

In Praise:

Concerning Anne Ferran, Judith Wright, Lindy Lee

During 2014, Anne Ferran, Judith Wright and Lindy Lee, three senior Australian visual artists, were each accorded major solo exhibitions, with substantial accompanying publications. I believed all these exhibitions were worthy of note, indeed of praise. At the time, however, none of the exhibitions attracted much critical attention: in this current era of focus on mass audiences and blockbuster projects, and with contracting critical arenas in this country, as in others, these exhibitions seemed, like so many other excellent projects, to have more or less slipped under the discursive radar.¹ Yet they did deserve to be registered, and appraised, for each, in its own way, was exemplary.

As it happens, and not co-incidentally, these intelligent exhibitions were organised by university art museums: Anne Ferran's *Shadow Land*, a career retrospective, was organized by the Lawrence Wilson Gallery at the University of Western Australia, in Perth, and toured to other venues across the country until late 2016; Judith Wright's project exhibition *Desire*, encapsulating related works from 2007-14, was presented by the Queensland University of Technology Art Museum, Brisbane, in late 2014; and Lindy Lee's survey exhibition, at the University of Queensland Art Museum, also in Brisbane, was seen in late 2015/early 2015.² (I'll return later to the significance and value of this university context.)

Anne Ferran, Judith Wright and Lindy Lee have

something else in common: they all came to practice as artists after other careers, other lives, though Lindy Lee did this in a very special way, as I'll argue later. More than that, all three emerged in the 1980s, so they share a background in that decade of ferment and development in Australian visual art: while Lee and Ferran trained at Sydney College of the Arts, a college opened in 1977 and in the vanguard of pedagogical commitment to a generously post-medium approach to art, Wright was a self-starter who did not undertake an undergraduate degree in visual arts, eventually completing a Master's Degree at Brisbane's at Queensland University of Technology after almost a decade of exhibiting. My point is that making art was a deliberate choice for these artists, made as mature women; and now each has, over three decades of constant work, refined a distinctive vision through producing exceptional bodies of work. So while this essay is not exactly 'in praise of older women', following the title of Stephen Vizinczey's infamous 1965 novel, it does recognize the inestimable value of life experiences in the making of an artist. And the great value of maturity.

Moreover, in thinking about these exhibitions, and the work of the three artists, it is worth noting the often-idiosyncratic ways and eccentric timetables that many artists, especially women, follow in finding ways of working and pursuing their own creative agendas. Proving my point nicely, these three artists found divergent paths to reach their mature practices: they all, effectively, changed fields to become visual artists. And this is a crucial matter: ever since the publication of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in 1962, we have understood that it is the incomers to intellectual and creative fields who very often make substantial innovations.³ This is precisely what I am claiming

for Ferran, Wright and Lee.

Anne Ferran came to critical attention with her graduating exhibition in late 1984 at Sydney's Performance Space. At the time, it was like seeing Athena springing fully formed from the head of Zeus, or, more accurately, a kind of feminine auto-genesis: as the series *Carnal knowledge* 1984, the substance of that first exhibition included in *Shadow Land* shows, this was work of startling maturity for a recent student. But mature age students are always far from average, as those of us who have worked in art colleges and universities can testify. There is a special joy in recognising students who have found their moment, and their métier, and in leaving her work as a schoolteacher, and with two children already in school, Ferran had entered into her own territory.

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, her first series of works, both *Carnal knowledge* and the subsequent *Scenes on the death of nature* 1986, took the entry of young girls into womanhood, through representation, as her subject, and her daughter and friends as models. But if this personal investment was an immediate starting point, Ferran's stance as a photographer was always theoretically considered, reflexive: the ambitious intellectual climate at Sydney College of the Arts, and in Sydney's feminist theoretical context generally during her student years in the early 1980s, suited her interests perfectly. Having previously gained a degree in psychology and education, along with studies in anthropology and languages, Ferran found, in photography's newly interrogative bent, a rich historically inflected tool that had a fresh relevance, not only in Australia but internationally, for considering pictorial representations of women. (All this is sketched with

