

Fiona Hall

Australian Pavilion

56th International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale 2015

Background information for media

▪ Fiona Hall

- Fiona Margaret Hall was born 14 November 1953, the daughter of celebrated radio astronomer Ruby Payne-Scott and William Hall, a telephone technician with the Post Master General.
- Her brother Peter Hall is one of Australia's most distinguished mathematicians, working in statistics at Melbourne University, Victoria.
- Ruby Payne-Scott is thought to be the world's first female radio astronomer and her most prominent achievement was the detection of radio flares from the sun. In order to continue her work with the CSIRO, Payne-Scott concealed her marriage from her employer, the Commonwealth Government, as married women were not permitted to work full time in the public service until 1966.
- Hall's mother carefully fostered the intellectual development and differing interests of her children, and it was a visit in 1967 to the Art Gallery of New South Wales to see the landmark exhibition *Two Decades of American Painting* that left a lasting impression on Fiona, then fourteen years old.
- She studied a diploma of Painting at East Sydney Technical College in the early 70s, and her first exhibition, held at the Ewing and George Paton Galleries, University of Melbourne, in 1974, was a group show *Thoughts and Images: An Exploratory Exhibition of Australian Student Photography*.
- In 1981, following a year in residence at the Tasmanian School of Art in Hobart under Geoff Parr, the Art Gallery of New South Wales acquired five of Fiona's photographs. Several photographic exhibitions and a rising profile followed, with residencies in New York, Japan and a teaching appointment at the South Australian School of Art, (which was later incorporated later into the University of South Australia).

- In 1989-90, Fiona achieved widespread popular and critical success with *Paradisus Terrestris*, a series of works fashioned from sardine cans, of botanical specimens juxtaposed with erotic vignettes and body fragments, which was shown at the Art Gallery of South Australia as part of the Adelaide Biennial of Contemporary Art. As a child camping with her family in the 1950s, the artist remembers seeing a sardine tin glittering, almost jewel-like, in a pile of rubbish another camper had left behind. A humble item but transcended and transformed because of the way it touched the earth, she says.
- Soon after, the National Gallery of Australia presented a survey exhibition of Hall's works, titled *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, which toured to the National Gallery of Victoria, the Art Gallery of New South Wales and galleries in Perth, Brisbane and Hobart.
- Since the *Paradisus Terrestris* series, Hall has worked with a range of mediums other than photography. Frequently, she repurposes everyday objects – she knits videotape unspooled from war movies and fashions birds nests out of shredded US currency, for example. Her works are extraordinarily detailed, often created using domestic processes like knitting, weaving and beading.
- Fiona's large polaroid photographs in *The Price is Right*, 1994, depict everyday consumer goods such as mobile phones, pills and coca-cola cans, transformed into holy figures. *Medicine bundle for the non-born child 1993-4* is a matinee jacket, bootees, bonnet, rattle and sixpack of baby bottles knitted from recycled aluminum Coca Cola cans.
- Growing up without a car or television, Fiona's family walked everywhere, instilling in the artist an appreciation for the natural environment, a passion that clearly informed her early photographic works, the breakthrough *Paradisus Terrestris* series, and has continued with growing intensity, throughout her career. Hall is acutely aware of our relationship with the natural world, our role in its demise, and the notion that what we do to nature is in effect what we are doing to ourselves.
- A visit to Sri Lanka in 1999, where Hall immersed herself in the gardens of Lunuganga, the country estate of architect Geoffrey Bawa, had a profound effect and inspired several paintings and sculptures and a subsequent *Paradisus Terrestris* series featuring temple flowers.
- Similarly, a 2011 visit with scientist and conservationists to New Zealand's Kermadec Trench, a safe haven for threatened marine species and deep-sea organisms yet also rich in natural resources and an obvious target for mining companies, was another source of inspiration. It was also on this trip that Hall began working with barkcloth (*tapa*), a material used by the Tongan woman of the region.

