

FISHERMAN'S VILLAGE: CULTURAL HERITAGE AND A MULTI-LAYERED ART AND INFORMATION STRATEGY

Biography:

John Smith is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Arts at Southern Cross University where he teaches in the Visual Arts program and has been the School Director of Research and Postgraduate Studies for over a decade. He has had 25 solo exhibitions and is represented by galleries in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. He has works in many major public and private collections in Australia. He is also the convenor of the Center for Art and Land Literacy (the CALL).

Fisherman's Village is a project that I have been driving for a few years now. It began when I started recording oral histories of fishing families. I approached the City of Botany Bay about carrying out a cultural heritage retrieval project. They became very interested in the audio-recordings I was making, in terms of oral history and the archival value. I was interested in using the oral history process as a platform to write creative non-fiction: poetry, prose pieces, lyrics etc.

The proposal for a cultural heritage retrieval project with the City of Botany Bay aimed to provide their museum with a multi-layered art and information package ranging from place-marking sculptural works through to digital outcomes (material for CD's and websites), various hard copy formations (pamphlets and artists books) and community interfacing (workshops for school and community groups, social intervention strategies) etc. It would provide a range of outcomes across archival historical information as well as creative works. It unfolded as a research project in collaboration with staff from the George Hanna Memorial Museum in Mascot, Sydney.

A key component was to be the formation of strategies for engaging the contemporary community. The idea as with some of my previous projects was to develop ways in which the contemporary community could invest in its cultural future. It was a strategy to tactically provide opportunities for people to hear the past and then speak the present.

I need to begin by outlining my personal background within Fisherman's Village. And phase into descriptions of strategies and outcomes. These are ongoing. Like life and death.

ARRIVING AND LEAVING

I was born and raised on the foreshores of Botany Bay at the end of an era, the end of a place called Fisherman's Village. Four generations of my family had been fishing professionally in Botany Bay since the early 19th century. (ILLUSTRATION 1.1) However, for me Botany was always a place to leave, not to stay.



1.1 Fishermen from Fisherman's Village circa 1920's. Anonymous.

Botany Bay was the official site of first white contact with Australia. There is a dilapidating mural of the arrival of Cook on the wall of the Captain Cook Hotel, on Botany Road. I remember, as a child, peering in through the heavy swinging doors and glimpsing passages of this huge history painting in the dark atmosphere; the forbidden, smoke-filled cave of the pub. It was first painted there in 1947 by Raymond Mascord, a self-taught 'war artist'. He was the first artist I ever met, a friend of the family.

Botany Bay has been marked as a place of arrival in all official symbolic and historical contexts but in my emerging consciousness it was always a place to leave. I had a very real sense of the place as a site of deterioration. Current environmental problems in Botany Bay continue to reinforce this perception. Yet it remains, symbolically, the 'first landing'. As I grew the industrialization swallowed the houses, paddocks, dunes, slicked the foreshores and then poisoned the water. By the time we left they were measuring the mercury content in the fish, heavy fish. (ILLUSTRATIONS 1.2 and 1.3)



1.2 Booralee St. Home. Cuthbert and Kathleen Smith circa 1965. Anonymous



1.3 Lulland St. House. Thompson's family circa 1975. Photo by John Smith.

This 'inversion' and the contradiction that I took for granted, has always stayed with me. I watched the fishermen moving against a changing background. A backdrop of industry was replacing their foreshore scenery. It gave me an appreciation of the irony of life. It provided me with an underlying sense of loss that I later came to see reflected in many aspects of late 20th Century, western culture.

For me the Fisherman's Village project was also a vessel, a sort of metaphorical 'New Endeavor' that I could use to try and turn my personal sense of loss into a broader social strategy of gain. Each time I visited Botany I called into the Captain Cook and had a beer with Mascord's mural. It had been restored in 1988, as a bicentennial project but it isn't in very good shape again. Cook is frozen in action, climbing out of a boat into a landscape that is peeling off of the walls around him. And all about the rest of this large room television monitors flicker wildly with the horses, the trots and the dogs. (ILLUSTRATIONS 1.4 and 1.5)



1.4 Captain Cook Hotel 2005. Photo by John Smith.



1.5 Captain Cook Hotel 2005. Photo by John Smith.

About a year ago I called in on a Friday afternoon. I expected to see how the mural was peeling along but instead I was surprised by lingerie waitresses, walking about topless in lacey knickers, serving drinks. Cook and Co. was partly shielded from this scene by a large screen that was pulled down in front of them. It showed an enormous video projected horse race. What a carnival! I immediately envisaged a scene with the topless waitresses serving amid this fanfare of racing monitors and one of our 'power-points' compiled from photos of the fishing families from the early 20th Century there on that big screen. (ILLUSTRATION 1.6) My grand mother was a stern upright woman who lived to 106. She maintained that she'd eaten a lot of fish and claimed never to have even been in a hotel. In all her life she could not have dreamed of how I could use her image, and the rest of them, to intervene on the part of a very different endeavour, in such a cultural environment.