economy and decision in Susan Best's excellent catalogue essay.) 4

In the next decade, Ferran's interests widened to consider colonial sites in Australia where women had been present, but where that painful and often longstanding occupation was barely registered, whether in scant historical records or, more rarely, with physical historical remains, let alone photographs. Beginning with a 1995 joint project with Canberra artist Anne Brennan at Sydney's Hyde Park Barracks, Ferran began to address the presence (and absence) of women in historical sites, investigating over many years how their presence might possibly be conjured. This almost quixotic project is rendered more poignant because of its impossibility: how to make a photograph of what is no longer there? Ferran welcomes this singular obstruction – indeed, it might be seen as her creative motivation – and in a 2014 interview for ABC Radio National's Book and Arts, is quoted as saying 'photography's insufficiencies are one of the things I value about it'.5

Amongst these works, I particularly enjoy the photograms exploring collections of historical clothes, from Sydney's Rouse Hill House to the Pioneer Women's Hut in Tumbarumba in rural New South Wales, to treasured items from families, made between 1998 and 2003: they are exquisite, detailed and entirely unsparing, the exact phantom of their wearers. However, and going against the grain of the direct contact that photograms require, and undoubtedly the major achievement in this long-standing project, is the series *Lost to worlds* 2008. These photographs, printed on shimmering ghostly aluminum sheets, are of the now barren ground at Ross, in central Tasmania, where convict women and their children were incarcerated, and

often died. The implacable silence of the ground in these magisterial images is eloquent, and final: as Thierry De Duve remarks, in his probing interview with Ferran published in the catalogue, 'The photos themselves... are poignant in a way that the narrative, with its inevitable humanism, cannot be.'⁶

I said earlier that this exhibition was a career retrospective, but given its necessary abbreviation for touring, it might better be described as a survey; the mix of works across decades I saw installed in Sydney at the Australian Centre for Photography was not a standard chronological account, but co-mingled older and more recent works. This strategy was telling: it emphasised Ferran's consistent interrogation of the limits of photography as a guarantee of veracity, and pointed to the mnemonic character of many images. I liked the dialogues. Thinking about this, I keep coming back to the hands shown in *Insula: books 3 & 4* 2003, cropped from photographic records made in 1948 of women inmates at Gladesville Mental Hospital in Sydney, which are now housed in the State Library of New South Wales. Those hands that had nothing to occupy them, except waiting, often clutched at thick felt jackets; the thick woollen material of the women's clothes, with its signal mute expressivity, has recently been recapitulated in the series *Box of birds* 2013, where dancers perform to articulate lengths of cloth in subdued colours that recall thick wool institutional-style blankets, and conceal the identities of the performers. (I'll return to these haunting works.)

The same complex interweaving of an artist's project, across time, subtended Judith Wright's exhibition *Desire*. Unlike Ferran's exhibition, which encompassed three decades, Wright's focused on just seven years, from 2007-14, with barely a dozen

works exhibited. Of the three exhibitions, this was the most concentrated visually, installed in an enfiladed series of rooms that permitted one installation to bleed into the next, using dramatic light and shadows to unify the whole. Shadows are, in fact, the key to the entire ensemble: both in the seven videos, where the performers might be shadows flickering across the screens, and in bizarre shadows thrown onto the gallery walls by carefully deployed spotlighting. These spooky doubles, often far larger than the actual sculptural objects, dramatized them effectively, and drew both the performers in the seven videos, and we visitors, into this imaginative world. It was a tour-de-force.

To backtrack: famously, Judith Wright came to art practice only after a successful career as a classical dancer in the Australian Ballet, and after bearing four children. Initially self taught, and only some time after commencing exhibiting in the mid-1980s, she completed a Masters degree at Brisbane's Queensland University of Technology, and went on to teach sculpture there for many years. Equally famously, though this was not widely known until some years later, amongst Wright's key creative motivations had been the loss of her baby daughter in 1973, shortly after birth, and her efforts to come to terms with what had been, at that time, a grief conventionally unspoken, and generally unwelcome, in Australian social life. Over three decades, Wright's work has traversed many ostensible subjects, generally at least elliptically figurative, and media as various as sculpture, large-format books, video and painting. Yet, in some senses, all her work has been at the service of understanding the circumstances of her own life, and of those closest to her. Once again, Wright sought practice as an artist as a mature individual, and it has always been driven by searching for

answers that she needed to find.

