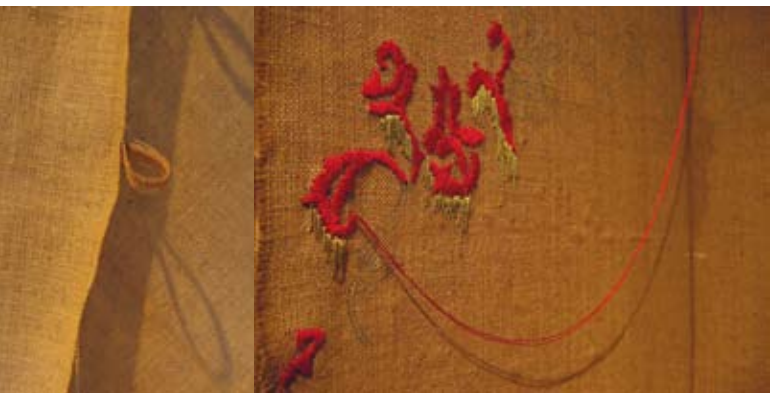
Wall Stories

ANA TERRY

THE FORRESTER GALLERY, WINTER 2006

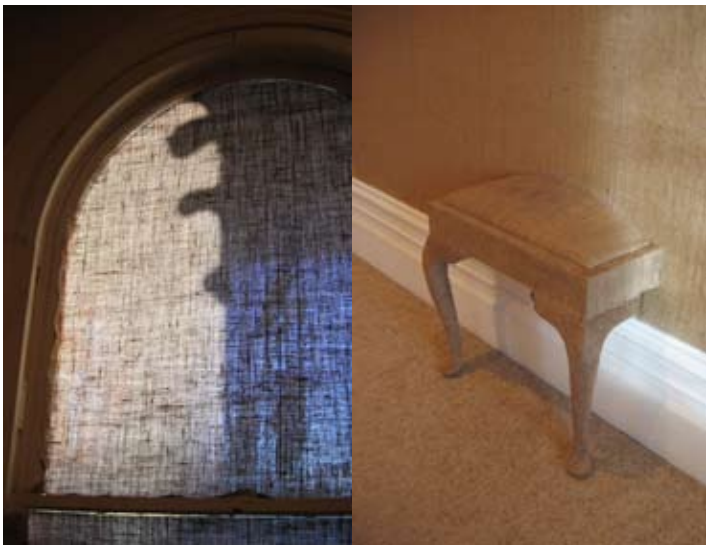
WALL STORIES - A COVER UP

Ana Terry has been occupying a particular space at the Forrester Gallery in Oamaru. This former master bedroom was used over a period of a hundred years by successive managers of the bank located in the building before it became a gallery in the late 1980's. The space is now soon to be refurbished to become a more conventional exhibition site. Between the previous uses of the room and its future deployment, Terry has seized the opportunity to work in and with the space. It is as if the space has been suspended in a liminal temporality during which the artist could lift its skin of jute covering on the walls and insert objects behind it before re-covering them with the jute, almost as one would wrap a valuable parcel or tenderly clothe a beloved body. Parts of walls and a mirror, furniture, fireplace surround, light fittings and windows have been re-covered but not obliterated as they are still visible underneath their regrafted skin. Through the covered windows one can see to the outside where columns throw shadows on the jute, while reflections of the interior overlay the orientalising[1] patterns created on the glass. Outside and inside talk to each other; the interior of the body and its epidermis are mutually productive; and history breathes through the very space where one layer is lifted and re-placed and another layer of value is added through the painstaking embroidery of 19th-century patterns onto and into the jute. Through the transformation of the space at least four registers of meaning have been unlocked. We are made acutely aware of the act of seeing; of architecture as a critical body; of histories narrated through form; and of the particularities of jute – also called hessian and burlap – as a material redolent with associations of the trade connections of the late 19th century.