1.6 Mrs. Kathleen Smith on right (with daughter Alma) circa 1935. Anonymous.

The hotel now has a local history program and we are negotiating an ongoing involvement that includes historical brochures and power-point shows through to place-marking sculptural works that carry rubbing plates. Amongst other icons patrons will be able to do rubbings of our website address, and log on to Fisherman's Village.

When I visited the old Fisherman's Village site and walked about the three streets that made up the area, I could see right past the factories and the sounds of machinery, the trucks and forklifts, voices crying out of dark work bays. I could see ghosts. These people were all gone, but with creative works, digital technology, Photoshop, Dream Weaver, and final Cut Pro and my writing, we could bring them back. In fact we can take them all up the pub for a drink. (ILLUSTRATION 1.7)



1.7 Len and Percy Smith circa 1968. Photo by John Smith.

I was mapping, on the one hand, like a cultural geographer but I was also reclaiming the territory. I have vivid memories of working with the men and although I certainly didn't enjoy the work as a boy, I began to realise that I could recall it in a strong, evocative, manner. I could see it and I could smell it and I could feel the slippery gunnels of the boat in my hands and through my feet. I could fear the weather and I could slide out onto the deep water with them at night. And even though I may now have to leave them in abyss I am, nevertheless, the last generation of these fishing families to be able to recall much of how they worked and lived. And I was in possession of some 400 minutes of oral history recordings of description of the FV community, their work and lifestyle.

MUSEUM EXHIBITION

In 2003 I collaborated with a museum in the City of Botany Bay to produce an exhibition called 'Booralee: the Lost Fishing Town of Botany' It was curated by Joanne Sippel. By this stage we had established an Industry Partnership between my university (Southern Cross University) and the City of Botany Bay Council. The museum exhibition opened a week after my father's 90th birthday. We provided a lot of research material from the recordings I had made, creative non-fiction writing, a power-point presentation and artifacts. Joanne Sippel had developed a large body of information about the fishing village families and installed an extensive display in the format that they had been using regularly in the George Hanna Memorial Museum in Mascot. (ILLUSTRATION 1.8)



1.8 Henry and Len Smith 2003. Photo by John Smith

The creative non-fiction works I have developed from my oral history recordings, and memory have spanned poetry, prose pieces and song writing. One of the pieces I provided in the 2003 exhibition was a set of lyrics to a song I had written. This was written as a sea shanty waltz, and I have played and sung it in various contexts. It is also the sort of material that is accessible to an audience in a eulogy. And I read it as part of my father's eulogy in June 2004.

FISHERMAN'S WALTZ.

On cold and wet nights the men of Botany (sea shanty waltz)
 Climb on their boats and push out to sea
 They sit on a dig
 They plan on the tide,
 And inside their hearts, their secrets they hide

Singin' ho we go fishin', for the schools we snare
 We shoot out our nets and we haul them in here (chorus)

And we never speak, of the things that we fear
 For that's not our way in Botany my dear

In starlit warm summers on the water we go
 In our broad open boats, cross the weed beds below
 We watch for winds changin' on the bay's other side
 And inside our hearts, our secrets we hide

I remember my father, and his father too
 They once caught the great shark
 For Taronga Park Zoo

And they thought it so funny,
 Although the thing died
 But inside their hearts their secrets did hide

Singin' ho we go fishin', for the schools we snare
 We shoot out our nets and we haul them in here (chorus)

And we never speak, of the things that we fear
 For that's not our way in Botany my dear

As time slipped away, and the fish disappeared
 The waters of Botany were dying, they feared
 So they packed up their homes (slow and spoken)
 And the village was cleared
 To make way for the workers, and factories

(music solos)

So I'm left now to wonderin'
 As I lay in my bed
 Just what were the mysteries, they kept in their heads
 Or as I go out, by the waters alone
 I remember their saying 'take care of your own'

Singin' ho we go fishin', for the schools we snare
 We shoot out our nets and we haul them in here

(chorusx2)

And we never speak, of the things that we fear
 For that's not our way in Botany my dear.

