Something There Is

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Abstract

My work encompasses an array of media and processes, including photography, weaving, embroidery, beading, and hand and machine stitching. All of this work revolves around the theme of ‘re-making’ or repair: photographs of walls that document a remaking of the landscape by inserting forms that shape, divide and contain, remaking landscapes by intervening (stitching, sewing, etc) with the photographs I have taken, remaking landscapes by inserting something into the image when it is taken, and remaking newspaper articles into woven baskets. The intimate acts of sewing and weaving serve not only to disrupt what was there, but can also be read as a form of reparation, suturing a tear but at the same time highlighting it. Further, my work explores the issues of inclusion and exclusion, questioning barriers and disrupting spaces, allowing a viewer to rethink these, and other, borders and spaces. The psychological thread throughout my work is control, however not in a dominant fashion, but more as a domestication of space, a desire to understand and manage space as place. I was driven by my desire to engage the image as a mechanism to reimagine the space, adding elements of domesticity, thereby asserting a kind of sovereignty, creating or imagining a different reality or an alternative rendering of these spaces. My art explores in-between places, with themes of displacement, both forced and voluntary, and the condition of being in transit, plus the meaning and location of borders, boundaries and zones of transition. The poem by Robert Frost, Mending Wall, is used as a metaphor for the ideas expressed in my work and to unite the entire body of work.
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# Table of Contents

List of Illustrations  
Introduction  
Chapter 1: Something there is  
Description of the works  
Walls, borders and barriers  
Displacement: Phenomenology, Intimate Spaces and Twine  
Empathy: Remaking and Repair  
Chapter 2: Turbulence  
Domestication  
Control  
New Materialism  
Resonances  
Conclusion  
Appendix  
Bibliography
List of Illustrations

Figure 1. My Fifth Week from Now and On Earth series
Figure 2. Untitled from God and Elvis series
Figure 3. Walling In or Walling Out
Figure 4. Between Us Once Again
Figure 5. To Each the Boulders
Figure 6. One Stone Groundspeed (red piazza) #2, Rosemary Laing, 2001
Figure 7. Beyond the hill
Figure 8. A stone grasped
Figure 9. Doris Salcedo, Unland: the orphan's tunic
Figure 10. The shade of trees
Figure 11. Groundspeed (red piazza) #2, Rosemary Laing, 2001
Figure 12. Flight Research #5, Rosemary Laing, 1999
Figure 13. welcome to Australia, Rosemary Laing, 2004
Figure 14. Pearls, Simryn Gill, 1999
Figure 15. Forest, Simryn Gill, 1996
Introduction

My work encompasses an array of media and processes, including photography, weaving, embroidery, beading, and hand and machine stitching. All of this work revolves around the theme of 're-making’ or repair: photographs of walls that document a remaking of the landscape by inserting forms that shape, divide and contain, remaking landscapes by intervening (stitching, sewing, etc) with the photographs I have taken, remaking landscapes by inserting something into the image when it is taken, and remaking newspaper articles into woven baskets.

Looking at my past work can help to contextualize this work. Perhaps as a consequence of being a transnational artist, the core themes that weave through all my work are the concepts of place, community and home, looking at home both as a fixed place and a social construct, examining how homes are made, both physically and symbolically, and what they mean. Working with these themes has also led me to explore what it means to be without a homeland, and the subsequent displacement and isolation. These interests have driven me to make numerous and varied works around these themes. I have photographed mobile homes in numerous caravan parks around Australia and New Zealand, appreciating how these 'mobile homes' have been made into permanent structures, with wheels removed and verandahs and personality added.

Figure 1. My Fifth Week from Now and On Earth series
I have also constructed wire sculptures of caravans, whimsical models that spoke to the disappearing lifestyle of the once ubiquitous caravan parks up and down the coast of Australia.

Figure 2. *Untitled* from *God and Elvis* series

The caravans I constructed are for the most part open sided, providing no shelter for the imagined occupants, speaking to both the disappearing lifestyle but also to the fragility of home. I photographed housing estates in which, but for minor alterations, all the houses look almost exactly the same, and another in which all the houses are surrounded by a high acoustic wall, similar in feel and appearance to the medieval walled cities of Europe, minus the charm. Looking at the natural world, I have photographed a series of birds’ nests that I have found. These bird homes are often amazing in their complexity and beauty, with twigs, leaves and threads woven throughout, each one perfectly unique.

For ease of comprehending and explaining my work, I will first describe the works I am presenting, and then discuss the photographs, and my interventions thereon, followed by an analysis of the baskets. Finally, in the chapter called ‘Turbulence’, I will explain how the works relate to one another thematically and look at artists who have inspired and influenced my work.
Chapter 1: Something there is

Description of the works

I have given each of my works, and this chapter, a title taken from the poem by Robert Frost, *Mending Wall.*¹ This poem concerns two neighbours who meet to repair a wall between their properties. One of them, the narrator, feels the wall is unnecessary as there is no livestock to contain, just trees. The poem explores three main themes around the wall: the building of barriers, the Sisyphean nature of barrier building (highlighted in this poem by the wall’s almost constant need of repair) and society’s persistence in this activity regardless. Also, the poem underscores the community making involved in barrier building, as the actual act of mending the wall is a social one in this case, bringing the narrator and his neighbour together. This narrator seems not to believe in walls for the sake of walls, yet he mentions mending the wall by himself at times and interestingly, he is the one who sets up the annual meeting to repair the wall, showing that perhaps his views toward walls are more ambivalent than even he thinks. The other man falls back on the old adage, “Good fences make good neighbors,” this use of cliche exhibiting a lack of thought on his part. The use of this poem for titling my works encourages a viewer to make connections across the entire body of work I am presenting for my MFA. The poem is fairly accessible and I hope that a viewer will consider the motifs addressed in the poem around the building of barriers and the consequences thereof, and make the thematic connections with my photographs and baskets.

My photographic work involves subtle interventions with the photographs, sewing, embroidering and beading on the surface of the photographs, and then re-photographing the altered image. The initial images I was working with were of walls, most of which showed the signs of wear and history, with cracks, holes and traces of watermarks and other events. With one such image, the stucco on a wall had fallen off, revealing the brickwork underneath. Looking at this image, the outline of the bricks can be seen along the entire wall, showing how thin the layer of stucco is. Where the hole is, the bricks show clearly. There is a crack from this hole down to the sidewalk below. In this image, I beaded golden-coloured beads along one side of the crack, and also placed a few beads on the sidewalk below.

![Figure 4. Between Us Once Again](image)

Another image shows a drain in the middle of a brick wall, with a somewhat ghostly white smudge running down from it, marked from years of water or other things being expelled from this pipe. I highlight and augment these markings by sticking thread through from the back of the image, leaving the end hanging down along the white marking. In the image I am presenting, the hanging threads appear to be blown by a wind.

