

## Under the Act: A poisoned chalice

by Louise Martin-Chew

### “This Whispering in Our Hearts”<sup>1</sup>

*Black Opium*: Fiona Foley’s mood rooms at the State Library of Queensland

*Two wongs don’t make a white*,  
Arthur Caldwell, Labor opposition leader, 1947

*Handouts of opium, plug tobacco, sugar and tea... tended to close the shackle  
of addiction upon the wrist of the potentially errant black worker.*  
Raymond Evans<sup>2</sup>

*In my lifetime, we have become one of the most culturally diverse places on earth,  
and it has happened peacefully, by and large. That is a remarkable achievement –  
until we look for those whose Australian civilization has seldom been acknowledged, whose genius for survival  
and generosity and forgiving have rarely been a source of pride. And yet, they remain, as Henry Reynolds wrote,  
this whispering in our hearts.  
For they are what is unique about us.*  
John Pilger, “Breaking the Australian Silence”<sup>3</sup>

At the opening of her exhibition at Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art in November 2009, Fiona Foley described her art activities as educative. “What I am trying to talk about is a notion of truth,” she said. On one level it may have seemed that, by 2009, many of the truths with which her art interacts – the indigenous histories of Australia – were well understood. But is this so? Little known in the general population is the speech given by Paul Keating in Redfern Park in 1992, which heralded a watershed in indigenous/white Australian relations in its acknowledgement of the injustices inflicted on Australia’s Indigenous inhabitants during and since white settlement. Many new accounts, such as Rosalind Kidd’s *The Way We Civilise* (UQP, 2005) which is based on the Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897 and 1901, and Tony Roberts’s *Frontier Justice: A History of the Gulf Country to 1900* (UQP, 2005), have come to light in recent years. These are an unblinking look at the injustices inflicted on the original inhabitants, specifically in Queensland, yet it would seem that the use and abuse of Australia’s Indigenous in the history since settlement is bound to remain contested.

In 2009 the second volume of Keith Windschuttle’s *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* attracted much comment in *The Australian* newspaper and other media for his criticism of the film version of Doris Pilkington Garimara’s *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*. While he has developed his thesis from primary sources, his interpretation of events has been and will continue to be passionately debated.

The State Library of Queensland, in developing a series of reading rooms by contemporary artist Fiona Foley, puts on the agenda a strongly articulated view of both Indigenous Australians and their interaction with the Chinese influence in north Queensland. This is a visionary public artwork, in bricks and mortar, moving images, and three-dimension.

The first of these little known truths is the relationship between Asian and Indigenous Australians, and the fairly complex story of how opium became involved in 19<sup>th</sup> century Queensland. (This history is explored in full in Andrew Gillett’s essay in this publication.) The Queensland Government intervened with the Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897 and 1901<sup>4</sup> which gave public servants the ability to control an Indigenous person’s life. While the Act may have been designed to deal with a short term problem, it became a mechanism for social engineering and took from Aboriginal people their most basic human rights. As such, Queensland’s Act became the first measure of separate legal control over Aboriginal people. Henry Reynolds wrote that, “...it was far more restrictive than any [contemporary] legislation operating in New South Wales or Victoria, and implemented a system of tight controls and closed reserves”.<sup>5</sup>

It would seem that the government's agenda was as much as to prevent the Chinese from employing available Aboriginal labour as the welfare of the Indigenous people. It was also used to outlaw sexual contact between Asian and Indigenous peoples, with the idea of maintaining "racial integrity"<sup>6</sup>.

Opium, despite being restricted by the Act, was commonly used to render Aboriginal Australians a compliant workforce, and its consequences are still visible in the ongoing dysfunction and difficulties of Palm Island where opium-addicted Australians were sent - so glaringly highlighted with the 2004 death in custody of Cameron Doomadgee.

On Level 4 in the library's airy, light-filled building these tiny reading rooms, with space for one or two people, are largely solitary spaces where you may be immersed in the multiple histories which Foley combines with simple aesthetic pleasures. Michele Helmrich has noted Foley's role in her photographic works as both observer and participant.<sup>7</sup> In the case of the *Black Opium* mood rooms, Foley takes us in with her and we too are implicated, immersed, immobilized by the revelatory nature of the histories which unfold.

**Bliss** An alcove for one, the viewing area of the Bliss room is an enclosed space – somewhat claustrophobic - with barely elbow room and a lowered ceiling. Foley's artist DVD shows poppies dancing. It has a breathtaking beauty, with rustling sounds and focussed details of the poppy field as both collective and individual. Text over the image conveys the deadliness of its historical usage on Indigenous Queenslanders. The aesthetic is peaceful, meditative, acting on the viewer as a relaxant and giving a muted sense of the narcotic fix and its associated entrapment.

