Barbara Campbell

Artist Barbara Campbell has worked primarily in the medium of performance since 1982. In the development and presentation of her projects, she works with the specific physical and contextual properties of ideas, be they art galleries, museums, foyers, towers or radio waves.

Barbara Campbell’s most recent work in Melbourne was Galatea, for the exhibition How you say it, curated by Kevin Murray for the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in 1996. Also at ACCA, she performed Backwash in 1994, and Nature culture in 1988 for the first Experimenta. For the 1992 Experimenta, she performed Ossia from the tower in the tower of Queen’s College, the University of Melbourne, the culmination of a residency there administered by 200 Gertrude Street. Campbell performed Loom of Arachne at the Malthouse, Melbourne, for Experimenta in 1990. The diamond necklace affair at the Greater Western, Melbourne, in 1991; and Arachne’s trace at Linden—St Kilda Centre for Contemporary Arts, Melbourne, in 1992. Between 1996 and 2001 she developed and presented work at various sites around the University of Sydney. These were brought together in the survey and publication, Fresh glories, in 2002.

After completing undergraduate degrees in fine arts and art history, Barbara Campbell was awarded a Master of Visual Arts from Sydney College of the Arts, the University of Sydney, in 1986. She has undertaken residencies at Griffith University, the University of Sydney and the Australian Council studios in Los Angeles and New York. In 1994, the New South Wales Ministry for the Arts awarded her the Women and Arts Fellowship. The fellowship allowed her to travel to Oxford, England, and Tasmania researching nineteenth-century portrait painters of Thukaroes for her performance, Fresh glories, which premiered at the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, in 1997 as part of Archives and the everyday, curated by Trevor Smith.

Although performance art is by its nature ephemeral, artefacts and objects created in and around Campbell’s performances are held in the collections of the National Gallery of Australia, Griffith University, Queensland University, the Museum of Contemporary Art, the State Library of Queensland and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Campbell was commissioned by the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory, Canberra, to create a public artwork, Cameral, in 2001.

Acknowledgments
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One of the strands of my performance practice is to work with the fabric of large institutions such as the University of Sydney, Griffith University and ABC Radio. By ‘fabric’ I mean both people—their specialised methodologies of practice and thought—and things—archives and collections. In approaching the thing that is the Grimwade Collection, I allowed myself to be affected by it: I went to work on it, and I did it. I believe that matter cannot be held in a pure state, free from interpretation. History is an interpretive act, as is making art, but in the latter the act of interpretation is foregrounded. I treat the archival material as something that is not static, but always changing in relation to what comes after it.

My first point of contact with the Grimwade Collection was the watercolour of the Pettit, Grimwade & Co. lace aquarium—a humble weatherboard shack given dignity by the surrounding parsley gardens and, further, by the pictorial status of ‘factory portrait’. My idea of leeches was changed by that image. I subsequently learnt that the medical profession has again legitimised leeches, this time for their assistance in microsurgical procedures.

Leeches are the true performers in The Grimwade effect. They go to work on me and convert their work into a body monitoring system. In order that they ‘perform’, I have given the leeches a ‘stage’—the historical context provided by the watercolour hanging nearby, the especially commissioned jeweler’s work to handle them; the hand-crafted glass aquarium that holds them; and the research undertaken to procure, handle and dispose of these leeches.

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The other material that pervades the Grimwade story is wood, or, more precisely, the eucalypt. The company has extracted and marketed eucalyptus oil since 1882, but Russell Grimwade’s interest in the gum-tree was far more extensive: he photographed and wrote about eucalyptus specimens for his book, championed the bio-chemical benefits of eucalyptus plantations; turned timber into wooden utensils in his workshop; and collected paintings of gum-tree leaves. Many woodworkers have contributed to The Grimwade effect, from my father-in-law, Mort Roberts, who experimented with steam-bending in his workshop at San Remo, to Richard Raffan, a master wood-turner who works in his studio in country New South Wales. Russell Grimwade’s obsession lives on.

It seemed a natural progression to extend Russell Grimwade’s relationship with trees into the metaphorical language of the body. The wooden bench is a surrogate body in the exhibitions and a body shadow in the performance. The bench legs are made from timber matched to my skin colour: [illegibly held my bare leg against lengths of hardwood at the timber yard] that are modelled on cloth that are themselves leg substitutes. In their ‘truncated’ form, they also resemble tree branches. The bench top is like a torso, a piece of red gum sawn edge-to-edge so that its heart and skin were revealed. Then it was dressed. During the performance it will absorb some of my blood. And the sounds of my heart will be conducted through it before being carried away towards the glass heart and into the atmosphere.

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