The powerful motivating force that Wright found in the death of her child has arguably found its most explicit and most narrative expression in the seven videos shown in *Desire*, collectively titled 'Seven stages of desire', and in three extraordinary sculptural suites made between 2011-13. Beginning with the mesmeric video *One dances* 2003, which shows Wright's actor son dancing with an archaic, almost life-size, mannequin, these works directly address the missing girl in Wright's life and family. All seven videos, often set in dim studios or even, in the case of *The stager* 2008, in an abandoned theatre, evoke loss, grief or displacement through, and in the midst of, bodily contact, whether between living people or proxy mannequins. Even more directly, the three suites *A wake* 2011 (Collection QAG | GOMA, not exhibited in *Desire*), *A journey* 2011 and *Destination* 2013 evoke, in turn, a solemn wake for the departed, the journey she makes to the underworld, and, finally, the fiesta-like atmosphere accompanying her arrival into paradise.

This is astonishing work, completely idiosyncratic. There is nothing else like it in this country, though it recalls for me the theatrical allegiances of installations by the celebrated Pole Tadeusz Kantor (1915 –1990), with his similar respect for the evocative potential of objects – in Wright's case ranging from masks to costumes to antiquated conveyances for *A journey* – and for the exact character of bodily gesture. As Catherine de Zegher notes in the suggestively titled text 'Judith Wright: 'Life? or theatre: An elegiac choreography', gesture is central in Wright's work: 'Imbued with the movement of dance, touch, empathic relation, Wright's art practice of reinventing sensation and relation becomes an instrument, a tender tool, an

exquisite mouthpiece for hopeful and affecting resistance against the devastating experience of separation, not only personal parting but also new forms of migration and disunion...' 7 As De Zegher points out, Wright's work tackles personal loss in its broadest implications, offering her own experience to, and for, others. In this way, her work recuperates sorrow.

In this trinity, Lindy Lee is, in an important sense, the exception that proves my rule. She has already had two careers as an artist, so the mature decision to take a particular path was taken after she had already trained. In the mid-1980s, Lee was known as an early adopter of postmodernist appropriation, with the singular peculiarity that she specialised in moody photocopied works on paper of famous European Old Master works, and later magnificent (mostly monochrome) paintings of similar subjects. (In an interview with Suhanya Raffel, Lee notes she made her first photocopy work as a student at Sydney College.) 8 These are beguiling works, in which Lee characteristically, and for the time almost perversely, took striking faces from European Renaissance art as her distinguishing motif. A fine selection of these earlier works was shown in *Lindy Lee: The Dark of Absolute Freedom*, where the darkness of the title might be taken, almost literally, as the velvety depth of the layers of photocopy ink constituting such mysterious works as *Philosophy of the Parvenu* 1990.

Yet in what I see as the second phase of Lee's career, she turned away from canonical Western European imagery towards images from her own Chinese family's history, and sourced from her embrace of Buddhism. Continuing her long fascination with portraiture, early in the 2000s Lee began to incorporate images from family albums

into multi-panelled works, culminating in the major installation *Birth and Death* 2003; she even deployed a beautiful portrait of her grandmother on street banners in 2004. This decisive turn towards Lee's Chinese heritage, repressed in her Australian childhood in the era of official assimilation, is associated with the great significance of her eventual decision to become a Buddhist. Around 1995, the year when Lee spent time on an Asialink residency in Beijing intending to study calligraphy, the notion of 'darkness' in her work began to take on another meaning altogether: here the dark might begin to signify, in consonance with Buddhist philosophy, 'the void that holds everything and nothing'.⁹