A solid sandstone wall with very large bolts and nuts set into metal plates and screwed into the sandstone features in another of my altered photographs. There are gray tracings down the wall,
which I have embroidered in a similar colour. Also there is some old graffiti covered in vines, which I pick out with embroidered knots.

![Image](image1.png)

**Figure 5. To Each the Boulders**

In yet another image, there are marks on the side of a building, exposed by a recent demolition of the adjoining building, which seem to have unearthed old graffiti. Whether by time or attempt at removal, these traces of graffiti appear almost like ghostly people. I have embroidered along these images.

In another part of my photographic works, I am showing an image of a yabby trap, thrown into the sky in an outback setting. The trap appears to be floating in mid-air, a contained space contrasted with the vastness of the outback setting. In one photograph the trap appears to be floating above a

![Image](image2.png)

**Figure 6. One stone**
seemingly endless road that weaves its way into the horizon; in another it appears to fly in front of an expansive scrubland area underneath an immense sky

The baskets I have woven are mostly small in size. From afar they look like rather compact, simple textured baskets, but as a viewer approaches, she sees that the twine utilised in the baskets is not simply a generic twine or rope, but newspaper twisted into twine. Upon close inspection, some words remain visible and legible, but the narrative of the newspaper articles is indecipherable. The general light grey colour of the newspapers is intermittently broken with muted colours of red, blue, dark grey and green, from advertisements or photographs from pages with the articles I have used. All the baskets have different shapes, but all are easily identifiable as baskets.

Figure 7. beyond the hill

I am also exhibiting a slow-motion video of falling strips of newspaper, shot against a stark black backdrop. The strips twist and twirl, sometimes singularly, other times in groups, as they slowly fall from one end of the screen to the other. The video will be looped to play continuously, resulting in a viewer not being able to discern the beginning or the end.
Walls, borders and barriers

Examining the themes of domestication, home and home/community-making in my work led me to contemplate how communities and living spaces are formed. Walls play a major role in community and home making, from the walls of homes on a domestic level to vast walls built between countries. At this time in the world, walls are in the news everyday, from Trump’s proposed wall between Mexico and the United States to fences erected in Europe to keep refugees from entering.

While walls are sometimes about containment, they also serve to protect and engage people. In reading about walls (Berlin, Palestine, the Wailing Wall, among others), the wall that interests me the most is the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. The Wailing Wall is a surviving remnant of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Although Jerusalem has been destroyed and rebuilt nine times, through it all the Wailing Wall remained intact. Over a million notes are placed in the wall each year. Twice a year the rabbi of the Wailing Wall collects the notes and buries them in a dedicated area of the Mount of Olives cemetery. This wall interests me because of the notes and prayers visitors tuck into the crevasses of the wall. People engage with this wall, using it as a safeguard for their prayers and wishes. I visualize people writing out their prayers, carefully rolling them, and then trying to find a place to safeguard their hopes in the wall. I also imagine the rabbi and his team of helpers who carefully take the notes out of the Wall with brooms and wooden sticks, making sure not to damage them. This type of disruption and engagement is a key concept to understanding my work for this MFA. The beading, stitching and weaving, both on the photographs and the baskets, resonates with this type of involvement and interference, as I stitch along the traces of decay on the walls or twist the newspapers into yarn and weave my protective baskets.

Walls have long been the subjects of works of art, from the Minimalist yet massive sculptures of Richard Serra to the ephemeral works of Francis Alys. Serra’s sculptures are often best understood by the physical experience of walking through the imposing structures rather than simply looking at them. Their disruption of the relationship between architecture and space challenges both perceptions and their surroundings. Alys’s work, The Green Line: Sometimes doing something poetic can become political and sometimes doing something political can become poetic consisted of Alys walking with a leaking can of paint in Jerusalem, resulting in a line along the ground tracing where he walked. His walk followed the green line drawn on the map as part of the armistice after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, indicating land under the control of the new state of Israel. The area in

2 http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/history-and-overivew-of-the-western-wall
fact occupied by Israel has changed considerably since then, with drastic consequences for all involved.3 My work is far less grand in scale than Richard Serra’s, and less ephemeral than Francis Alys’, but I considered both of their works with regard to architecture, borders and boundaries while making my own.

The photographic portion of the work I have done for my MFA started with a series of photographs of walls. These photographs play between urban and suburban spaces that are shaped by fences, walls that mark out territory, or protect from intruders or noise. The wall that initially piqued my interest was a high acoustic wall surrounding a housing development (a somewhat gated community) outside Melbourne. This enormous wall was built (and is still being extended) to block the noise from the adjacent freeway. While it no doubt does the job of muffling the noise of cars traveling at 110 kms per hour on the adjacent Hume Highway, it also serves as a strange totem for this community, making it appear almost as a medieval, walled city. I visited this community over several years, photographing the wall, and the new, expanding community it delineates.

This wall led me to think about how walls and boundaries have physical, cultural and symbolic presence, what they mean, how they act to contain and exclude, protect and repel, and what they mean to those on both sides of a particular wall. While walls and fences are obviously physical things, some of their power does not come from their physicality or materiality but from their psychological impact on those who live within their confines or are excluded by their presence. Walls can be interesting architectural structures but perhaps their more significant impact is as entities that inhabit our thinking and shape cultures.

For this series, I have focused on exterior walls. For the most part, the walls I have photographed comprise the public face of buildings, or the walls or fences that surround them. I decided to deepen my photographic study of walls by focusing on two places, Rozelle (specifically Callan Park, interesting to me because its haunting, institutional history as a ‘hospital for the insane’ has left real and imagined traces on the buildings) and Mosman, where I live. I have endeavoured to walk through one site or the other most days, recording the walls. I have specifically and purposely excluded people from these images in order to control the experiment. While we are constantly and unconsciously funneled into spaces that have been designed by urban planners, architects and politicians, with my work I tried to move consciously through these spaces, to acknowledge the individual roles of these particular walls. All the walls I have photographed have different and distinct uses: the acoustic wall I previously photographed is an utilitarian structure meant to shield

3 http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/13/arts/design/13chan.html
or protect; the suburban fencing is more territorial, while the institutional walling off is to separate one group from another in a more crude or brutal demonstration of difference.

