

(terra) australis incognita



eva fernández



*Anigozanthos flavidus* 2011

# unknown southern: colonial folly, madness and hybridity in Eva Fernandez's (terra) australis incognita

The title of Eva Fernandez's new photographic series, *(terra) australis incognita* is drawn from the ancient European belief in an 'unknown south land', a mythical continent whose existence was assumed from Pythagoras onwards, as a natural counterbalance to the land masses of the northern hemisphere.<sup>1</sup> Terra Australis Incognita was popularly imagined as a paradise, milder than Europe but with similar ecological diversity<sup>2</sup> and variously expected to be rich in gold, silver, tin, iron, lead, copper, precious stones, pearls and shells, as well as elephants and wild game.<sup>3</sup> As such, its location was keenly hypothesised by rival nations, and by the sixteenth century this could lie nowhere other than between Africa and South America, the only part of the globe still largely unfamiliar to European navigators.<sup>4</sup>

What they did eventually discover in this region could not have been further from their utopian expectations. James Cook was searching for *Terra Australis* when he claimed Australia's eastern coast in 1770. His appraisal of the landscape as "rather barren than fertile"<sup>5</sup> concurs with that of the French and Dutch who preceded him, Cameron noting the Dutch dismissal of Western Australia in the early seventeenth century as "little beyond an arid, barren and wild land".<sup>6</sup> Following British settlement, Matthew Flinders famously shortened *Terra Australis* into *Australia*, falsely believing it to be the globe's southern-most landmass.<sup>7</sup> Mack argues that the re-naming was not only an error (Antarctica was yet to be mapped), but also something of an afterthought and time-filler while Flinders was imprisoned by the French, as well as a way of usurping Cook's preferred title of *New South Wales*.<sup>8</sup>

This series of disappointments and false assumptions set the tone for Australia's colonialism – and particularly that of Western Australia, where Fernandez produced these works – as a comedy of errors. Cameron portrays the foundation of the Swan River Colony in 1829 as farcical, James Stirling optimistically basing his appraisal of the site on a small pocket of rich soil on the coastal plain and assuming the surrounding countryside to be as well-suited to farming despite the numerous ill-appraisals that preceded him.<sup>9</sup> Once the settlement was established, colonists had to contend with "[t]he sandiness of the coastline, the unexpected severity of the winter storms, the shortage of fertile land, and the chaos in the administrative centres of Perth and Fremantle".<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, British shipping agents were quick to exploit the *Terra Australia* myth, promoting the new colony as a southern paradise and leading to short-lived 'Swan River mania',<sup>11</sup> one couple bringing with them no livestock other than pointers, greyhounds, pheasants, rabbits and a lap-dog in anticipation of a new life of carefree luxury.<sup>12</sup>

Fernandez's images of ravished Western furniture contrasted with the almost alien forms of Australian flora, evoke a similar disjuncture between European gentility and the harsh realities of the Australian landscape. For many early settlers in Western Australia this disjuncture proved too severe. Once the 'mania' died down, the dwindling settlement was transformed into a penal colony out of desperation, until the late nineteenth century gold rush provided the first real incentive for immigration.<sup>13</sup>

This legacy of colonial folly could perhaps be considered funny, were the consequences not so dire for those people already thriving here. Another Latin term, *Terra Nullius* (no mans land), was used to classify Australia as legally empty<sup>14</sup> and therefore ripe for British colonisation despite the preceding fifty thousand (or more) years of Indigenous habitation. Fernandez has created a similarly 'empty' space in her photographs. Her subjects are framed within a white void intended to evoke the sterile quality of forensic photography, with the damaged furniture representative of a site of vandalism, or a mutilated body. While some of her couches and armchairs are merely disassembled, others have been haphazardly pieced back together or had their upholstery replaced by native flora. For Fernandez this is a metaphor for the legacy of postcolonial Australian race relations, the attempts to alternately overlook prior devastation, or naively seek to restore the original state of things.