In recent years a number of Australian-born artists have explored the significance of Buddhism for their lives and work, in part because of Buddhism's status as Australia's fastest growing spiritual affiliation: in 2001, for instance, Lee's work was shown with that of Tim Johnson and Peter Tyndall in the exhibition *Three Views of Emptiness* at Monash University Museum of Art, curated by Linda Michael. Today Lee is perhaps the most senior Australian artist whose work is significantly informed by Buddhist practice, and this was made wonderfully clear in *Lindy Lee: The Dark of Absolute Freedom*. In her choice of subjects, such as *Bubhi and Me* or *True Ch'ien*, both works on paper from 2009 that were altered by the application of fire, and in her methods, particularly the thrown bronze works such as *Cosmos – A Life of Fire* 2014 or *The Life of Form: One Billion Worlds* 2012, Lee is clearly making her commitment to practicing as a Buddhist an integral part of her life as an artist.

This is one of the most thoroughgoing renovations

of an artist's practice that I can recall. In remaking herself as an artist in this way, and for deeply-felt reasons, Lindy Lee is articulating a vision of life that is relevant to increasing numbers of Australians. As with Ferran and Wright, I am struck by the importance of the artist's commitment to taking on her own personal circumstances, views and desires as a source for making work. Not for a minute do I believe art historian's Rex Butler's elegant account of Lee's career as a transit from abstraction back to abstraction. Too neat by half. Lindy Lee's work is far richer than this, in my view. ¹⁰ Coincidentally, I believe that Anne Ferran, Judith Wright and Lindy Lee share a larger territory that I will not attempt to define precisely, as that would betray the individuality of their projects. This terrain certainly, however, encompasses a firm basis in the artist's personal life, and a commitment to exploring what that might suggest in their practices: in all three cases the singularity of the work of each artist is the guarantee of the intimate character of her work. And it is correspondingly valuable for this.

What of the work of these three artists since 2014? How does this short period relate to the larger themes that were explored in their comprehensive exhibitions? Were these exhibitions termini, or way-stations, of a sort, in far longer trajectories? Since 2014, and the career milestones marked with these exhibitions, each artist has continued to develop her practice. (None of the exhibitions was the end of the story.) Thinking about the intervening years, I am struck again by personal threads that continue to run through the works made by each woman. It is no small matter to continue to find inspiration and substance in the issues life throws up to one, yet Anne Ferran, Judith Wright and Lindy Lee, in different ways, continue to draw on the immediate environments of their lives, families and

communities.

These three Australians are not alone in the intimate personal cast of their oeuvres: this has been marked in art in the post-modern era, arguably as a reaction to the high formality of much modernist art, at least in its most formal manifestations. Certainly, the value of the personal and the intimate, and the power of the immediately biographical, has been fundamental to the feminist contribution to contemporary art, and it is not coincidental that all three artist I am considering here came to artistic maturity in the 1980s, and in the case of Ferran and Lee, in an art school where feminism's relationship to art was part of the curriculum. **11**

Since 2014, Anne Ferran has continued to work with the interactions of women's bodies with cloth, as she has throughout her career. (As we will see, she commenced a new series of works in 2013 that has continued to the present.) On occasion this working with the expressive possibility of fabric has led Ferran to work with actual clothing, such as photograms made with archived clothes from historical collections, or *Rydalmere Vertical* 1997, where historical styles of caps, commissioned by the artist, were photographed unworn: in both cases the absence of wearing bodies is precisely the point. But an equally allusive recurring motif in Ferran's work has been the ways women relate to, even express, potentialities inherent in fabric associated with women: in *Scenes on the death of nature* 1984, for example, young women wore sheets approximating classical drapery.

