

## Christina Henri: 'Engaging the convict legacy: art's role as a means of understanding'

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Based on the heritage sites that form part of Australia's convict legacy, focusing mainly within Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania), this project explores ways in which the economic, social and cultural context of the transportation experience can be communicated to the 21st century visitors to the various sites. The importance of art in mediating site in the service of history will be demonstrated through the conception and curation of a major installation work inviting international participation. Behind the practice-led investigation lies research into possible interpretative and art installation strategies for specific sites: some of the strategies have been initiated in the course of this project, while others remain as suggestions for consideration in future contexts



All aspects of the project retain a focus on demonstrating the importance of art as a significant tool to bring attention to history. This is a project by an artist working within a worldwide community that retains links to a convict past, not the work of an historian. With the recent World Heritage nomination of eleven convict sites within Australia this research is pertinent to current concerns within the heritage and tourism industries regarding the communication of these sites to a non-expert, cross-cultural, international audience. Sites central to the research include Maria Island, Cascades Female Factory and Woolmers Estate. Attention to conventional history is used to inform the practice component of the project. Producing and presenting past experiences of each site through art in the form of exhibitions, installations and performance art is one possible interpretation strategy.

Reference has been made to artists who have worked in similar themes and media including Hossein Valamanesh and Angela Valamanesh, Anne Ferran, Fiona Hall and Julie Gough, and to Susan Best's ideas of affect. Writers who have addressed the question of interpretive modes of history include Ann Curthoys and John Docker. Kate Grenville and Rohan Wilson provide recent examples through the contemporary historical novel of literary evocations of site. The tenets of tourism are derived from Dean McCannell.

The project demonstrates that art works can be used by historians and site custodians to evoke story, memory and a sense of place and time that enriches the visitor experience and can elicit poignant and sometime surprising responses from those who choose to participate in the collaborative aspects of the project, from simply attending a site or exhibition having direct input to installations and related site-specific activities.

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## Heartfelt tribute to history's forgotten women



From the latest Research to Reality

When artist Christina Henri was attending school, she knew only about the male convicts who were sent to Tasmania.

It wasn't until she was a [UTAS Fine Arts](#) undergraduate, and she visited the Cascade Female Factory as part of a Historical Landscape module, that Ms Henri was moved by the stories of the thousands of women who were transported to Van Diemen's Land.

Ms Henri's Fine Arts PhD project, Engaging the convict legacy: art's role as a means of understanding, aims to remember these forgotten women and to engage the community with their stories. Moreover this project will also illustrate the importance of art in driving cultural tourism.

"I'm using conceptual and installation art as an important tool to tell colonial history - and specifically the history of female convicts," she said.

"We've just had 11 convict sites inscribed as World Heritage in Australia and the largest number of those have been in Tasmania.

"A big part of my PhD is the memorial to the convict women *Roses from the Heart* that looks at the entire number of convict women who came out to Australia. I'm creating a collection of cloth bonnets that symbolises each of the convict women."

The Memorial requires 25,566 bonnets to represent the lives of all the women transported to the Australian colonies from 1788-1853. And, after inviting other people to take part in sewing the pieces, Ms Henri has received beautifully-crafted bonnets from all over the world. To date, she has collected 20,066 bonnets.

"A Tasmanian woman has made 1,500 wonderful bonnets," she said.

"I've had people come from England, Ireland, France, Canada and New Zealand to personally hand me their bonnets. They want to see the site where their woman spent time - at the female factory, or perhaps where she was assigned to work. Participating in the Memorial is the impetus to follow a female 'convict trail' around the State.

“And even if the bonnet-makers don’t come out physically, they come mentally and emotionally because they get very involved. They become engaged with the female convict that their bonnet commemorates.”

If the bonnet-maker is a descendant of the female convict, the connection is particularly significant.

“But if people have no female convict ancestry, I still try and match them in some way, by name, place or their offence, so there is a real engagement as the participant sews the bonnet and makes that tribute to the woman,” Ms Henri said.

“This island is rich with living tourism. I want people to engage with those spaces and experience those stories.”

This research features in the latest [Research to Reality](#) newsletter.

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