The clinical styling of Fernandez's images additionally evokes the aesthetics of studio portraiture, a genre employed as a tool for domination practically from the invention of camera-based photography, with many early portraits depicting subjects who were being forced to pose – prisoners, the homeless and the colonised. Similarly, much early studio portraiture was of the dead, many families only able to justify the expense of a portrait as a last resort, going so far as to carry the corpse of a child or sibling to a photographer's studio. Fernandez explicitly referenced this history in her *Memento Mori* series (that preceded this new body of work both chronologically and conceptually), in which she documented everyday objects from deceased estates. Her entire practice has been similarly obsessed with capturing subjects on the brink of dissolution, including abandoned rural buildings, bygone industrial spaces and the vestiges of landscape poised for development. She has in fact even photographed a ghost, glimpsed in the background of a seemingly-innocuous group shot taken at the allegedly haunted old York Hostel. Whether or not one believes the photograph to be genuine, it seems possible that a spirit would choose to reveal itself to a photographer whose practice has been so preoccupied with mortality.

*[terra] australis incognita* was produced for exhibition in another notoriously haunted site. Fremantle Arts Centre was built by convict labour in 1864 as Western Australia's first lunatic asylum, and whether or not you concur with its claim to be Western Australia's most haunted building, it undeniably provides an atmospheric source of artistic inspiration. Fernandez's imagery of distressed upholstery and strewn stuffing recalls the building's padded isolation cells (one of which will be opened to the public for the first time during her exhibition run), evoking a confusion of interior and exterior reminiscent of hysteria, in which the sufferer's emotional state was thought to manifest on their body. No doubt many of the building's female inmates would have been diagnosed with this notoriously ambiguous affliction which was something of a catch-all for little-understood conditions such as depression, that would have been rampant during the colony's first few difficult years.<sup>15</sup>

While the 'mad' appearance of Fernandez's images points to a failure within colonialism, her evocative use of native flora simultaneously provides an ambiguous beauty. The only works in the series that do not depict furniture are two images of native flora bursting from suitcases – iconic objects suggestive of travel or exile. They serve to question whether the owner is taking the landscape with them on their travels by choice, or if it has invaded their psyche just as they were trying to escape it. In titling her exhibition, Fernandez has interpreted the Latin phrase with brackets around the word *terra* – land – leaving the emphasis on 'Unknown Southern', evoking a mysterious, undiscovered quality of 'southness' that exists beyond geographical borders.<sup>16</sup> While this 'southness' could be interpreted as pointing to the folly of the utopian myth, I prefer to read her works as arguing that despite the postcolonial disjunctures of *terra australis*, one may be able to piece together an idiosyncratic, hybrid subjectivity 'down under'.

## Andrew Nicholls, 2011

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### Notes

- 1 Cameron, J.M.R. 'Western Australia, 1616-1829: An Antipodean Paradise', *The Geographical Journal*, 140/3, 1974, p. 374.
- 2 *Ibid*, p. 375.
- 3 *Ibid*, pp. 376-377.
- 4 *Ibid*, 373.
- 5 Frost, A. "'As it Were Another America": English Ideas of the First Settlement in New South Wales at the End of the Eighteenth Century', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 7/3, 1974, p. 255.
- 6 Heers, 1898, cited in Cameron, *op. cit.*, p. 373.
- 7 Stallard, A.J. 'Origins of the Idea of Antipodes: Errors, Assumptions, and a Bare Few Facts', *Terrae Incognitae*, 42/1, September 2010, pp. 34-51.
- 8 Mack, J.D. 'The Naming of Australia: A Revised View', *The Geographical Journal*, 124/4, 1958, pp. 514-515.
- 9 Cameron, *op. cit.*, p. 382.
- 10, 11 *Ibid*, p. 383.
- 12 Uren, 1948 cited in Cameron, *Ibid*, p. 383.
- 13 Blainey, G. 'The Momentous Gold Rushes', *Australian Economic History Review*, 50/2, 2010, p. 215.
- 14 Secher, U. 'The High Court and Recognition of Native Title: Distinguishing Between the Doctrines of *Terra Nullius* and "Desert and Uncultivated"', *University of Western Sydney Law Review*, 2007. Retrieved from <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/UWSLawRw/2007/>
- 15 McPherson, M. 'Fremantle Arts Centre & Western Australian Museum, Fremantle History', *Spooked-Art and Horror in the Western Australian Landscape*, Artrage, 2005, pp. 66-67.
- 16 Curator Dr. Kevin Murray has spent several years exploring the resonances of this 'south-ness' to artmaking through his *South Project* and related endeavours.

