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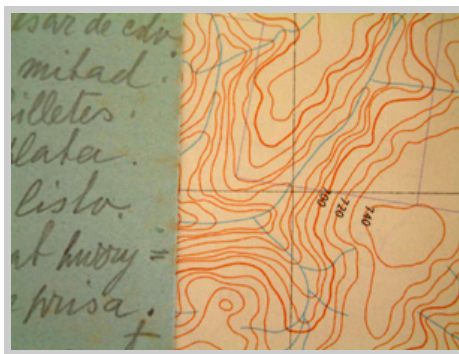
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Journey to Hill End

By Zoe MacDonell



When I set out to Hill End it still felt like a mystery. I was so busy, packing the night before, I guess I was wondering where I was really going, to an unknown town in the middle of nowhere. My intuition led me along the bumpy dirt tracks, far too harsh for my much loved old Toyota, suspension cracking under the pressure. The allure of Hill End embraced me while I was quite unaware; it began with old postcards and pictures of the skeletal remains of the old mining town, displaying the deep history that lies there from before the artists later settled. My fascination grew with stories I read of the artists who had spent time in its folds.

The town revealed itself through the trees, and there, in the middle of the common, stood Haefliger's Cottage. I entered the garden, sweet dark plums suspended overhead. The front door seemed crooked on its hinges and the whole house was lopsided as if it had relaxed into itself. What captured me the most was the cottage, its undulating walls that didn't quite meet, the worn floor, the greens, turquoise and terracotta of the interior, drawers, cupboards and chests lay waiting for me to wipe the dust away and discover their indifferent presence. Tethered edged books frayed under my touch and notes and postcards would slide out, revealing themselves as a magical history left for me to piece together events, people, the story of this house that was mine for a time.

Much of the contents of the cottage remain a beautifully fragile museum of treasured bits and pieces, many items having belonged to Jean Bellette, its former owner. It was the fine details that I had to search for that gave me deeper insight to beyond the pretty veil. These talked to me of the humble origins of the mining cottage and its appropriation by artists. I photographed the detail of a loosening book spine, pages curled, old lists written in Spanish or so slanted they became impossible to read, unusual cards and drawings of exquisite oddness, ceramic fragments, maps kept in trunks, Jean Bellette's colourful paper parasol, rusted tin boxes of assorted worn buttons, an old bottle once buried, the textiles still adorning the walls, and wire fly nets against mug stained table tops. Like captured moments whose meaning has been faded by the passage of time, these elements fed into the fascinating textures of the house. The panelled exterior, dried paint palettes, plums squashed into the concrete, all illustrated a fragile and ephemeral existence of the cottage, combined with a strength of its presence.

The town itself began to unravel with interested visits from people that lived nearby, who are a rich mix of old miners' families and the artistic community. It is as much the people of Hill End, as the objects and textures that influenced my experience, making it all the more alive to my current reality. Each of their stories mingled with my own, each character becoming alive, making my mind dance with intrigue. I felt like an insect landing on a flower, each petal opening up to me further each day. I felt nourished in its presence. The response from visitors to my working pieces and ideas was positive. A fifth generation Hill End resident said that my images made her re-look at the environment, and re-see the beauty in it, making her feel happy and appreciative to be there.

Once seduced by the opportunity of a simple life, untangled from my city commitments, I explored the town. I could see the site of the cottage more clearly. The whole surroundings, the landscape, was so enticing and stimulating: the expanse of the sky, the hills that the river had carved into a meeting point, the overwhelming vibration of insects, the sun pulsating downwards with a delicious clarity, the full moon rising, the land's intense pastel yellows exquisite and indescribably intricate against a mauve backdrop of flowers.

I felt privileged to immerse myself in these surroundings. So many people had spent nights alone in that rickety iron bed, dreaming their creativity on that mattress. Jean Bellette and Paul Haefliger had lived there for many years, the town and cottage had also played host to Donald Friend, Russell Drysdale, Margaret Olley, David Strachan and Jeffrey Smart. Later John Olsen and his family lived in the cottage. The knowledge that I was working in the same studio was fulfilling, it felt like I was building upon the layers of history, almost as if I was sharing it with them. The moment I got there I felt motivated, like I didn't want to waste a moment, it was too precious an experience. I played in the studio, collaging threads, newspapers and inks with no pressure, just the sound of the bees humming.