- In early 2014, Fiona spent time with the Tjanpi Desert Weavers of Central Australia, collaborating on a series of sculptures woven from local grasses, depicting endangered Australian desert species and feral cats. The works are currently on show in the Tarrawarra Biennial, a selection of which will feature in the 2015 Venice Biennale. Tjanpi Desert Weavers is a not-for-profit Aboriginal social enterprise established in 1995 by the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council to provide an income source for women living in remote Central Australian communities. Today more than 400 Aboriginal women artists from 28 remote communities covering 350,000 square kilometres of the western and central deserts of Australia work with Tjanpi to create beautiful, intricate and whimsical fibre art.
- Fiona's preoccupation with the natural world, plants, the perilous state of various species, and where the human and natural worlds collide, is ongoing. Her dOCUMENTA (13) project *Fall Prey*, presents a series of trophied species on the International Union for Conservation's Red List. Each animal is constructed from the camouflage military defence uniform from its country of origin, torn up and reshaped.
- While the fragility of the environment is a continuing theme, Fiona has also explored a wide range of issues through her practice – colonisation, economic corruption, geopolitics, and human frailty in the face of war. Her works are metaphors for the often dark messages she explores, yet delivered with irony and humour.
- Military camouflage uniforms, driftwood, cuckoo clocks, sardine cans and international currency are just some of the materials that have frequently appeared throughout Fiona's practice, always refashioned and repurposed into politically charged objects.
- Fiona Hall's intuitive response to many aspects of our world will inform her exhibition for the 2015 Venice Biennale. Her love of nature and with things 'counter and strange', coupled with her eye for the foibles of human nature, animates works that engage with subjects from war to ecology to colonial histories. A massive, multi-layered exhibition that brings together over 350 individual pieces from the artist's incredibly prolific practice, Fiona's Venice installation will be a powerful expression alert to the contradictions and anomalies of the world.

▪ The Venice Exhibition: Curator's Summary

In her exhibition for the Venice Biennale, *Wrong Way Time*, Fiona brings together hundreds of disparate elements which find alignments and create tensions around three intersecting concerns: global politics, finances and the environment. In common with many of us, Hall sees in these failed states 'a minefield of madness, badness, sadness, in equal measure', stretching beyond the foreseeable future. Her lifelong passion for the natural environment can be intensely felt in works that respond to our persistent role in its demise, or the perilous state of various species.

Hall's seemingly random conjunction of things in a *wunderkammer*-like installation appeals to our human impulse to make connections, or perhaps a propensity for paranoia born of the deep uncertainty and fear of our times. Yet despite the prevalent darkness, Hall's exhibition is fundamentally life-affirming, its own vitality in perverse distinction to the subjects it ranges across, which provide rich pickings for Hall's extraordinary transformation of materials, images and objects. Drawings on banknotes, painted clocks, ripped and reconstructed military garments, real and constructed natural forms – all contribute to a rich archaeological display that imagines and visually enacts some of the issues and fluctuations of our time.

▪ **Fiona Hall AO**

Fiona Hall AO is one of Australia's leading contemporary artists. She lives and works in Adelaide.

Fiona Hall first came to prominence as a photographer in the 1970s and during the 1980s she extended her creative practice to embrace a diverse range of art forms including sculpture, installation, garden design, and film. Transforming everyday materials and objects, Hall creates artworks which often address the relationship between nature and culture. Her practice includes major public commissions and projects that have increasingly engaged with themes of ecology, history and the effects of globalisation.

Recent solo exhibitions include *Fiona Hall: Big Game Hunting* at Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, (2013), a major survey exhibition, *Fiona Hall: Force Field*, held by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (2008) in partnership with City Gallery Wellington, New Zealand which toured to Christchurch Art Gallery, New Zealand and Newcastle Art Gallery, Newcastle, Australia, and the retrospective exhibition, *The Art of Fiona Hall* at Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane which toured to the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide (both 2005).

Fiona Hall has been included in many important group exhibitions and biennales over the past two decades, including *dOCUMENTA (13)* in Kassel, Germany (2012); *The Third Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art*, Moscow (2009); *The Biennale of Sydney* (2000 and 2010); *Fieldwork: Australian Art 1968–2002* at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (2002); *Perspecta* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney (1997); *Prism: Contemporary Australian Art* at the Bridgestone Museum, Tokyo (2006); *DeOverkant/Downunder*, Den Haag Sculpture 2007, Netherlands (2007).

Hall was the recipient of the prestigious *Contempora 5 Art Prize* in 1997 and in 1999 won the *Clemenger Art Award* at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

Hall's work has been collected by all the major Australian public art museums, including the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; and the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane. She has also completed a number of important public commissions, for example: *Folly for Mrs Macquarie*, 2000, Sydney Sculpture Walk, Royal Botanic Gardens; *Fern Garden*, 1998, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; and *Occupied Territory*, 1995, commissioned for the opening of the Museum of Sydney.

Fiona Hall is represented by Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.

▪ **Further Reading**

Kendrah Morgan (ed.) *Big Game Hunting*, exh. cat., Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, 2013

Julie Ewington, *Fiona Hall*, Piper Press, Sydney, 2005.

Vivienne Webb (ed.) *Fiona Hall: Force Field*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney & City Gallery, Wellington, 2008.

The Art of Fiona Hall, Queensland Art Gallery, 2005 – Education Resource.