Walls also reflect contemporary political and social issues. As I mentioned earlier, walls are being given more and more import with the recent swing to the right in world politics, mostly based on fear of the ‘other’ on a nationalistic level. Along this same line of thought but on a domestic level, gated communities have long interested me due to the fact that the occupants choose to wall themselves off from others and create an enclave. About 15 years ago, my family and I moved to Newport Beach, California, an area which has undergone a vast expansion in population, and consequently housing, in the last 30 years. Most of the new houses have been built behind gates, on what were orange groves when I was growing up in Los Angeles. Most of these gated communities have security guards manning the gates, controlling who enters and observing who comes and goes. Zygmunt Bauman ruminates on this phenomenon and its implications in his book Liquid Modernity. In the chapter called ‘Time/Space’, he writes about a place called Heritage Park, a new 500-acre gated community being constructed in South Africa. He states that the desire for this sort of living stems from the belief that in order to build a community, ‘others’ must be excluded. He describes this as the ‘institutionalization of urban fear,’ quoting Sharon Zukin’s description of Los Angeles. He also writes about public spaces, such as La Defense in Paris whose inhospitable design and architecture deliberately discourages people to linger. Anyone who is not working in La Defense does not go there, as there is no place to repose, which essentially serves to create a barrier, albeit unseen, to those on the outside. This ‘othering’ of those on the outside of the wall or those who are similarly excluded by invisible barriers, as in the La Defense area, creates a world defined by binary opposites in creating a clear demarcation between those inside and those outside. My work explores these issues of inclusion and exclusion: for example, by weaving and stitching on the photographs I have taken of walls, my work questions these barriers and disrupts these spaces, allowing a viewer to rethink these, and other, borders and spaces.

In making my work, I have thought about place-making through boundaries, and how space is constructed. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy states,

> whether sharp or blurry, natural or artificial, for every object there appears to be a boundary that marks it off from the rest of the world. Events, too, have boundaries — at least temporal boundaries. Our lives are bounded by our births and by our deaths; the soccer game began at 3pm sharp and ended with the referee's final whistle at 4:45pm. It is

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5 Ibid.
sometimes suggested that even abstract entities, such as concepts or sets, have boundaries of their own, and Wittgenstein could emphatically proclaim that the boundaries of our language are the boundaries of our world (1921: 5.6).⁶

Likewise, distinct cultures have borders: physical borders because they are often linked with certain geographic regions; more interestingly, they are bordered by discrete belief systems and social mores. Walls and fences are definite and obvious boundaries, and it is interesting to analogize these physical boundaries to other invisible boundaries in our lives. A wall prevents us from crossing but attitudes and beliefs have the same effect of constraining thoughts and actions. My work explores these blatant and more latent boundaries by stitching, weaving and beading, asking the viewer to rethink and reexamine spaces, asking what walls, boundaries and borders are physical and what are psychological? What are phenomenological responses to walls and other architecture? How do we as humans comprehend borders and walls? How do we conform our behaviours and perceptions to accommodate them? The stitching and sewing I have done serves not only to disrupt what was there, but can also be read as a form of reparation, suturing a tear but at the same time highlighting it.

Walls are often thought of as definitive barriers, but many of the photographs I have taken expose their permeability. Sometimes the permeability was built into the walls; in other images nature has pushed though or over, staking its claim, and leaving its mark when removed. Stereotypically it could be speculated that walls offer a masculine reading in their architectural solidity while the permeability of walls, shown by cracks, intrusions by plants and other natural phenomena, could be interpreted as having feminine qualities of layering and porosity. These images expose the conjunction between culture and nature, and masculine and feminine, showing the effects of many factors, highlighting the coexistence of people and nature.

This suggestion of ‘feminizing’ these structures is extended into a concept of the domestication of space that is less about containment and dominance and more about understanding and managing space as place. I decided to intervene literally in the walls I was documenting by inserting different materials into crevices and cracks in their surface, in a way evocative of the prayers stuck into the Wailing Wall. These interventions were then further extended by beading, stitching and embroidering onto the surface of the photographic images, to accentuate and draw attention to their permeability and porosity. These intimate actions also suggested a remaking or repairing of the spaces. I was driven by my desire to engage the image as a mechanism to reimagine the space,

adding elements of domesticity, thereby asserting a kind of sovereignty over these spaces, creating or imagining a different reality or an alternative rendering of the wall.

**Displacement: Phenomenology, Intimate Spaces and Twine**

I believe it would be difficult to think about walls, barriers and homes without contemplating the ideas expressed in the philosophy of phenomenology. The study of phenomenology recognises the embedded, lived experience of phenomena, that the body is inextricable to perception. A central tenet of the philosophy is the way people exist in relation to their world, and that experience is the foundation of all knowledge. Unlike previous philosophies that privileged the mind over the body, phenomenology acknowledges that perception is never a static affair, but an active, bodily involvement with the world we live in. Phenomenology appreciates that certain spaces predispose you to move- and even to think- in certain ways. These ideas influenced my photographic works around walls. As I stated earlier, we are continuously and unconsciously directed through spaces that have been designed to make us move in a particular way. The photographs I have taken of walls acknowledge this capacity, while the interventions I performed on the photographs questions this power by intervening with the walls, adding domestic elements (ie. stitching, sewing and beading, traditionally tasks performed by women in domestic settings).  

Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, applied these ideas of phenomenology to architecture, particularly homes and the intimate spaces therein. He stressed the lived experience of architecture and that objects can embody deep emotional reserves, emphasizing the personal, psychological response to buildings. He writes of one’s recollection of space and how that affects one’s relation to that particular space and other places. The interventions I have done with these photographs express my own personal responses to these buildings. The addition of the domestic elements to these photographs adds an intimacy to these places, in a sense bringing the inside to the outside through these intimate acts. My interventions on these walls can be seen as breaking these boundaries and creating new imagined spaces.

I have taken the ideas and themes I contemplated when I was initially photographing the walls in urban Sydney -- the themes of place and space, containment, insideness/outsideness, the phenomenology of environment -- and extended these concepts into another group of photographs.

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7 this theme of domesticity is further explored and explained in the chapter entitled Turbulence

taken in outback Australia. The photographs I have taken in this series include images taken around Broken Hill, in and around the dry lake-beds of Minindee and Lake Mungo. The sense of the vastness and variety of the Australian outback landscape brought to mind the stories of Bourke, Wills and King, exploring this ‘uninhabited’ land. The Australian outback landscapes, with their intense light and unique features, are powerful symbols of place and have helped shape Australian cultural identity. While the idea of the outback as a vast, unsettled land (terra nullius) has long ago been proven incorrect, the notion of large, ‘unsettled’ land and the possibility that presents remains a formative idea within the general Australian psyche. Likewise, the Australian outback plays an important role in Australian cultural and political life. Nicolas Gill, in his essay ‘Life and death in Australian 'heartlands’: pastoralism, ecology and rethinking the outback’, asserts,

outback mythology provides one important means by which the past and present is interpreted, and by which social hierarchies and relationships of gender, race and nature to live by are laid out (Hirst, 1978; Rose, 1997). In relation to pastoralism's place in these narratives, the outback is a key component of Australia's ‘countryside’ in the sense of being a space where the nation is mythically constituted spatially and culturally through rural pursuits and communities.9

An interesting feature of the outback landscape to me is my inability to read it. Traditional inhabitants of that land might view ridges and canyons as we city people view walls- as areas with physical, cultural and symbolic significance. Perhaps these ridges and canyons possess a similar power to exclude that walls have to those of us who live in a more urban environment. The photographs I have taken in this outback setting pose an alternate space to the urban one, presenting an ‘other’ to the more controlled spaces in the cities and its outskirts.