The images I collected and created during the residency have since become a type of vocabulary for me. These images added their faded presence in layers on silks. They are included in my recent work like mapped objects: printed buttons scattered over contour maps of the surrounding area; circles found in an old text, alluding to the ripe plum formations in the garden; my writing being pieced together with the foreign handwriting of Jean Bellette's. My work there echoes finer details such as the linear quality of the view from the studio, with each pattern merging into the next becoming a mystery, a detail. The works are a direct visual reference to colours, the sensation of uncovering layers and a vivid interpretation of the interior of the cottage. The work attempts to capture the 'feel' of the cottage, the age, beauty and secrecy, the discovered elements and snippets of evidence of a previous existence. Overall I am looking at the textured surface of the house and garden, in context with the surrounding landscape, the micro and the macro.

As the residency neared its end an opportunity arose to stay at Murry's Cottage for the last few nights. It seemed hard to leave the spacious setting of my studio at Haefliger's, however the thought of being in Donald Murry's old cottage captured a different kind of curiosity. I had visited when Yvonne Boag, another artist in residence, was staying there. She showed me her myriad of bright miniature canvases, like beautiful ornate postcards. I was aware that the feel of the cottage was different, it seemed to be cleansed of Donald Murry and Donald Friend, unlike the time warp of my current abode. I feel a natural closeness to Donald Friend, maybe it's his cheeky knowing smile in the pictures I have seen. I knew that the old studio was the current bedroom, and I would sleep where a thousand canvases had been created. My favourite part of that cottage is the one thing that feels like it really remains true to its old existence: the haphazard brightly patterned tiles decorating the kitchen stove. It felt like a secret code to the past, having viewed wonderful drawings of it by Donald Friend. It seemed to be a link to Haefliger's Cottage as similar tiles had revealed their pretty selves on shelf tops there. When in Murry's cottage I studied the wildly beautiful garden, perched on the front porch watching the last sunlight probing through the gaps. It felt different, the sofa was new and comfy, the bathroom complete, unlike the cold meander to the latrine at the bottom of the garden I had come accustomed to for the last month.

Hill End has an annual Arts Festival at Easter. I felt brightness with the fun of being invited to return with completed works developed from my residency. Knowing I would return two months after my departure gave me a sense of comfort. That I could now develop work inspired by my time in Hill End reassured me that it had not been a divine fantasy, but was actually part of my life now, and to stay so. As part of the festival there is an exhibition that local ceramist Lino Alvarez organises. The exhibition is held in a wonderful old renovated church, now known as La Paloma Gallery. Each year two of the resident artists are invited to participate. This year included my work, in addition to drawings and sculptures by Ian Mars and Lino's ceramics.

I submitted a miniature series of prints on silk based on the photographs that I had taken. I intend to use these photographs in future work, developing larger prints, incorporating layering. These have influenced my work by stimulating me to use graphic images as opposed to abstract pictures. In addition I created larger pieces with layered prints of mapping, texture and stitch. Some of the hanging fabrics had a pleated and folded texture, alluding to the age and fragility of the cottage.

Hill End's atmosphere held me in. I know that I will continue to return to recharge my creative peace. It felt fantastic that my ideas and art practice had brought me there. On my return to Sydney I felt a little sad and a little excited. I had gained so much from being there, so many important stories captured by the beauty of time. There are particular things that will stick in my mind: the mornings of picking small plums to devour and counting the stones to twenty something, till overeating them was accomplished and I was quite happy to see them rot in the grass like everyone else does; the rocking chair that seems to have always perched on the edge of Jean Bellette's veranda; the sweet taste of rainwater; the sky's view at night, turning beautiful pink, hues of melting divinity; taking a moment to watch life, to let forgotten moments rise up.

Zoe MacDonnell is a Sydney-based textile designer. Jean Belette bequeathed Haefliger's Cottage to the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service upon her death in 1991. The cottage has since been used as an artists' retreat, as administered by the Bathurst Regional Art Gallery. Zoe MacDonnell's residency there in late 2003 was funded by the Australia Council.

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