

fiona davies

Fiona Davies, a textile/mixed media based artist, became interested in Maitland Hospital during her initial visit in August. This was influenced by a personal experience related to the death of her father in 2001, 'I had done a lot of thinking about the interactions between the ideas of the public, medical authority and how that space becomes familiar and almost domestic'.

Fiona's installation is based on historical narratives associated with particular medical implements/equipment, and old un-used surrounding sites which have been lost or forgotten. During her investigation, Fiona walked throughout the hospital grounds, to discover a decayed isolation cottage (full of old implements, specimens and tools), an isolation ward (now the blood bank) and a foyer space adjoining the old and the new. These three sites became Fiona's focus.

The research collected, was gathered through various sources, such as Maitland City Council's (MCC) Heritage Officer, the hospital engineer, archived newspapers from the Mercury & Maitland Library and Pender archived plans from The University of Newcastle, as well as physically delving through the equipment discovered in the isolation cottage.

The construction of Fiona's installations include, a mortuary slab re-created with a rice paper mould, an antique bed, textile based re-constructed medical tools, starched embroidered sheets and video footage. These aspects represent a point in time, almost tapping into a nostalgic characteristic.



Week 1 and 2

Selecting the Site - Maitland Hospital Isolation ward built in 1916 Nurse's Cottage

I'd just finished a project installed at St Marks Anglican Church Aberdeen where I'd been looking at my experiences of the ten and a half months my father was in hospital before he died in 2001, so I had done a lot of thinking about the interactions between the ideas of the public, medical authority and how that space becomes familiar and almost domestic. One of the themes of the bulk of my previous work has been the telling or re-telling of narratives that have been excluded from history for one reason or another. So I was interested in the idea of the hospital in this context.



The former isolation ward and the cottage built to house the nurses who worked in isolation are tucked into the periphery of the hospital, into the small triangle next to the bridge. The nurse's accommodation building is not used while the isolation ward is used for blood donation and central blood distribution services and to some extent they are well out of the main flow of traffic and to some extent forgotten and untold.

In discussion with the hospital, the use of both of these buildings was not possible due to safety concerns and the possibility of existing users being inconvenienced.

One of the adjoining spaces I had looked at initially was the foyer space between the oldest and second oldest buildings in the hospital. Both buildings are primarily used for administration but have some service provision to the public through clinics and dialysis.

On a practical level it is an open space primarily used as a corridor allowing a large space in the middle to be used for a work without disrupting the passage on a daily basis of people who work there. The glass in the window at the back of the photo is obscured but opens into an office. One of my first ideas with the cottage had been a video work (no sound) that was viewed only through the window of the cottage. I.e. the viewer was physically excluded from the space. In this space this idea of the physical relationship between the work and the viewer can be maintained as the work will be inside the office and the viewer can watch through what has echoes of a ticket or enquiries type window.

Next Phase – research

Unfortunately there is no neat book which tells the story of this space and puts it into both the historical and contemporary context.

1. The engineer from the hospital gave me a lot of background and site specific information and some leads.
2. The Heritage officer from Maitland Council supplied a lot of background material from the heritage plans for the hospital as a whole. She gave me the names of a couple of people and I am following them up.
3. The isolation ward and the cottage are on the list of Pender archive plans held in Newcastle University. From the web I have the accession number and one the next things to do is to see the original plans. One of the copied later plans I one of the heritage studies divides the waiting area I am working in into male and female waiting areas apparently separated by a wall (maybe half wall). Pender is an architectural practice based in Maitland for several generations.
4. Newspapers – Maitland Library has the old copies of the Maitland Mercury on Microfilm. – The report of the opening of the ward in 1916 is lengthy and involves a couple of hundred words detailing the types of surfaces used in the original construction and the design of the interiors. There are no originals held in Maitland as the newspaper office told me they had been lost in the 1950's flood. There are originals held at the Mitchell in Sydney. I may get a better copy of the article to use if I need to.
5. Newcastle Library – one of the local history librarians found for me a book of Newcastle Herald cuttings one of which detailed the extent of cases of infectious diseases in West Maitland in 1910 and compared it to those of 1933 and 1934 when 'Typhoid was unknown unless brought in from outside the area.' The book of cuttings had been pasted into a copy of the Hunter Water Board Annual Report obscuring the original document.
6. Theories of isolation – a book 'Isolation; place and practices of Exclusion' edited by Alison Bashford and Carolyn Strange, Routledge Press 2003 has been really useful in developing my thinking about the idea of physical isolation; Foucault's idea of the 'great fear', the idea of isolation being 'out of place' and the contemporary links to the ideas of physical isolation such as mandatory detention of asylum seekers or illegal immigrants.

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