curiosity and commitment: the Sydney suburb of Erskineville where she lives and the fishing village of Teshima in Japan are two examples. She has a gift for bringing others along with her: introduce her to a local community and before you know it they are weaving, wrapping, cooking, sewing, net making, whatever the work demands.

Sue and Peg Pedley, *Patches of Light* (detail), 2019, seaweed and wire



Peggy has said that she does not think of herself as an artist, but it is truer to say that her creative work offers an alternate model – a locally and domestically inclined one – of what sustained art practice can be. Peggy studied pottery at Launceston TAFE in the 1970s and went on to co-found Riverside Pottery Studio, exhibiting and teaching, making vessels from clays dug locally and from glaze materials collected around Tasmania. Later she studied printmaking. Her primary art form has been needlework: she is a skilled tapestry designer and maker and a highly accomplished colourist with thread. With its focus on home and community, hers too is an art of place.

It is not unusual for a successful contemporary artist to be the child of a creative parent or parents (this may explain my secret hope that Peg Pedley will one day adopt me). However, the relationship

between Sue and Peggy is more than this. It is ongoing, and it works in both directions, each artist learning from the other. Considered as a model of feminist art practice, it prompts a rethink of what we think we know. In 2015 an early version of *Patches of Light* formed part of an exhibition called *Mothers Daughters* at Sydney College of the Arts' SCA Galleries.² It was a beautiful and engaging show, pairing the creative outputs of four contemporary artists with those of their mothers. It would have been quite enough to be introduced to those four mothers and their work, but the viewing experience was more than that. As the generations met in the gallery, it felt exciting, as if an entirely new energy was being created, right there and then. This is what I see as the beauty (and the power) of this collaboration. It makes room in the present for the regenerative reworking of old stories that may in turn lead to change in the future.



Sue Pedley, *Patches of Light*, 2015, watercolour on paper, private collection



Sue and Peg Pedley, *Patches of Light*, installation detail at QVMAG, Launceston 2019

'As the generations met in the gallery, it felt exciting, as if an entirely new energy was being created, right there and then.'



Peg Pedley, *untitled*, 2017 - 2018, wool and tapestry canvas private collection

For their collaboration Peggy and Sue have chosen terrain that remains difficult for everyone concerned. Tasmania's history is one of contest over land: pastoralists erecting fences across Aboriginal lands, local clans retaliating, the infamous Black Line of 1830. The artists' aim is to unsettle the past, to create a space where fraught, forgotten parts of old stories might be called back to sight, sound and acceptance. But how do you see a gap, or sound a silence, much less show it? Sue says she had to move away from Tasmania before the dark places in its history and her paternal family's part in it could become clear to her.³ (All the more remarkable that Peg who never moved away has embraced this project so fully.) By revisiting the occluded parts of

their family history *in this place* and – by implication – inviting visitors to do something similar with their own family's past, both artists take a considerable risk.

As Sue recognises, it is her mother's secure place in her community that has created the platform for this exhibition. In a very real sense, their joint project can only come fully to life here in Launceston. When the work was shown in Sydney, its themes were already resonant but, by comparison with here and now, they were not *in place* yet. QVMAG performs its own important role by being open to the reworking of the past that Sue and Peggy are proposing, by helping to connect their work with its audience, by making it feel at home (or not, we will see) within its walls.

In *Patches of Light* we are asked to consider things from different perspectives – distant, close-up, near, far, present, past, old, new. The most immediately striking works are the central, sentinel-like structures of sheep's wool and seaweed, first seen from a distance, suspended from the gallery ceiling. The difficulty I have in naming them suggests that something is in a state of becoming, work is still in process. Internally they are loosely held together with loops of wire and electrical cord, more open than closed, more light than heavy.

