

Artist Commentary
Fiona Hall

by Craig Judd

b.1953

Lives and works in Adelaide, Australia

Gene Pool

Government House

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

"I don't think that everything I do has equal standing; some things I do are more successful than others; and I think that's often true of a body of work.... Perhaps the ongoing exploration, the systematic working through of ideas and reaching out for different approaches and so on is the epic voyage. Maybe it's a soap opera. I quite like that term actually. Often it does seem like a soap opera, where you've got all of these characters, ideas and media that crop up again and again, and which go through different phases..."

Tim Morrell and Jim Moss, "Fiona Hall", *Photofile*, Summer 1988-89, p. 27

"It is amazing to me that section of the Australian population still can't comprehend that this land and the plants that grow in it, and the people whose land that was, have together a very long history of coexistence that must be acknowledged and respected. The recent work *Paradisus Terrestris Entitled* attempts to make a political comment about this. The multiple parallel systems of plant names seem to me to eloquently indicate widely different outlooks and levels of awareness"

Deborah Hart, "Fiona Hall's Garden: fertile interactions", *Art and Australia* Vol 36, no. 2, 1998, p. 202

COMMENTARY

Fiona Hall is an extraordinarily energetic artist. She emerged as a leading photographer in the late 1970s with her images of interiors, landscapes and beach life. During the 1980s, there was an exponential expansion of Hall's practice and themes. Her chosen medium changed from photography to what can broadly be described as sculpture. This transition is quite common. People who capture the traces of subjects with the lens move to mediums which make real or actualise those objects and events.

Plants have been a vitally important subject area for Hall. From her early square format photographic studies of gardens to the plant and physical metamorphoses of the now famous sardine/tin can series *Paradisus Terrestris* 1989-90 and 1999, she uses plants as complex metaphors and signifiers for a wide range of interests and issues. Hall is very interested in science and the role of the museum and how this institution orders language and knowledge through the creation of taxonomies. Series *Paradisus Terrestris* 1989-90 and 1999 is one of the few series in Australian art that clearly links the reproductive processes and notions of fertility commonly associated with plant life in other cultures to local plant species and the sensations and narratives of the human body.

Hall's work has also referenced mass production techniques, ecology, identity politics and the effects of commodity fetishism. She works across many practices such as photography, knitting, beading, painting, printmaking, sculpture/installation garden design and construction and costume. One of her favoured materials at the moment is soap, which has the tactility and sensuality of human skin

It was in the 1970s and 80s that artists such as Walter De Maria, Robert Smithson, Mary Miss, Wolfgang Laib, and Meg Webster began to play with the ideas of displacement. That is, to bring unfamiliar materials and forms into the museum environment and museum consciousness. Piles of dirt, sticks, pollen and moss gain a new presence, a new aura, by

their placement in this new pristine (and unnatural) environment of the museum space. Fiona Hall also enjoys the acts and effects of displacement.

For a small band of devotees the garden has always been an art form. Indeed in the late 17th and 18th centuries it was considered to be one of the most important of human endeavours. With the rise of modernity the role of nature as a site of meditative pleasure has grown in importance but conversely, so has the idea of nature at the service of industry. Nature in 2001 is still generally conceived to be an infinite resource aching for exploitation and development. However recent events and discoveries have challenged this assumption. Within the Australian context, inappropriate land management practices have promoted various forms of land degradation such as widespread salinity and blue green algae. The threat and reality of ecological disaster has become an important subject in contemporary art.

Gene Pool at Government House, Sydney was a temporary installation in what used to be the tennis court. This work continues large-scale garden projects that began with Hall's design for *The Fern Garden* 1998 at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

Influenced in part by the writings of Mary E. White and Tim Flannery, *Gene Pool* is an installation that references the primordial powers of nature. This 12 x 16m space has been shaped into a quasi Edenic environment. This particular Eden is a series of garden beds in the shape of the continents that together once formed the mega-continent, Gondwanaland. The garden beds are placed to represent the pre-human geological time just when the continents began to drift apart. The rupture lines form gravel paths. In the "land masses" are planted species with close Gondwanaland connections thus compounding the primordial and Edenic associations of the work.

With *Gene Pool* Hall has gathered together some of the most ancient plant species still in existence. These are the Araucariaceae, Dicksoniaceae, Cycadaceae Proteaceae and Podocarpaceae. The maximum height of these shrubs are 2 metres that still allow the average viewer to look down onto the essential shapes and forms of the plants and to meditate on the subsequent diversity of species that has occurred. These plants have colonised a range of environments and have adapted to different conditions. Hall contends that humans in their colonising activities have not been so successful at adapting to new and unfamiliar conditions. *Gene Pool* asks the viewer to contemplate the processes by which nature has been tamed and changed by human activities.

Reading

- Deborah Hart "Fiona Hall's Garden: fertile interactions" *Art and Australia* Vol 36, no. 2, 1998, p. 202-211
- Tim Morrell and Jim Moss "Fiona Hall" *Photofile*, Summer 1988-89, p. 27