I went to the outback with the idea to perhaps work with a found object. On the first day of my trip, in a dry riverbed, I found a disused yabby trap. This trap intrigued me: the way it was built, the look of it and what it was. When I next had internet service, I researched these types of traps and discovered that they are called Opera House yabby traps and are illegal in much of Australia as they tend to catch a lot of other animals besides yabbies, including platypus. I decided to use this found object in order to intervene in the vast outback landscapes, by throwing it into a landscape image I was shooting. The contrast of this constrained and contained space (the trap) against the vastness of the landscape struck me. The yabby trap, as a contained space in this open setting, offers a metaphor for the more controlled spaces of a city. In reflecting on the enormity of the landscape, and its suggestion of the notion of unlimited spaces and all the possibilities they entail, I thought

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about the counterpoint to that notion: the idea that Australia was active in constraining ‘who and on what terms’ (John Howard’s words, not mine) might enter the country, and in locking asylum seekers in detention centres. This thinking (and the trap) brought to mind work I did as a lawyer for asylum seekers in New York and the treatment of asylum seekers by Australia, and inspired me to make the basket sculptures I talk about in the next section of this paper.

As part of my reading before I went to the Darling River and Menindee Lakes region, I learnt about the ubiquity of twine technology utilised by the indigenous Australians of these areas. Twine was widely used to produce both vessels and baskets. Perhaps more uniquely, twine was also used to construct nets which were used for hunting. For example, indigenous people used to make nets more than 5 metres high and wide, which were suspended across rivers to catch birds. Twine was also used to make other types of hunting traps. As I reflected on this and other methods of employing twine, I came to see the yabby trap as reprising the role that twine once played in the landscape. I have taken photographs of the yabby trap and my baskets thrown into the air, the containers contrasted with the outback landscape, suggesting containment in wide open spaces. I have also put my twine and baskets in natural settings (in trees covered with birds nests, strewn along craggy tree trunks) in this outback area, inserting myself into the image and reinserting twine technology that used to be prevalent in this area but has been absent from this particular landscape for hundreds of years. This might be viewed as yet another attempt to domesticate space and speaks to the notion of re-making or repair given the past ubiquity of twine technology in the region.

**Empathy: Remaking and Repair**

These themes of domesticity, remaking and repair discussed earlier with regard to the beading, stitching and embroidering on the surface of the photographs of walls continue in my work with the sculptures/baskets I have made. My work is informed by my life story as an immigrant. The feeling of dislocation made me sensitive to cultural differences, both obvious and subtle. Making art became a way of making sense of my new surroundings, examining and reflecting on place and home. One of the drivers behind the interventions into both the walls and the photographic images is the exploration of how people convert space into place and thereby create meaning. The idea of place and space, geographical locations and one’s relationship to them, interests me. Places can have both metaphoric and symbolic meaning, plus real and symbolic value. I am interested in art that explores in-between places, with themes of displacement, both forced and voluntary, and the
condition of being in transit, plus the meaning and “location of borders, boundaries and zones of transition.”

My interest in these themes is expressed by my exploration and commentary on Australia’s current immigration and detention policies with the baskets I have woven. The baskets are woven out of newspaper articles from *The Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* around the subject of immigration and specifically Australia’s treatment of asylum seekers. My work concerns diasporic issues brought about by my own sense of dislocation. While the issues I address in my work can be overwhelming in scale and are laden with political meaning, the way I make the work, inserting traditionally domestic elements into the works by stitching, weaving and sewing, helps me to assert a sense of control, aides in helping me negotiate these events that often make us feel incapable of acting, and assists in my search for understanding place.

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Figure 8. *A stone grasped*

The pages from articles I find or am given are torn into strips and then spun into yarn or twine, after which I weave the twine into baskets. I like the idea of reusing something that would be discarded by repurposing the newspapers into baskets. These baskets, some left uncoated and other coated with resin, have the possibility of being used for something further. However, the baskets that are left uncoated will deteriorate over time. The work is a time consuming, almost meditative process. The length of time required to make these baskets speaks to the ongoing issues these articles address.

Doris Salcedo’s work concerns the traumatic political strife and the subsequent personal consequences, including thousands of deaths and disappearances, in her home country of Colombia. Doris Slacedo's works entitled Unland : audible in the mouth consists, in part, of roughly joined sections of old wooden tables into which Salcedo and her team have drilled countless tiny holes.

Figure 9. Doris Salcedo, Unland: the orphan’s tunic (detail), 1997
through which they have sewn human hair and silk thread, an arduous process that took years to complete. In *Unland: The Place of Testimony*, Tanya Barson writes about Salcedo’s works:

> It was a deliberate strategy on the part of the artist to find a process that would be both lengthy and absurd to make the sculptures. Salcedo says she wanted to find a way of working that would seem like a huge expenditure, or waste, of time, energy and effort, in order to evoke the extreme conditions and waste of life that occurs in violent regions of the world.

Speaking about the same work, Doris Salcedo states, "The laboriousness is almost, I feel, a kind of artistic atonement in order to be able to properly address these very serious issues." While my work deals with different issues, the length of time taken to make these works speaks to the same theme of the waste of life of the people languishing in detention centres addressed in the articles I use.

A viewer of these baskets will be able to glimpse words and colours still visible in the ‘yarn’ I have used. I believe that a viewer will be drawn to look at the baskets closely to try to see what words are visible and if any sense of the narrative of the newspaper articles remains. However, a viewer will discover that, with these woven newspaper baskets, I have erased the narrative of the articles by twisting the newspaper into yarn, and then even further by weaving the yarn into baskets. The ideas I am exploring with this concealment are similar to those explored by Doris Salcedo in her previously mentioned work,

> The intricate web of hair draws the viewer closer, but while seeming to offer the possibility of proximity both with the sculpture and the experience of the victim it embodies, the work simultaneously denies such a contact. It resists looking. No matter how closely or for how long one examines the surface one sees nothing more than the basic materials.

With my baskets, the yarn is identifiable as newspaper, but access to the narrative is denied, as the text is unreadable. This covering up of the issues addressed in these articles, the paper shaped into benign and inviting sculptures, alludes to the way the government covers up the treatment of asylum seekers. The concealment of the articles destroys the narrative by erasing the record of the

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
15 Barson, “Unland, The Place of Testimony.”
travails of the refugees, mimicking the government policy of removal, placing the refugees out of sight (i.e. on Manus Island), thereby attempting to sanitize the plight of the refugees.

By hiding the narrative of the text, twisting and weaving these newspaper articles into sculptures, I am denying the viewer the ability to read these texts and thereby allowing an evocation of personal associations from the viewer. No matter how long a viewer looks at these baskets, the narrative remains concealed. As with Salcedo’s art, this approach allows the materials to work as powerful emotional triggers, eliciting a more visceral reaction than words can.