In *Box of birds* 2013, made at the time her survey was being prepared, Ferran began to work collaboratively with dancers who either posed

motionless, behind spare falls of thick fabric, as solid and impenetrable as modernist monochromes, or improvised to animate them, as if to suggest the lightning movements of birds. There is a nice word play in 'Box of birds' — a selection of women who are also, as the vernacular expression has it, sprightly and joyful; this has another resonance in Ferran's life — she is an ardent bird-watcher. But as writer Kyla McFarlane suggested, there is a darker suggestion in this title: 'Ferran's engagement is drawn more from Plato, who likened the mind to a cage of birds; in confusion our thoughts flutter from our grasp.' **12**

I have wondered whether Ferran sees birds, as many cultures do, as symbolic of the impulse to freedom, or as messages from afar? Her use of felt began with *Insula: books 3 & 4* 2003, and the 1948 photographs of women effectively incarcerated in a psychiatric hospital, often in bleak and harsh conditions and perhaps unnecessarily, given modern views about female forms of resistance to familial and state authority. These photographed inmates wore thick felt-like garments, and in Sydney, from 2013, and in Paris and Helsinki in 2014, Ferran has been collaborating with dancers to articulate lengths of felt cloths, photographing sessions that resulted from their conversations. Ferran notes:

... the lengths of felt were one starting point, and the 1948 photos of the Gladesville women were another...I don't remember the details of the conversation...but it would have included my idea of releasing energy from those archival images...we were all aware that the lengths of felt 'represented' the felted clothes of the patients, and that covering their faces was partly about the patients' anonymity.**13**

The work from *Box of birds* onwards alerted me to think retrospectively about the ways Ferran's work, from time to time, has touched on her own life experiences: in *Carnal knowledge* 1984, for instance, the coming to maturity of her daughter is foregrounded, and two years later this was refigured in *Scenes on the death of nature* 1986. Other works, such as the series *I Am the Rehearsal Master* 1989, started from considerations of the ways women are acculturated, especially how the social institutions of medicine and psychiatry have borne on their lives, or, later, on that ways colonial history does, or does not, record the lives of women. Here Ferran's engagement seemed to me to be both personally felt, and also broadly general in its implications: its value was to implicate all Australians in the social experience and historical lives of women. Working with adult dancers as she has recently, on the other hand, seems to me to bring Ferran's work into a closer alignment with her own stage of life: each photograph seems to be a photographic mediation on the conundrum of how to see individual experiences, over many decades of historical time, as something that might be shared: I see the recent performative collaborative photographs as essay in how to seize what is, inevitably, always going to be lost.

With Judith Wright, connections between her artistic work and events in her life are always close and to a degree direct, if not always immediate or immediately interpretable, even by the artist herself.¹⁴ As seen earlier, the death of her only daughter just after birth, and the experience of social and official repression of that grief at the time, had been a powerful force in her work. But since exhibiting the works in *Desire*, which spanned the years 2007-14, the sudden tragic death of another infant occurred in Wright's family. A granddaughter succumbed in December 2014 to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome at the age of four months, leaving the family inconsolable, and causing Wright to revisit, once again, the persistent sorrow that had prompted so much of her artistic work.

Wright's work as an artist may not be reduced to a transcription of the facts of her biography, or that of her family members, but her work is fundamentally compelled by her emotional life; it may even play a cathartic role in it. When Wright lost her daughter Nicole many decades ago, infant deaths were generally unremarked and unacknowledged in Australian social life; they were seen as a trial to be

born stoically — it was usual for stillborn and very young infants to be buried in unmarked graves, as Nicole Wright was, until her mother found the child's grave in 2000 and erected a stone for her. (As a contemporary comparison, when a memorial was erected to still-born and young babies buried from 1920s-1980s in unmarked graves in West Terrace Cemetery in Adelaide, another major Australian city, it was revealed over 30,000 infants had been interred, more or less unceremoniously, with the collaboration of hospital staff.¹⁵) Today attitudes to such losses are different: they are acknowledged and grieved, with active support from hospitals, churches and other services. Members of Wright's family, including the artist herself but especially the child's grieving mother, have been able to access support networks, and are actively involved in raising awareness of SIDS and fundraising for research. ¹⁶