**String** This room is woven, a web of regular gridded handmade string, suggesting the intrigue and political confusion that underpins the Act – ostensibly developed for the protection of Aboriginal people but in its application, impact and agendas subjecting their lives to onerous restrictions and regulation. Threaded into the back wall are three Aurukun spears, recording the sculptural tradition in the area since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Silver** The silver room is also visually seductive, and cuts to the reality of opium addiction. Pipes sourced from Shanghai are beautifully ornate, and photographs of Aboriginal families in early Queensland bear testimony to their lives. Hung Salon style, in some cases these images were clearly posed, "dressed up" to convey a photographer's agenda; nonetheless they evidence something of the reality, and unreality, of these lives. A facsimile of the Act is displayed in this room, spelling out in bureaucratic language the chilling level of control imposed on those whose faces look out from history at the viewer.

**Shrine** The crimson walls are used to denote Sir Henry Parkes's "crimson thread of kinship", a Federation of the States from which Chinese and Indigenous peoples were patently excluded. Historic pictures of Queensland's Chinese - in the cane fields, with opium pipes, carrying water, notably in the gold fields - in ornate gold frames evoke Colonial times. 1848, writ large in gold lettering on the crimson wall, refers to the date that Chinese arrived in Queensland. A letter, reproduced in full, movingly pleads with the MLA for Brisbane in 1884, B.D. Morehead, "to block the sale of this infernal stuff", citing the "affects of opium on the Niggers" and its "evil". The ceiling is high, and the crimson walls rise poignantly through the emptiness above.

**Mangrove** Photographs of local mangroves are set behind floor to ceiling glass, and the viewer sits in this room with imagery of life size trees, seduced by the beauty of native species, experiencing all but the stickiness of the mud. Foley is opening an imaginative door to the way it may have felt to those Europeans coming ashore for the first time, experiencing the historically wild density of the Brisbane River, which runs adjacent to the State Library building.

**Gold** In this small gold-painted room 300 heart-shaped Bodhi leaves are hung on long threads, floating above the head of the viewer. They are beautiful, moving gently and meditatively in the air, evoking both Chinese culture (in their reference to Buddhism) and the blissed-out state of the opium addict.

**Slow Burn** In marked contrast, the slow burn room conjures up images of colonial life. The ceiling is rusted, bullet-holed, corrugated iron, and framed on the wall are a tomahawk, knives, fishing hooks, tobacco tins, and old clay pipes, all referring to the rudimentary materials on which a life could be built. It lists, in confronting detail, the towns in Queensland that hosted opium dens, and the number of opium licenses issued for particular areas. The numbers are little known, surprising, confronting: Brisbane 16, Cooktown 20 - the relatively small population on Thursday Island boasted 15.

Slow burn is a reminder, too, of the time taken to absorb this material, the slow reveal, a gaze upwards providing a chilling reminder of the life and death realities of colonial life.

In these rooms, Foley is conducting a symphony, weaving together elements of history, emotion, beauty, concepts and visual cues, which come together with the multi-layered understanding they develop. The full impact of the story she tells is complex. The aesthetic impact and its meanings come through the culmination of the rooms as a group. To journey through each room makes for an experience, as poetic as it is political, into greater understanding.

In another layer for Foley personally, Queensland's Chief Southern Protector, Archibald Meston, whose recommendations shaped the Act, set up the first mission on Fraser Island. This is Badtjala land and Foley's country. After a twenty year war with the settlers, Fraser Island became Bogimbah Creek reserve, and the site for Indigenous people from other areas in Queensland – anyone deemed “unproductive or troublesome, was removed there between 1897 and 1904 and incarcerated in a ‘closed institution’...”<sup>8</sup>

Foley's ability to continue to take us on a poetic, imaginative, aesthetically rich yet educative journey has increasing resonance – in the State Library of Queensland's *Black Opium* mood rooms we witness too-little known histories and, by that witness, make them meaningful for those whose lives were lost or changed. The art offers a permanent site in which to spend a little time with “this whispering in our hearts”.

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<sup>1</sup> From the title of Henry Reynold's book, *This Whispering in Our Hearts*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Evans, “The Owl and the Eagle”, *Fighting Words: Writing about Race*, UQ Press, 1999: p.45.

<sup>3</sup> John Pilger, “Breaking the Australian Silence”, *Global Research*, November 8, 2009,

<http://www.globalresearch.ca/PrintArticle.php?articleId=15970>: p.7 of 7.

<sup>4</sup> The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897 and 1901 is housed in the State Library of Queensland.

<sup>5</sup> Reynolds, Professor Henry, “Appendix 1(a): THE ABORIGINALS IN COLONIAL SOCIETY, 1840-1897”, *RCIADIC*.

<sup>6</sup> Rosalind Kidd, *The Way We Civilise*, UQP 2005: p.45. Much of Foley's research into this matter has been drawn from *The Way We Civilise*.

<sup>7</sup> Michele Helmrich, “Looking at You Looking at Me: Performance and Ethnography in Fiona Foley's Photographs”, *Forbidden: Fiona Foley*, Museum of Contemporary Art/ UQ Art Museum, 2009: p.40.

<sup>8</sup> Fiona Nicoll, “No Substitute: Political Art Against the Opiate of the Colonising Euphemism”, in *Forbidden: Fiona Foley*: p.61.