This concealment of the narrative of the articles is an approach that confronts and challenges ordinary perceptions of how cultural meaning is created. Meaning usually comes from a cultural context. Theorist Barry Brummett notes; “What a given sign means, especially as an artefact, is determined in large part by the systems of signs (the culture, the system of artefacts), in which it is placed.”

Here, I am disrupting the symbols and markers that create meaning by twisting the newspaper articles into yarn, thereby making the articles illegible. The process of creating the baskets acts as a reforming and recasting of those cultural products that create meaning (i.e., newspapers) into a material object where the original meaning and utility of the artefact is obscured. Further, I am playing with cultural meaning by using the artifact of the basket, a pre-western language object. Traditionally, materials used as twine in basket making were reeds and other plants, while my twine is made from newspapers. These baskets also speak to the prevalence in many countries of reusing and recycling the detritus of Western culture into new objects.

I have coated some of the baskets with resin, which further conceals the origin of the materials I used, permanently abstracting the language of the newspaper articles. In some ways, the baskets can be interpreted as representing destruction: destruction of the meaning of the articles by twisting and weaving them into baskets and destruction of traditional cultures resulting from the displacement of refugees from their home countries. The fragility of the uncoated baskets speaks to the fragility of the position in which these people find themselves; they are hidden, rendered almost invisible by their exclusion from Australia and their detention in Manus and Nauru, just as the text of the newspapers is hidden, rendering it illegible.

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However, I prefer that, rather than this inability to read the newspaper articles being viewed as destruction, it can instead be read as a type of palimpsest. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word palimpsest originally referred to "writing material or manuscript on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for a second writing; monumental brass turned and re-engraved on reverse side."¹⁷ According to this definition, there are three stages: the original writing, the erasure, and the rewriting. My intention with these works being viewed as palimpsests is meant in a metaphorical rather than literal sense, contemplating the overwritten narratives of the subjects of these articles and also referencing the contentious, numerous histories of Australia, that have themselves been subject to erasure and exclusion.¹⁸ Further, the idea of these baskets as palimpsest can be seen to reconcile my references to both indigenous peoples and refugees.

Seeing the baskets as palimpsest, they can represent reusing, recycling, and re-making. In this sense, the baskets are representative of hope. The baskets are vessels that contain and protect their contents and have a nurturing, traditionally feminine symbolism. This suggests the possibility of renewal: just as the baskets are constructed from material that has been transformed, individuals are transformed by the experience of migration, and the baskets offer the acknowledgment of new

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¹⁸ See, for example, Stanner’s 1968 Boyer Lectures on ‘The Great Australian Silence.’
beginnings and the possibility of new homes. Perhaps that is why I chose to weave baskets out of this yarn: I want these displaced, mistreated people to be looked after in a more compassionate way by our society and have a place that speaks of safety and renewal. In that sense the basket represents restoration and protection, a secure space where individuals can create new beginnings. The re-purposed newspapers woven into baskets speak as a metaphor for acceptance, refuge and belonging.

In choosing to weave the newspaper yarn into baskets, I am referencing both traditional cultures and crafts. Newspapers have been influential purveyors of news and opinions for centuries. While the obsolescence of the entire newspaper industry is debated, and certainly television and more recently the internet have eroded newspapers’ hegemony, daily newspapers still have a dominant influence in shaping and modifying public opinion. By weaving baskets out of newspaper articles about a particular subject, in this case Australia’s treatment of refugees, I am literally weaving metaphor and meaning into my art. The subject matter of the articles I use is important to me when I am making the baskets. By twisting the articles about refugees into yarn and weaving the yarn into baskets, the meaning of the articles is literally woven into the baskets, thereby giving the baskets meaning. There is also an interesting word association, as the expression ‘telling a yarn’ means to weave or spin a story.

I chose to make baskets out of these articles because doing so takes these overwhelming issues and spins them into something manageable. The action of spinning the yarn and weaving the baskets is for me a poetic response to these upsetting world issues. The twisting of the newspapers is reminiscent of what kids do, fiddling with their hair or a small trinket. It is a comforting motion, repetitive and calming. In this way, spinning the yarn and weaving the baskets allows me to find comfort and feel less passive in response to these events, as the shape of the baskets are suggestive of envelopment and protection. Baskets are intimate, useful and prosaic domestic items, which can carry and protect their contents, evoking home, security and safety. The familiarity of these items assists a viewer to feel empathy.

These baskets are deliberately left in a way that could be interpreted as being in an unfinished state. While they are finished, the trailing out of the ‘yarn’/newspaper leaves the possibility of adding on to them open, suggesting the continuation of the stories behind these articles and the promise of new futures.

While the baskets weave these strips of newspaper together, the video, *No one has seen*, releases similar strips in a continuously looping cycle. *No one has seen*, shot against a stark black backdrop,
show the newspaper strips slowly falling into and out of the field of vision. I used the strips of paper that I later twisted into yarn. The way the strips fall in an uncontrolled descent, buffeted by unseen forces, can be seen to reflect the migrants’ experience, the lack of autonomy and sovereignty, as their futures are decided by the whims of political favour. Sometimes one strip falls on its own, other times many strips together, twisting and falling over each other, illustrating the increasing number of migrants in the world in recent years. The way the video is looped to play continuously, with no beginning or end, mimics the stories of many of these immigrants, whose battle for a home is ongoing, often with no end in sight. The video is perhaps bleak but at the same time mesmerizing, beautiful and sad. A viewer is able to sometimes read a glimpse of words as the paper falls however, as with the baskets, a viewer is never able to read exactly what the strips say. This, like the baskets, can be seen as covering up the issues addressed in the articles, as the government hides the asylum seekers off shore.
Chapter 2: Turbulence

Domestication

All of the work I have completed for this MFA involves ‘re-making’ which imply domestication, a way of asserting control over the vastness of the outback, the impenetrability of walls and the overwhelming subjects of these numerous newspaper articles. I feel the need to respond to these events through actions to avoid being paralysed by the overwhelming nature of these stories. This domestication by way of making (weaving, stitching, and the like) is a way of negotiating the events these articles address, suggesting new avenues of understanding, empathetic feelings, and potential pathways for those who are displaced. The title of this chapter references the book, *The Turbulence of Migration*,¹⁹ by Nikos Papastergiadis, which I read while making this work. The idea of turbulence spoke to me with regard to the tumultuousness of the lives of the refugees in the articles I use to make the baskets. It also references the disruptions I make into the photographs I am presenting by embroidering, beading and sewing, thereby agitating a viewer’s reading of these spaces.

Stitching and weaving have long been considered to be domestic tasks traditionally performed by women. These types of undertaking are both utilitarian and decorative at the same time. Historically, this sort of work was viewed as craft, not art, and was therefore not afforded the status of art, in spite of the skill and knowledge necessary. Therefore, my use of traditional craft practices to make contemporary pieces speaks also to the hard work that feminist artists have done for decades, forging a way into a traditionally male field, and subverting traditional art forms to create a feminised space redolent of home and security.