Because of the longstanding impetus for Wright's work in the memory of her daughter's death, coupled with this more recent bereavement, I recently noticed the appearance in her work of oversize infant's heads presented in simplified outline, hugely scaled up: the works measure two metres square. In *Significant others* 2016 (now in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales), the blocky forms of the children's heads are simple, magisterial, benign, but in the recent *Lines of confluence* 2017, the colours are strikingly acidic, heightening the emotional tension of the assertive intersecting forms that characterize this series and named it. Wright has suggested that these are 'more confrontational' than her previous works, and she attributes the bolder colour, and the departure from her characteristic emotional reticence, to a gathering sense of mortality: as she gets older, Wright believes she is prepared to expose more of

herself, and her vulnerabilities; she commented that she no longer has 'time to pull back.'¹⁷ Taken together with other recent works, especially the installation *The Garden of Good and Evil* (first exhibited 2015, on-going) and the associated suite of paintings entitled *Fragments from The Garden of Good and Evil 2017*, which sit directly in line with the three preceding large installations, Judith Wright's recent work continues, but importantly expands, her work on memory. This is active remembering, a process rather than a project.

Since her 2014 survey exhibition, alongside her regular commercial gallery work, Lindy Lee has continued to explore her social location as an Australian-born Chinese through major sculptural projects, both in Australia and China. She has been commissioned to create major civic sculptures such as *The Life of Stars* (2015) for Ting Hsin Plaza in Shanghai, China, and *Life of Stars – The Tenderness of Rain* (2017, for Zhengzhou Cultural Center in Henan Province. For the Australian projects, Lee's focus is the current lived experience of her Chinese Australian heritage.

Two significant projects have allowed Lee to work closely with different communities of Chinese in Australia: the first was a civic garden at the small town of Avoca, in the southern state of Victoria near the city of Ballarat, nearly 200 kilometres from the metropolis of Melbourne, the second a sculptural installation in the heart of Sydney's Chinatown. *The Garden of Earth and Fire* at Avoca was made during 2014, with a substantial Small Town Transformations project grant, sought by the town community from the Victorian Government. Launched in December 2014, it is a civic amenity that is a tribute to the long-standing Chinese community in the town and district, which dates

back to the 1850s and the Victorian gold rush. Lee worked closely with a multi-disciplinary team, comprising community representatives, a designer and a soil expert, convened by artist Lyndal Jones, a local resident.¹⁸ Winding paths lead through a garden filled with both Australian natives and Chinese plants, to a central pavilion surmounted along the roof-line by Lindy Lee's scorched metal flame forms, that continue her long-term engagement with the element of fire. The structure is part Chinese pavilion, part Australian shed. As Lee noted, 'I think what we're creating in this garden is a really beautiful and particular kind of Chinese-Australian vernacular.'¹⁹ Nestled among the plants is another of Lee's contributions — a polished-metal scholar stone. Underlining its Chinese references, the entire garden owes its inspiration to hexagram 64 of the *I Ching* (the ancient Chinese book of divination also known as *The Book of Changes*); this is, the final hexagram, 'Nearing Completion', which suggests that life (like a garden) is never finally completed.

Lindy Lee's next major project was much closer to her then home in Sydney. She has led the development of the renewal of the Thomas Street Plaza, creating a new public art space in the heart of Chinatown, which commenced in 2016 as part of a major revamp of this central historical Chinese cultural precinct; it is scheduled to be finished late in 2017, with shading metal discs overhead. Entitled *The New Century Garden*, the work pays homage to traditional Chinese gardens, while reflecting an Australian identity. It is well-used: sitting at the intersection of three major streets, it is populated by men smoking, women shopping, and children climbing and swinging from the sturdy metal forms, which are reminiscent of the wind-hewn rocks beloved of traditional Chinese gardens,

here rendered in a virtually indestructible material. This project Chinatown project has brought Lindy Lee back to working with the community from which she sprang. As Lee says:

I feel like I have now come full circle. I spent a large part of my life finding my place, my identity. Now I am creating an important place that represents and celebrates Chinese Australian culture. It is an exciting moment in my life. 20

With Lindy Lee's recent public projects in Australia we see a senior artist, from one of the country's longest-established cultural communities, asserting the specificity of that community's cultural heritage, which is historically located in the centre of the country's largest city, in a project sponsored by the city of Sydney. Importantly, the Thomas Street Plaza project was, for the first time in the city's distinguished public art program, led by an artist. (Lee worked in collaboration with Sydney architect Philip Thalib.) This is a tribute both to Lindy Lee's achievement as a visual artist, but also to her ability to broker connections between her visual arts world and the leaders of the city's Chinese community. Lindy Lee, artist, is now a community identity, both Australian and Chinese, and authentically both.