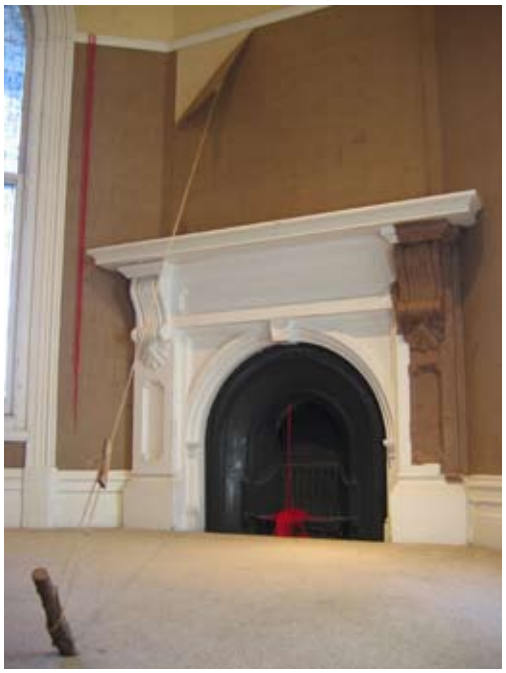
In an essay entitled "The Nobility of Sight", Hans Jonas discusses the implications of a visual bias in Western art and philosophy. He argues that sight is preeminently the sense of simultaneity, capable of surveying a wide visual field at one moment. "Intrinsically less temporal than other senses such as hearing or touch, it thus tends to elevate static Being over dynamic Becoming, fixed essences over ephemeral appearances."[2] Terry's activities in Oamaru work to thwart this project of sight and to problematise its inattention to detail, to the small and the easily overlooked. Our sweeping view of the room is constantly interrupted as our attention is held by each particular form and outline and detail and tension between the body and skin of the space. Terry also makes sure that we cannot create a new overview from the detail. For example, embroidered pattern is fragmentary within the space and thus in line with the partial insertions of colonising activities that retain their incomplete and parasitical character. In focusing on these fragments and details we are also made aware of the time the artist – and her assistants, Don Hunter, Tracey Shepherd, Patricia Tough and Anna Wild – have spent in clothing and decorating the space. This work and the time it took are almost palpable, especially where cut-off remnants of red embroidery thread have been left in situ. The importance of touch in our knowing of the world is emphasised in every careful act of covering and stitching and patterning of which we see and feel the evidence.

Oamaru town lies in the heart of the Waitaki district in the South Island of New Zealand and is well-known for its impressive Victorian buildings created from locally quarried whitestone. Architect Robert Lawson designed the elaborate Bank of New South Wales in the 1880's and dressed its façade with six Corinthian columns finely fluted and elaborately carved. But, it is on the inside that Terry has focused her critical attention. In a chapter called "The Mutant Body of Architecture", Georges Teyssot points out that it is "precisely because



architecture has the very concrete and useful vocation of building shelters for dwelling that it also has the duty and the right to reexamine itself incessantly". Teyssot also writes about how structures are built down to the finest details: "dé-tailler=to cut, in French...[and how criticality can operate through] cutting and carving into the very flesh of architecture, revealing the many incarnations and incorporations that have constituted its matter and spirit over the centuries."[3] Terry engages with the building in Oamaru in the manner of a surgeon. She breaches the intact body of the room and we become aware of its bones, organs and muscles underneath the skin. She sutures the operated body and we become aware of its skin and its scars. One could argue that the exterior of the building remains complicit with the world of trade and business for which it was erected; while Terry's interior assumes the role of interrogator. Teyssot continues: "Architecture can be used as a kind of surgical instrument to operate on itself (in small increments)."[4]

Historical narratives and their implications are revealed through Terry's incisions. Groined pilasters elaborate a fireplace; the carved legs of a Queen Anne chair jut out from a wall to suggest a pompous inhabitant; a Rococo-style mirror provides evidence of the Victorian love affair with the ornamental and the superfluous; ornate wallpaper behind the jute is too heavy and comes loose from its ground; and William Morris and associates in the Aesthetic Movement and the Arts and Crafts Movement make their appearance through Terry's choice of patterning. We remember that they, themselves, had much to criticise in late 19th-century architecture and the applied arts, especially where these practices had become unmoored from their function to merely prop up an indulgent middle class lavishing decoration on itself. In Oamaru, Morris and associates speak alongside the critical voice of the artist; while conversely their patterns were also complicit in the colonial domestication of the New Zealand life-scape and its introduction of foreign flora in the landscape. In revealing such histories, Terry assumes the role of antiquarian. John H. Arnold tells us how "it was antiquarians who...developed the tools for dealing with the past via its documentary and material remains... the 'mouldy and worme-eatern'."[5] that can speak of attitudes and deeds that shaped the lives of people. In Oamaru, Terry is not telling us what these attitudes and deeds were, but she carefully leaves clues in the space for us to translate. This process of translation is not merely an intellectual game as we become affectively responsive to the space and forms and materials. Tracing the outline of a mirror hidden behind its covering, one can become acutely aware of its particular