One reason I think these themes of domestication and examination of home are important to me is due to the dislocation I felt as an immigrant myself. I came to Australia in my twenties with a very young child and a husband, who was returning to his home. Although the language was not different (for the most part!), there were obvious and subtle cultural differences I sometimes struggled to understand. I felt a displacement, far from my extended family and what was familiar.

This sense of displacement pushed me to contemplate the answers to various questions as I strove to construct a home, far from what I knew. What is home? How is a home constructed? Does home need a place? Home can mean many things, exist in multiple locations, produce a variety of emotions, and, undoubtedly, the idea of home means disparate things to different people. This experience of displacement also allowed me to see both where I am from and my adopted home of Australia from a unique perspective. As a fresh immigrant, I had to be mindful of the different ways that everyday words, acts, references and gestures could be interpreted, both my own and others'. I found I had to pay close attention in a way I hadn't in my own country in my pursuit of understanding my new home. I strove to establish a home that had meaning for my family and me, wherever we were. I looked to make this somewhat overwhelming situation more manageable. My work acknowledges and examines the concept of home and making a home/community, through both the subject matter of my work but also the elements of domestication I employ.

After years of raising my family in Australia, I now find myself with grown children living overseas, and ageing parents, also overseas. Once again, I find myself in a transitional space, feeling almost nomadic. In this transitional space, I feel the need to do something to make a place mine, and, as the world becomes more globalised, interrogating these ideas of place and home becomes more and more meaningful.

Control

As with the baskets, my photographic interventions serve to erase the documentary reality, either when I take the photograph, by inserting elements that were not present, or after, by stitching or otherwise interfering with the printed photographs. Additionally, I am using photographs as a background event onto which I introduce an object or act upon it by stitching or beading, thereby adding a performative element. I am compelling the viewer to imagine possibilities, asking the viewer to reconceptualise the landscape. I am inviting further enquiry of alternative histories or interpretations. I am asserting ownership and jurisdiction by my interventions on walls, and by weaving my baskets. The psychological thread in all my work is control: controlling the vastness of the outback with the yabby trap, asserting authority in urban environments by stitching and beading on the photographs, and attempting to cope with the difficult subjects of the articles by weaving the articles into baskets.
As previously mentioned, the photographs of the yabby trap grew out of my interest in the idea of photographing a found object and seeing where the process would lead. A found object is something an artist finds which would not usually be considered art, most of the time because the item has a specific function. This item can function as art or as inspiration to the artist. In my situation, the yabby trap served both purposes. The trap is a concertina device that expands and allows egress through two vents. Once inside, the yabby is trapped. I placed this contained space (the trap) in the middle of the wide-open spaces of the outback. Introducing this artifice into the tableau spoke of constraint in an otherwise unconstrained landscape, these interventions serving to rewrite the way the scene is read by a viewer along a similar vein as the stitching and beading of the walls.

Susan Sontag explicitly separates photography and action/intervention, stating that, “The person who intervenes cannot record: the person who is recording cannot intervene.”20 In this series of photographs, I challenge Sontag’s statements by intervening in the landscapes I photograph, either while taking the photograph or thereafter. This blatant and explicit loss of objectivity confuses perceptions and creates fictions that highlight the subjectivity of all photography. Making photographs involves conscious decisions of what to include and what to exclude. Photographs have long been presumed to have a certain level of veracity as recordings of the real world. Up until the proliferation of digital photography, this veracity was rarely questioned, although even in that time there was a long history of photographic manipulation. Now of course anyone with a mobile phone can manipulate photographs digitally. I titled this chapter ‘Turbulence’, thinking about the ‘turbulence of migration,’ but this idea of turbulence can also be applied to the ideas of photographic manipulation and the questions of veracity that arise, the subsequent confusion raised by this subjectivity, and the unsettling idea of questioning what is real.

New Materialism

According to the theories of New Materialism, walls, boundaries and other ‘things’ can be viewed not as static elements in the background of one’s life, but as active participants in a complex assemblage of ‘things’ with power to shape outcomes. In her book *Vibrant Matter*,21 Jane Bennett discusses what she calls ‘thing power’ or the ‘vitality of things.’ She notes how things are alive in their complex interrelations and their propensities for unlimited and undetermined change.

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Traditionally, people are thought of as actants/actors, while objects are seen as stable and passive. Bennett is staunchly non-anthropocentric, flattening the horizontal hierarchy of potential agency. Bennett asserts that the traditional binary (people as active, things as passive) is incorrect and that in fact things have the power to ‘to animate, to act, to produce effects both dramatic and subtle.’

Objects are actants because they are capable of making a difference in the world, to change the tangle of interrelationships, which she refers to as assemblages, of which they are a part. The vitality of things is explained as “the capacity of things- edibles, commodities, storms, metals- not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans, but also to act as quasi-agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.” People are not autonomous either but are composed of and affected by a complex web of things. She states; “There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity; today this mingling has become harder to ignore.”

By stressing this complex interconnectedness and interdependency, Bennett questions this idea of human centered action. Undoubtedly, humans act in the world, but never outside of the complex assemblage of things: active bodies and materials. For example, it has been found recently that bacteria in one’s gut can contribute to depression and similarly that consuming omega-3 oil has shown changes in mood and cognitive ability.

Bennett’s thoughts on ‘thing power’ extend to include the agency and vitality of spaces and places. The power she sees in places is analogous to the ideas expressed by Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* in which, as previously mentioned, Bachelard asserts that homes and intimate spaces have the ability to embody deep emotional reserves. Bennett discusses infrastructure and the Chinese idea of ‘shi.’ This term originally comes from military strategy, and relates to the power of a specific arrangement of things. Bennett uses this concept as a means of illustrating how the “dynamic force [emanates] from a spatio-temporal configuration rather than any particular element within it.”

It is this aspect of her ideas that I explore in my work. We often think of ourselves as active subjects and the things (structures, surroundings, etc) in the background as passive objects, but it is well known that background can have effects on us, exhibited not only through examples such as uplifting architecture or music, but on a more prosaic level of directing one’s path through a space. My work explores these connections by examining the role and use of walls in society, and also noting and highlighting the markers of time and other actants thereon.