('singin' tura li ura li athertee) (FADE)

The poetics of the eulogy involves providing a congregation with the opportunity to cry and laugh. Again I identified the dynamic of the process of 'inversion' of laughing and crying in the concert of person and place, during the eulogy, as ironic. From a theoretical perspective I am able to position it as part of the broader discursive structure of the 'carnavalesque'. In Terry Eagleton's recent work, 'Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic.' He claims that

'...By relativizing life in carnivalesque style death relaxes our neurotic grip upon it and sets us free for a deeper enjoyment. Such detachment is the reverse of indifference.' (Eagleton, T. sees Introduction.)

SHARING COGNITIVE OWNERSHIP

I have also played and sung the Fisherman's Waltz with family members. One time when this happened I was on a trip away with a group from the family at a country hotel, playing and singing in the early hours of the morning out on the verandah. In this instance the last time we had shared the Fisherman's Waltz was as a spoken piece a couple of months before in my father's eulogy. However, this time one of my nephews indicated he had written his own music for it. He played it for me to sing and he'd changed it from a seaman's waltz to a ballad.

As a ballad, it was a more contemporary piece of music and it was also a lot more moving, a lot more emotional. I was very taken by the way in which he had claimed a 'cognitive ownership' of the work and transformed it. Cultural geographer, Bill Boyd describes 'cognitive ownership' as:

'...founded on the concepts and pragmatics of social construction theory, the term refers to the interest in or association with a cultural site claimed, even implicitly, by any person or group who attaches some value to that place...the important issue is not the truth or validity of one meaning over another, but merely their identification. Using this approach the cultural heritage place ceases to be an isolated place...' (Boyd, W. et. al. P.93)

One of my other nephews who would not have given himself any credit for creative ability whatsoever interjected a spontaneous verse about his grandmother (my mother) and how he remembered her on a sheep farm at sheering time. This was an accurate little vignette of a vivid picture he had of her in gloves and gumboots and overalls etc. The song had come alive with the fisher woman, shearing sheep. The song now has verses in progress, so to speak. I can offer a potential for 'cognitive ownership' of and through this song to contemporaries within the community of the 'bay'. We have literally had school kids singing the song while they draw pictures to 'save the bay'.

Incidences like this helped us formulate our 'cultural investment' strategies for workshops with the local schools and groups. We are particularly interested in working with factory workers who now occupy the site of Fisherman's Village.

LOCAL SCHOOLS WORKSHOPS

The context in which we ultimately focus this project, its production and consumption is the contemporary community. If this past is going to be useful to the people who occupy the area around the bay, young and old, they will need a 'live' connection, not just some nostalgic or sentimental reminiscence. The key 'now' issue that provides the focus for the present in this instance is 'environment'. This ranges across environmental issues, place-making and cultural identity. I would argue that without key contemporary issues a proactive transformational function doesn't become activated. The archival work becomes archived and the creative work stands only on its formalism, and fades.

If I go into a school workshop on the culture of Fisherman's Village and I am going to talk about the bay, then I have to start from their bay, not mine, not my fathers etc. However this can be done through an 'inversion'.

We raised the environmental issues simultaneously with descriptions of the demise of Fisherman's Village. But we kept the first sessions with the school workshops focused on the domestic and recreational life style and professional fishing practices of the people from Fisherman's Village. The sense of loss was inherent in the descriptions of a very dynamic and fascinating community, simply being gone forever.

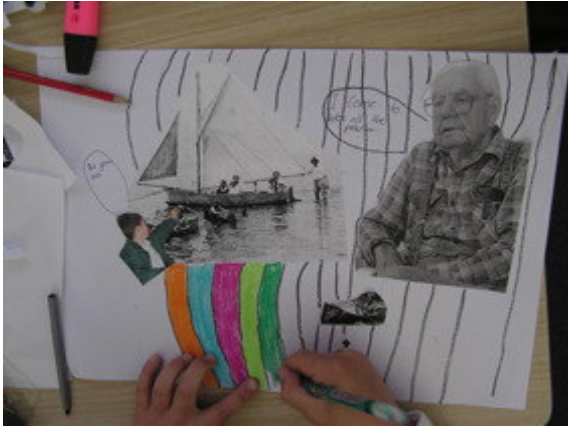
"It was the beginning of the end..." (the opening of one of the first pieces of feedback writing we received in a story writing exercise).