A third hanging element repurposes an old wool bag from Sue's brother's sheep farm, later used in Peggy's house as a drop cloth. To its paint-spattered, stenciled and worn surface, the artists have added, here and there, patches of cloth sourced from Peggy's fabric collection. These patches of bright colour, applied where the old fabric has been damaged or worn away, also beautify and heal it. They suggest that old stories too might be reworked – neglected and discarded ones especially. Also, perhaps even more importantly, in making spoiled things good it suggests that new possibilities and fresh hopes can take hold.

Taken together, the materials of this exhibition are varied (and sometimes smelly to boot): sheep's wool from Deloraine; seaweed from Low Head; electrical cord; annealed wire; old bags of various shapes and sizes, some for wool, some for sand, in hessian and synthetic cloth; scraps of dress fabric. They recall locations and activities beyond the gallery – home, farm, workshop, garden, beach – and speak of past uses and past lives. Like the repurposed wool bag, they frequently relate to a family story or experience. For instance, Low Head at the mouth of the Tamar River, where the seaweed was gathered, is a significant spot for both sides of the family. It saw the arrival of William Field, Sue's convict forebear, and his wife Elizabeth Robley to the colony. Peggy's sea-captain grandfather regularly sailed up and down the Tamar on his way between Melbourne and Launceston. Peggy holidayed at Low Head as a child and later with her own children.



Sue and Peg Pedley, *Patches of Light* (detail), 2019, wool, power cord, tape

Peggy's small-scale ceramic and textile works are drawn from different decades of her long creative life, one that until now has been mainly geared to the domestic sphere. Here in the museum, where these objects encounter bigger narratives and histories, we see them in a new light. For example, the needlework's modernist affinities – its subtle geometric patterning and sophisticated colour palettes – show out more clearly. Sue's watercolours began as a form of research, a hands-on way of exploring the exhibition's themes and ideas. They are experimental and improvisatory, welcoming of accidents and 'mistakes.' A number of them map the ancestral land of the Pallitorre people (it includes the land acquired by William Field). The land is rendered in faint but precise cartographic detail, overlaid with blotchy washes of colour or bold brushstrokes, as if to say that one way to tell a story is never enough.

This exhibition does not set out to dictate. Instead it uses its materials, processes and forms of display to communicate indirectly, by suggestion and invitation. The beauty of this way of working lies in its spaciousness and openness: others can populate it with their own experiences and stories. The exhibition challenges viewers, but it is also genuinely welcoming and generous. Significantly, the conversation that Sue and Peg have cultivated is still developing. No line has been drawn that would mark it off from the present moment, or from the prospect of change in the future. Nothing, this exhibition seems to say, is ever finally done with, buried events are always near at hand, old stories wait to be told again.



Peg Pedley, *raku lidded container*, c. 1979, private collection

¹ *Future Feminist Archive* (cat.), Sydney: Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney, 2014, 40.

² Four mother/daughter artist duos, Alison Clouston and Joan Clouston, Judy Watson and Joyce Watson, Sue Pedley and Peggy Pedley, Toni Warburton and Enid 'Soot' Warburton, exhibited in *Mothers Daughters*. The exhibition was part of a complex, multi-disciplinary project, the *Future Feminist Archive*, developed by SCA's Contemporary Art and Feminism research cluster.

³ Peggy's family, the Carringtons, arrived in 1907; her grandmother Mary Carrington brought five children to live in Launceston after Peggy's grandfather Frederick Carrington, a ship's captain, tragically lost his life at sea.

PATCHES OF LIGHT

Sue and Peg Pedley

21 July 2019 – 27 October 2019

The artists would like to acknowledge the Palawa people past and present on whose land we are exhibiting.

Patches of Light was originally displayed as part of *Daughters, Mothers*, Sydney College of the Arts Gallery, Sydney, 2015, curated by Jacqueline Millner featuring artists: Jacqueline Millner, Alison Clouston and Joan Clouston, Toni Warburton and Enid 'Soot' Warburton, Sue Pedley and Peg Pedley, Judy Watson and Joyce Watson

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