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22 Ibid., 6
23 Ibid., viii
24 Ibid., 31
25 Ibid., 35
In his book entitled *Making*\textsuperscript{26}, Tim Ingold expresses similar ideas of ‘thing power’ as espoused in *Vibrant Matter* by Jane Bennett, however Ingold addresses the issues in the context of making. The physical experience of the making of my art and the physicality of the work itself resonates with the ideas expressed by Ingold. He differentiates between making by thinking (hylomorphism), in which the mental work comes before the application or execution (theory leads, making follows) and thinking by making, referred to by Ingold as the art of inquiry, “in which the conduct of thought goes along with, and continually answers to, the fluxes and flows of the materials with which we work.”\textsuperscript{27} This idea is that making is not a projection of thought onto materials, but rather an ongoing binding together of material flows and sensory awareness, a kind of weaving. He analogizes the ‘thing’ to a kind of knot, not a bounding structure, but an open one, with every string trailing off. According to this way of thinking, nothing is ever finished, just temporarily in a certain form until nature or some other force changes it.\textsuperscript{28}

In one particularly poignant chapter entitled ‘On Building a House’, Ingold writes about building a house and notes that even with this type of major structure, elements of it shift and change through time due to the dynamic forces of ‘things.’ He writes;

‘The whole idea of architecture’, writes the inventor and designer Steward Brand (1994: 2), ‘is permanence.’ Yet buildings are part of the world, and the world will not stop but ceaselessly unfolds along its innumerable paths of growth, decay and regeneration, regardless of the most concerted of human attempts to nail it down, or to cast it in fixed and final forms.

He asks the reader to open our perception to what is going on in the world around us so that we in turn can respond to it, set up a relation with the world he calls “correspondence.” He states that the point is ‘not to accumulate more and more information about the world, but to better correspond with it.’\textsuperscript{29} My photographic interventions and woven baskets are informed by these ideas of New Materialism, working with the concepts of translating, corresponding and rewriting. This permanent state of flux is highlighted in my photographic interventions, in which I have often traced, with threading and beading, cracks that have appeared in walls over time or followed the marks left by water down the side of a building, thereby highlighting these markers of the passage.

\textsuperscript{26} Tim Ingold, *Making : Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (2013), 7
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 25
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 29
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 31
of time, decay and regeneration. Similarly, the fact that my baskets could be seen to have been left in unfinished states also speaks to Ingold’s idea of nothing ever being truly and completely finished.

Nikos Papastergiadis explores concepts similar to those espoused by New Materialists in discussing the sustainability and fluctuations of cultures in the context of migration in his book *The Turbulence of Migration*. He states:

If cultural transformation is activated by the infinite number of translations at every level within a cultural system, then this suggests that there is a great deal of uncertainty and instability in the structures of a culture. The very process of translation is a creative transformation that reorders the very languages within which it operates. All translations are unpredictable because, like strange attractors that shape turbulence in the physical world, their meaning and associations are formed in a field that is not predetermined by a fixed set of coordinates but shaped by signs which themselves are mobile and bifurcate through their own operational stretching and folding. Therefore the viability and resilience of a cultural system depends on the particularities in the patterns of interaction.  

To put it succinctly, nothing exists in a vacuum. ‘Things,’ be they walls or entire cultures, interact and react to various other things. My photographic and sculptural work explores this interaction, both in the Australian outback and in more urban environments. By acting on the photographic images, often giving prominence to areas in the photographs where some ‘thing’ else has already left a mark, be it nature or man, I am accentuating the state of flux and interaction between ‘things.’ Similarly, with the sculptures, the transformative process of spinning the newspaper articles into twine and weaving the baskets foregrounds the materiality of the work. This translation of newspaper into baskets, and the delicacy of the baskets (the baskets left uncoated have started to yellow and will eventually deteriorate), speaks also to the permanent state of flux of everything.

**Resonances**

Rosemary Laing is an Australian artist whose photographs resonate strongly with my recent work. Laing has an extensive body of work in which she captures dramatic interventions and performances against a backdrop of nature, engaging with the politics of space/place and contemporary culture. Graham Coulter-Smith writes that Laing “takes photography into the technological dimension by introducing the immateriality of the photographic ‘screen’ into the

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30 Papastergiadis. *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalization, Deterritorialization, and Hybridity*, 31
materiality of sculptural constructions.”

Laing does this by juxtaposing incongruous objects in landscapes, be it covering the forest floor in carpet in her *groundspeed* series, blanketing seeming acres of woodland with newspaper in *The Paper*, or photographing a bride seemingly suspended in mid-air against the sky in *flight research* and *bulletproofglass*. She photographs real events, physical installations and performers, and as such, her photographs are not only about place and space but are documents of performances. Laing uses these elements to create metaphors and allusions, asking viewers to make associations. For example, in *groundspeed*, a viewer might at first be unsettled and appreciate the strange beauty of the photograph. Learning, however, that Laing used flowered patterned carpets reflective of European customs, a viewer can appreciate her commentary on the European settlement of the Australian continent. Through this use of symbolism, Laing’s photographs transcend their status as representational images and speak of broader sociopolitical themes.

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As with Laing’s previously mentioned work, her series of photographs of the Woomera Detention Centre, *welcome to Australia*, explores similar issues of place and contemporary politics. These stark photographs depict the exterior of the disused detention centre. The high fences and the barbed wire illustrate in no uncertain terms that these detention centres have more in common with prisons than anything else. The ironic titles Laing chose for these works, including *Welcome to Australia* and *You Can Even Pay Later*, clearly exhibit Laing’s negative opinion of Australia’s treatment of asylum seekers. In *The Unquiet Landscapes of Rosemary Laing: One Dozen Unnatural Disasters in the Australian Landscape*, Solomon-Godeau states of this series;

> The artificial division [the fence in the photograph] of this border both physically, legally and psychologically divided people according to criteria of belonging...(The fence) represents a wedge through the landscape- a blockage, an eyesore, an echo of controversy and a closing off in terms of both a view and a sense of the possibilities of Australian identity. The inability to see into the distance or horizon and for the gaze to move spatially within the image, corresponds to the lack of freedom and to the loss of civil liberties imposed upon the individuals in this site.33

The disjunction between the outback setting and the detention centre is striking and weird, appearing in some photographs as if the detention centre has been put there by Laing as another one of her installations. The feeling of these photographs is strangely similar to her *groundspeed* and *The Paper* series, with the juxtaposing of incongruous objects in landscapes, however, this time Laing did nothing but photograph what was there. This intermingling of documentary and constructed photographs unsettle our sense of the truth of the image.

33 Abigail Solomon-Godeau, The Unquiet Landscapes of Rosemary Laing: One Dozen Unnatural Disasters in the Australian Landscape (San Francisco: Minor White, 2004). p17
The interventions I have done to the photographs I am exhibiting are on a more domestic scale, speaking to my interest in home and home making. However, similar to Laing’s grand cinematic interventions, my interpositions distort the perspective and add a strangeness and displacement to the images, suggesting an ‘other.’ The photographs I have taken of the yabby trap, representational of contained space, juxtaposed with the vast landscapes of the Australian Outback, function more allegorically than Laing’s detention centre photographs in this instance, requiring the viewer to interpret what they see, but the underlying themes are similar. Further, the interventions I have made, stitching, embroidering and beading on the photographs, work in the same vein as Laing’s aforementioned works, with the surprising interventions serving to unbalance a viewer. This disturbing of the viewer can be seen to be the equivalent of the uncertainty that ‘others’ experience. As an immigrant to Australia myself, I have been an ‘other’, although admittedly my experience has been very far from that of the asylum seekers. However, I have experienced a sense of isolation, cultural confusion and alienation, particularly when I first arrived. I felt unbalanced and uncertain, and these works explore those feelings but also offer domestication; a sense of adaption and homemaking.