Finally, I want to return to the crucial institutional contexts of the three major exhibitions featuring works by Anne Ferran, Judith Wright and Lee with which I began this essay. It is no coincidence, in my view, that these exhibitions were mounted by university art museums. Today, the Australian network of university art museums and galleries has emerged, as I believe it has in other countries, as providing significant sites, resources and expertise for in-depth considered research into the practices of contemporary artists. These university

foundations have become considerably more sophisticated and better resourced in recent years, and this is significant for contemporary artists, since following the country-wide reforms of the tertiary education sector in the late 1980s, almost all Australian art schools have become incorporated into the university sector. Thus this network of Australian university art museums now has the mandate, and the responsibility, to explore the achievements of the artists that it has trained, and continues to employ to educate successive generations of artists and cultural workers.

More generally, these university museums participate vigorously, as part of their educational role within their respective institutions, in broader discourses in contemporary art, with access to, and support from, experts across many fields including art historians and art theorists, but also from the university communities of scholars, that allows them to initiate and sustain thoughtful projects, such as these substantial exhibitions. Consequently, they have in recent years grown into extremely important nests for manifesting and developing practice-based research. All three exhibitions came out particular research focuses at the respective university museums: Ferran's exhibition was initiated by the Lawrence Wilson Gallery at the University of Western Australia, which houses the important Cruthers Collection of Australian Women Artists, and thus places special emphasis on work by contemporary Australian women; Judith Wright's exhibition follows QUT Art Museum's policy of staging substantial exhibitions for Queensland-based mid-career artists; and Lindy Lee's exhibition was curated for the University of Queensland Art Museum by Michele Helmrich, a longstanding Brisbane-based curator, in part following that museum's established interest in the Australia-wide

(and international) diaspora of artists of Queensland origin. Moreover, the feminist orientation of the women curators in the initiating museums has played a role in sustaining these projects: the curators, and their museums, are aware of the impact of considered exhibitions dedicated to the work of senior women artists, all of whom have had substantial careers teaching in university art colleges.

This commitment to intelligent focused exhibitions for leading living artists is, in Australia, more important than ever, given the audience-driven focus of the national and state art museums, the principal institutions able to stage contemporary art exhibitions. At one time, one would have expected to see solo exhibitions by contemporary artists of the achievement and sophistication of Ferran, Wright and Lee undertaken by the larger public art museums, but this is increasingly less likely today, with increasing pressure on budgets and staff, and the corresponding pressures to secure expanding audience numbers. This being so, it is a tribute to the growing complexity and maturity of the Australian cultural landscape that projects of this high calibre are being undertaken by university art museums, now more frequently than before, and that they are being supported by both university budgets and philanthropic foundations.²¹ The downside, of course, is that these university art museums do not attract the same large numbers and very broad demographic that the larger public museums are able to command, a point I made at the outset when I commented on the lack of published critical responses to these exhibitions. As one manifestation of the research-directed energy in Australian university art museums, however, these three exhibitions were accompanied by fine publications, with a wealth of material by leading

authorities, and supplemented by many generous illustrations.

It is fortunate that these published records exist: my only regret in thinking about these three splendid exhibitions is that wider audiences may not have had the opportunity to encounter them, given the relative lack of publicity accorded university-based museums in Australia, which are often ideas-rich but resources-poor. For Anne Ferran, Judith Wright and Lindy Lee, like so many of their fellow artists in Australia at the moment of their maturity, are artists with rich complex bodies of work, at the height of their powers. For this, they do deserve our attention, and merit our praise.

Notes

A version of this text, entitled *In Praise: Exhibitions by Anne Ferran, Judith Wright, Lindy Lee*, was first published in *eyeline*, 2014. My thanks to Sarah Follent, editor, for her kind permission to expand that essay for this volume.