The drawing exercise we developed centered on dealing with a major chemical pollution problem. (ILLUSTRATION 1.9) This was initially caused by the Imperial Chemical Company (ICI) from the 1940's and inherited by a multi-national corporation, Orica, since 1990. Orica are presently committing 167 million dollars to remediating a large aquifer pollution problem on the north side of the bay, a few hundred meters from the site of FV. I don't have time to discuss this in depth here. But there is a lot of bad blood between the Botany Council and this multi-national.



1.9 John Smith delivering drawing workshop, St. Bernard's School 2005. Photo by Joanne Sippel.

Our approach was to provide a platform for the students to make a proactive attempt to contribute to the issue through drawing. We employed a collaging and drawing exercise that made a lot of material available in imagery of Fisherman's Village (people and activities) in conjunction with a lot of newspaper and Orica publications about the current environmental problem. A series of simple and complex metaphorical subjects were used to prompt and stimulate the students. (ILLUSTRATIONS 1.10 and 1.11) Students were encouraged to see their role in a proactive approach towards helping solve the problem. An intrinsic component of this would be a cultural investment in their future by establishing appropriate destinations for the outcomes of their creative efforts. (ILLUSTRATION 1.12)



1.10 Workshop exercise in progress 2005. Photo by Joanne Sippel



1.11 Workshop exercise in progress 2005. Photo by Joanne Sippel.



1.12 Workshop exercise in progress 2005. Photo by Joanne Sippel.

Positioning of the outcomes of this exercise is an important tactical aspect of the project. It is necessary to generate the proactive significance of the whole exercise. As an investment in the cultural future the outcomes need to service both the subject of the exercise and the students.

The Orica company will be offered the material for use in a range of venues, e.g. on their website, in their library, in their publications etc. Material will be made available for use in community libraries and the George Hanna Memorial Museum. It is also envisaged that material from the workshops will be added to Fisherman's Village power-point displays that are to be run in local Hotels. Southern Cross University's Center For Art and Land Literacy will post material on it's website. A small number of Artists Books will be constructed from the original materials and from scans to be kept in local library venues, and for archival purposes.

It is hoped that the project will be supported by the Orica administration and that the project will contribute to a positive and proactive liaison within the community, into the future. We will attempt to inscribe a schedule into the project where these students will be given the opportunity to do the exercise again in 5 years time, and the company will be given an update on these young adults perceptions of its activities...that is 'held to ransom'.

Most importantly for the sense of cultural investment, the students will be given experience and understanding of a range of the placements of the outcomes of their project and hopefully develop an appreciation of the potential of their involvement and of course, the 'irony' of living on Botany Bay and inversions especially apparent in collecting oral history.

(ILLUSTRATIONS 1.13 and 1.14)



1.13 Len Smith during oral history session 2002. photo by Les Dorahy



1.14 Len Smith during oral history session 2002. photo by Les Dorahy

“ Inversion addresses the social classification of values, distinctions and judgements which underpin practical reason and systematically inverts the relations of subject and object, agent and instrument...master and slave. Although it alters the terms of a binary pair it cannot alter the terms themselves.” (Stallybrass and White p.56)

For Fisherman's Village, the terms were never set. They were always in flux. Inversions occur within inversions, if you like. The diasporic factory workers displaced the fishermen. But the landscape had been changing ever since the white settlers arrived at the site in the first half of the 19th century. As a child I was told nothing of the Kameygal people but a sense of the 'place' of Botany Bay in the past and the future always seemed so ironic. And I drew upon it in various parts of the eulogy required for the last of these fishermen.

FROM MY FATHER'S EULOGY

“The key element in 'overcoming' of this deep-seated sense of irony seemed manifest in two aspects of the culture of the community. One was the 'serving of an overwhelming priority', that of the weather and the Bay, in 'a plentiful work, where there was always plenty of work to do'. The other was in a certain 'larrikinism' where work and play were interwoven in the carnival of anecdotes that make up a life as 'all just a bit of fun'.

The very last of these fishermen moved to Jervis Bay to retire, spend time with the women and eventually to nurture each other away. And they did it with a laugh about the 'bit of fun' they'd had. They loved to reminisce, but lived for each new day. It has always reminded me of the parting lines from the dolphins in “The Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy”, as they left the earth just before it was to be blasted out of the way of a new inter-galactic super highway.

‘Good bye, and thanks for all the fish.’(Adams, Disc Three) ” (ILLUSTRATION 1.15)



1.15 Len and Henry Smith circa, 1989. Photo by John Smith.

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