Similar to Laing’s art, my work can also be seen to be documenting a performance, particularly my photographs of the yabby trap thrown into the air in the outback. The term ‘performance photography’ describes photographic works involving the execution of a performance staged to the camera to produce a particular image, where the photograph is the final artwork. Viewers of Laing’s photographs often assume she uses digital manipulation (I thought she did when I first saw

Figure 13. Rosemary Laing, Welcome to Australia (2004)
her work many years ago), but the reality is that she is photographing real events, installations and performers. My photographs also have an unreal feel to them and I have often been asked if the yabby trap was photoshopped into the outback landscapes. Like Laing’s work, my images are not just recording place and space but are documenting performances and interventions.

Coulter-Smith’s aforementioned statement about Laing’s photography taking “the immateriality of the photographic ‘screen’ into the materiality of sculptural constructions”35 raises the issue of the materiality of photography, with materiality defined as the physical and discursive condition of having a material substance.36 While Coulter-Smith comments on “the immateriality of the photographic screen,” it is not a new idea that photographs are images and material objects. Roland Barthes in Camera Lucida37 writes about a photograph, describing not the image but the material object that is the photograph, with its marks of its own history, its deterioration and its own past as once part of a photo album. He states: “Photographs are both images and physical objects that exist in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience.”38 Today, our experience of viewing photography is becoming ever more immaterial as the screen is replacing the print. I wanted to engage with the photograph on a tactile level, remaking the photographs as hand-crafted objects. The interventions I have performed can be seen to have created a ‘punctum,’ a term created by Barthes, defined as the “element which will disturb the studium … a photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me), is poignant to me.”39 Barthes argues that the punctum allows the photograph to transcend itself, “to annihilate itself as a medium, to be no longer a sign but a thing itself.”40 With the disruption I have done to the photographs, I have acknowledged the materiality of the photograph as an object, but then I have re-photographed the resulting material item, and what I am presenting is an image. This work again speaks to the turbulence of things, highlighting the patterns of interaction between objects.

Reading has always been an important part of my life and has had a strong influence on my art. I have reflected this in some of my past work, including making resin sculptures of books, some with text floating inside, and I also have used lines from literature as titles for my photographs in

39 Barthes, 26
40 Ibid., 45
Now And On Earth and Threshold. Until making these baskets, however, I haven’t worked with paper and texts themselves. Simryn Gill, who is also a transnational artist (born in Singapore, raised in Malaysia, educated in the UK and India, presently living in Australia), explores many of the same issues in her work as I do: dislocation, themes of place and insider/outsider positions. She works in various ways with texts, found objects, photography and sculpture. One of her series of works, entitled Pearls, comprises necklaces constructed with beads made out of torn pages of books. Another series, Forest, consists of torn strips of texts placed in nature and photographed. In yet others, Gill inscribed words on pieces of sea glass she collected from beaches for years (Washed Up), modified books, cutting into them to make shrines in one series (Pooja/Loot), and erased all text in books (32 Volumes). Additional works by Gill consist of items she has found run over on the road, to which she has added wheels (Roadkill), and series of photographs of people with large fruits on their heads (A Small Town at the Turn of the Century). Dr Daniel Palmer, in a catalogue for Gill’s exhibit entitled 32 Volumes, states:

Although photography literally deals with the surface of the world, Gill finds ways to penetrate beneath the pictorial layer. 32 Volumes opens up the Western view to multiple readings, opening to doubt its power to confer authenticity. John Berger once suggested that ‘[w]hen we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending it a past and future’. Such narrative projection is invited here – viewing these images is a work of empathy and imagination. Gill’s modified books are a reminder that nations, like identities, are a product

Figure 14. Simryn Gill, Pearls (1999)
of history – an agglomeration of clichés that we invest in to varying degree, imposed on us by geography, politics and history.41

The element of empathy and the physical use of texts in Gill’s work resonates with my art. Gill states that books have provided the raw material for her to tease out new meanings. She “gathers texts, narratives and words, for what they say, for how they have been read and as objects in themselves.”42 John Kelly, a curator of Gill’s exhibit at Tate Modern, said that Gill’s work “encourages the viewer to reject a rigid classification of their surroundings in favour of arrangements which offer uncertainty, disturbance and new possibilities.”43 The aforementioned works of Gill’s explore the broad themes of how one perceives and experiences a place, by unsettling and disturbing what a viewer would expect to see. This uncertainty and disturbance is similar to what I am seeking in my work. In Gill’s work, for example, the photographs of the people with fruit on their heads are strange and unsettling. With my work, a viewer might feel the same about my interventions in the walls. Also, as with Laing’s photographs, Gill is documenting a performance. The photographs of people with giant fruits on their heads are true, real time performances, documented by Gill.

Conclusion

As I previously stated, the work for this MFA began with photographs of a walled housing estate located outside of Melbourne. This interesting setting made me think about place and space, and how homes are made and what they mean. The wall in this setting was (and remains) stark and imposing, a real feature for those who live within its confines, and those on the outside. This wall piqued my interest in walls in general, how they contain, exclude, protect and engage people. Little did I realize when I started this line of thought that walls would become more and more relevant on the world’s stage, from, as I mentioned before, Trump’s idea of a massive wall between the US and Mexico to barrier fences and newly imposed border controls in Europe to keep refugees outside.

The ideas of engagement and disruption are key concepts for understanding my work. The beading, stitching and weaving, both on the photographs and with the baskets, elucidate an involvement and interference, as I stitch along the traces of decay on the walls or twist the newspapers into yarn, and weave my protective baskets. This engagement not only disrupts, but also can be read as a form of reparation.

The themes of domesticity, remaking and repair are also at the crux of my work. The notion that walls, spaces and constructions are man-made and represent a ‘masculinizing’ of the environment is countered by the constructions (walls) being made more porous by cracks, interventions by nature that could be cast as a ‘feminizing’ of these structures. I further this idea of ‘feminization’ by stitching and beading along these marks, asserting control, negotiating these structures and events, suggesting new pathways of understanding and possibilities.

As I previously mentioned, reading has always been important to me and has had a strong influence on my work. The time-consuming processes of these interventions, with the new avenues of understanding and alternatives they present, bring to mind the process of reading, with a slow unfolding of narrative. Making and thinking about this work, realizing and acknowledging the threads found in all my work through the years, has been an enlightening process. In the future, I plan to expand the exploration of the themes my work addresses, both photographically and
sculpturally. The interest the baskets have attracted in particular has me contemplating exploring different sculptural mediums utilizing texts.
Appendix 1

Mending Wall by Robert Frost

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbour know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbours."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they make good neighbours? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbours."
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