1. See a brief mention of the exhibition by John McDonald in a *Sydney Morning Herald* review of the Festival of Perth dated 22 February 2014, at <http://johnmcdonald.net.au/2014/perth-festival-2014/> accessed 3 August 2015; the detailed review mooted here by McDonald did not appear. See also Phil Brown, 'Wings of desire', *Courier Mail*, Brisbane, 27 September 2014, p.11 on Wright's exhibition and Lucy Rees's web-based review of Lee's exhibition, <http://www.artasiapacific.com/Magazine/WebExclusives/TheDarkOfAbsoluteFreedom>, accessed 5 August 2015.

2. *Anne Ferran: Shadow Land* was at Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia, 8 February-19 April 2014; at the Australian Centre

for Photography, Sydney from 29 November 2014-15 February 2014, will be at Newcastle Art Gallery from 12 September-15 November 2015 and at Western Plains Cultural Centre, Dubbo, from 23 April-26 June 2016. *Judith Wright: Desire* was at QUT Art Museum, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, 12 September-23 November 2014. *Lindy Lee: The Dark of Absolute Freedom*, was at the UQ Art Museum, University of Queensland, Brisbane, 20 September 2014-22 February 2015.

3. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996, originally published 1962.

4. Susan Best, in *Anne Ferran: Shadow Land*, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia, and Power Publications, 2014, pp. tbc.

5. Anne Ferran quoted on 14 March 2014, speaking on ABC Radio. See <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/booksandarts/anne-ferran3a-shadow-land/5258648>, accessed 3 August 2015.

6. Thierry De Duve, 'Interview with Anne Ferran', in *Anne Ferran: Shadow Land*, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia, and Power Publications, 2014, pp. 65-73, p.73.

7. Catherine de Zegher, in *Judith Wright: Desire*, QUT Art Museum, Brisbane, 2014, pp. 68-74, p.73.

8. Michele Helmrich, 'From Darkness to Light: Pathos and Reverie in the Work of Lindy Lee', in *Lindy Lee: The Dark of Absolute Freedom*, The University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane, 2014, pp. 15-31, p.29.

9. See Suhanya Raffel, 'Between the Oceans of Birth and Death: An Interview with Lindy Lee', in *Lindy Lee: The Dark of Absolute Freedom*, pp.73-83, see pp.74-5.

10. Rex Butler, 'When One Becomes Two', in *Lindy Lee: The Dark of Absolute Freedom*, pp.45-59.

11. Susan Best, in *Anne Ferran: Shadow Land*, p.tbc, and also, more generally on emotion in modernist art, her *Visualizing Feeling: Affect and the Feminine Avant-Garde*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2011.

12. See Kyla McFarlane, *Anne Ferran: Box of birds*, at https://anneferran.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/anne_ferran_catalogue.pdf.

13. Anne Ferran, email communication with author, June 2017.

14. Judith Wright, telephone communication with author, June 2017.

15. The Baby Memorial was commissioned from Julie Blyfield, Sue Lorraine and Catherine Truman of Adelaide's Gray Street Workshop.

16. Judith Wright, telephone communication with author, June 2017.

17. Judith Wright, telephone communication with author, June 2017.

18. For Lyndal Jones's Avoca Project, see <http://avocaproject.org>

19. See interview with Lindy Lee, <http://vimeo.com/106165131>.

20. See http://sydney.edu.au/sca/news/2016/lindy_lee.shtml

21. The University of Sydney's Power Institute supported the Anne Ferran catalogue, thorough Power Publications, and the Gordon Darling Foundation supported the Lindy Lee catalogue; Australia Council support was also crucial for the Ferran catalogue and the Lindy Lee exhibition. See (eds.) Felicity Johnston and Anne Ferran, *Anne Ferran: Shadow Land*, Sydney: Power Publications and Perth: Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, 2014; Judith Wright (et al), *Judith Wright: Desire*, Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology, 2014; Michele Helmrich (curator, et al.), *Lindy Lee: The Dark of Absolute Freedom*, Brisbane:

University of Queensland Art Museum, 2014.