

Fiona Foley and her fearful symmetry

by Alison Kubler

“... And finally, what about the magical number seven? What about the seven wonders of the world, the seven seas, the seven deadly sins, the seven daughters of Atlas in the Pleiades, the seven ages of man, the seven levels of hell, the seven primary colors, the seven notes of the musical scale, and the seven days of the week? What about the seven-point rating scale, the seven categories for absolute judgment, the seven objects in the span of attention, and the seven digits in the span of immediate memory? For the present I propose to withhold judgment. Perhaps there is something deep and profound behind all these sevens, something just calling out for us to discover it. But I suspect that it is only a pernicious, Pythagorean coincidence.”

George A. Miller "The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits on Our Capacity for Processing Information" *The Psychological Review*, 1956, vol. 63, pp. 81-97.

The Royal Library of Alexandria looms large in the imagination of even the most lay of scholars. Arguably the most famous library from antiquity and widely considered the largest of its time, its name conjures romantic notions of seminal classical philosophical exchanges. It established the concept of a library as a sacred place for the accumulation and collection of knowledge, with its claim to contain all known knowledge and creating facsimiles of texts held by other classical libraries to extend its holdings. The library even boasted simple lodgings for visiting students.

Contemporaneously, it is of course impossible to think that the sum of all knowledge could be contained in one place. The contemporary notion of a library sees the original model of the library at Alexandria enlarged and expanded to embrace new technologies - bringing knowledge from elsewhere to the library and sending information out again via the Internet - creating spaces that privilege small children as much as learned scholars. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the busiest time of business for the State Library of Queensland is in fact the evening hours when the library is closed. Patrons come to lounge in the spacious well-lit public atrium to take advantage of the superior free wireless and safe surrounds. In this instance the library emerges not just as a site for the repository of knowledge, but also as a space for its sharing and explication, and perhaps just general communication. In an age when we are supposedly becoming increasingly detached from one another, this augurs well.

The library is thus both a site of learning *and* a meeting place, a place that provides pathways to education. Importantly libraries are repositories for the protection of a diverse range of material – books, letters and manuscripts alike - regardless of their content, for the illumination and elucidation of future generations. All matter is valued equally for what it tells us about humanity, the good the bad and the indifferent: the book burnings perpetrated by the Nazi regime or the sacking of precious materials during the fall of Iraq are all too fresh in the collective memory, and chasten our collective resolve to build libraries for the posterity of memory, in order that we don't forget. But as the adage goes, you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink. In the case of the State Library of Queensland, here is a building replete with all manner of resources and information about every conceivable thing. It is well patronized, and yet still large portions of its holdings remain unknown to Queenslanders.

It is wholly apt then that Fiona Foley's contribution to the State Library of Queensland through the Millennium Arts Fund, an installation entitled *Black Opium*, should so eloquently articulate the library's larger function as both a repository and a vessel for the dissemination of information, as the document from which Foley took the inspiration for this body of work, the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* is housed in the State Library of Queensland. Although how many Queenslanders have ever read it is debatable. Foley herself became aware of the history of the Act after reading Roslyn Kidd's important book *The Way We Civilize: Aboriginal Affairs - The Untold Story* (1997), a book that exposes harsh little acknowledged truths about the great mistreatment of indigenous people in this country. Kidd's book is a galling read, largely because it is accompanied by the sheepish recognition of ignorance of a history that is collectively ours, but untold until Kidd articulated it for us. It seems particularly ironic that something so

seemingly innocuous, a parchment paper yellowed with age - albeit bearing an official seal – had such lingering repercussions for indigenous people, in Queensland especially, yet its history is at best unknown to most. The original intentions of the Act, elaborated upon elsewhere in this book, were grossly corrupted to arrive at a legal decree that is in short, evidence of Australia's own history of apartheid. Foley's ongoing art project is in large part a strategy of educating Australians, white and black, about this aspect of our nation's history through the catharsis of art. Foley's past bodies of work have exposed shameful massacres and exposed accepted Government practices that are unspoken and more importantly, *still* not taught in schools or universities. Fiona Foley's fierce art making is a vocation that has at its heart public education.

And yet, *Black Opium* is a public artwork that operates in stealth mode. That is to say, it is not immediately public. It exists in the public realm yet its attitude is one of discretion. Its presence is slowly revealed as one looks upward from the ground floor. Glimpsed from afar the infinity symbol the form the work takes is immediately apparent. A reward for the stargazer, it shimmers enticingly beckoning viewers up to the ...floors. In mathematical formulas, the concept of infinity – something greater than that which is imaginable, that is, unimaginable and unfathomable – is denoted by a horizontal number eight (symbol here). In medieval symbolism it would take the form of a snake twisting on itself, devouring its own tale, to represent the passing of time and the notion of time as infinite.

On closer inspection, *Black Opium* consists of 777 aluminium poppies arranged in a figure eight embedded in the ceiling. Foley employs the opium poppy as a motif with which to explore the legacy of the Act. A deceptively prosaic flower, its cheerful exterior belies a dark heart. Its intentions are good, but it in the wrong hands it is a vehicle for humanity's greatest evils. Poppies have always been used for their natural opiate traits and are safely farmed by the medical industry for use in analgesics, hypnotics and sedatives. At the same time, they are grown illegally and harvested for the narcotics trade, for use in opium and heroin, harvested by regimes such as the Taliban in Afghanistan. The poppies hang with their fecund heads down, suspended like so many multiple evocations of the sword at the heart of the classical Greek myth of Damocles. Damocles, an ambitious courtier in the house of Dionysus II of Syracuse, begged to experience a day in the life of his patron, and was obliged. He indulged in a brief taste of a life of privilege and power, before Dionysus drew his attention to the sword hanging from a single horsehair above his head, poised to drop.

Cicero employed the myth to exemplify the truth that a life of virtue is the true path to happiness: "Does not Dionysius seem to have made it sufficiently clear that there can be nothing happy for the person over whom some fear always looms?" Cicero's moral analogy may be easily applied to those in power, the lawmakers who enforced the Act as well as to the indigenous people whose lives it affected so irrevocably. Standing beneath the work one is simultaneously entranced by the shimmering surface of the opium poppies and conscious that they seem tenuously suspended, as though they may fall, like Damocles' sword. Persecution by art?

Embedded in *Black Opium* is a further symbolism of personal interest to Foley, an interest in the number 7. Foley repeats the poppy 777 times. As a digit, the humility of the size of the number 7 denies its significance. For the number seven is indeed great among integers. An elegant prime number, variously described as a lucky prime or a happy prime, it is perfect in its asymmetry. It has a symbolic significance in almost every culture and is employed in mysticism and numerology. Consider the Seven Wonders of the World, the seven days of the week, the seven days of creation, and so on. The mathematician George Miller hypothesized that the average human short term memory capacity is for 7 things, or 7 chunks of memory, plus or minus two. In this sense it is as though Foley were encrypting her work in order to subliminally expand our short and long-term historical memory. Similarly, *Black Opium* is at once both the end *and* the starting point for the 7 reading rooms, variously named the Bliss Room, the String Room, the Silver Room, the Shrine Room, the Mangrove Room, the Gold Room and the Slow Burn Room. Here again is the number 7. Plus one makes eight: the integer of infinity. Is this symbolism intended or accidental? Is Foley a contemporary seer, divining meaning from the blackest (sic) of histories? There is indeed a deeply embedded symmetry and symbolism that speaks to the very heart of indigenous culture, its richness, longevity and historical tenacity. In this light, we might approach the rooms as 7 steps to a kind of enlightenment.