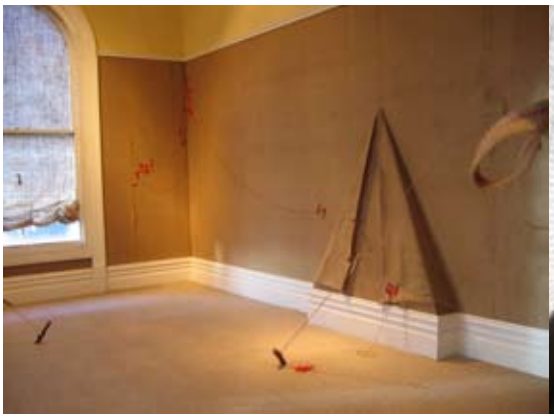


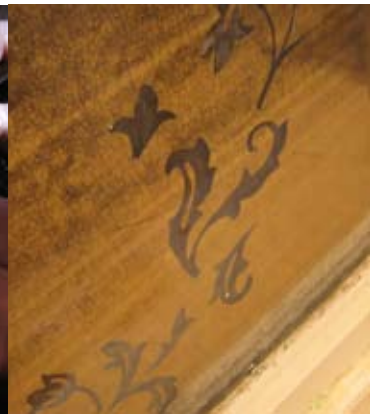
presence; and hearing the sound of cicadas[6] and seeing a tent with its pegs staked into the urban base of a building in Oamaru, one is transported to the rural context of the town and its farming hinterland so well-served by the Oamaru Harbour in the late 19th century. And, smelling the covering on the walls, one feels privy to the air infused with molecules of sacking so specific to warehouses where tea was stored at that time, tea from India, then another outpost of the British Empire.

Upon becoming the Forrester Gallery, the interior of the building was covered in jute, a base material ironically in contrast with the social aspirations of its former occupants. Jute as a material brings its own connotations to Terry's project. The fibre it is obtained from has been grown in Bengal since remote times. It is strong and resistant to stretching and has thus been used wherever packaging of agricultural and industrial commodities had to be transported. Its presence around the world in the late 19th century – for example in New Zealand – bore witness to the global trade connections made possible by imperialist manoeuvres. The commercial benefits of this trade often disguised its effects on the colonised, a strategy obliquely revealed through Terry's covering activities in Oamaru. Mia Campioni writes about installation practice that work "by altering our focus, undoing our visual expectations, recognising the multiplicity involved in our composition of reality...[leading to] an understanding of how apparently distinct things (a wall, a floor, a ceiling) bear their being 'other' within them."[7] Terry provides us with a glimpse, a whiff and a trace of the ghostly lives of those 'others' implicated in her scenario. The contestatory multiplicity of presences breathing the same air in her interior is spatially present through a tension of pulling and pushing between walls and space; between the smooth skin of the walls and the objects trying to emerge from the walls, struggling to escape from being suffocated or buried behind its covering.

Leoni Schmidt June 2006

1. Many late 19th century architects, artists and designers in England (for example) borrowed patterns and other elements from the arts of the Orient. This practice was expedited by the contact made possible between England and Asia due to the expansion of the British Empire.
2. Hans Jonas, "The Nobility of Sight: A Study in the Phenomenology of the Senses", in *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), 145.
3. Georges Teyssot, "The Mutant Body of Architecture", in Elizabeth Diller & Ricardo Scofidio, *Flesh: Architectural Probes* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1994), 8.
4. Ibid., 9.
5. John H Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000), 39 & 42.
6. The sound track for *Wall Stories* was inspired by the film *Illustrious Energy* by Leon Narby (1988). The film tells the story of a father and son who are Chinese Gold miners in Central Otago in the late 19th century. The son captures a cricket and keeps it as a lucky charm. The sound also carries distinct memories for the artist of the intensity of the arid interior of that part of the country in mid-summer.
7. Mia Campioni, *Plane Thinking: Drawing installations* by Margaret Roberts (Sydney: Benevision, 1998), 4.





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