

# ARTEMIS

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## The Newcastle Chest: Newcastle's own cabinet of curiosities



A contemporary work of art, *The Newcastle Chest* has been inspired by a two hundred year old object - the Macquarie Collectors' Chest. Now held in the Mitchell collection of the State Library of NSW, the Macquarie Collectors' Chest was made in Newcastle during the Macquarie period (1810 – 1821). The chest's fascinating history is the subject of a recently released publication by former State Librarian, Elizabeth Ellis.

The colonial chest has inspired a response from Newcastle, the very place it was made around 1818. Commissioned by the Gallery with the support of private benefactors, the contemporary chest has been crafted by master cabinetmaker Scott Mitchell from the same native timber species, rose mahogany or NSW rosewood (*Dysoxylum fraserianum*) and red cedar (*Toona ciliata*), found in the Macquarie chest. These trees were prolific in the Hunter area before extensive logging led to their near extinction. Crafted to the same dimensions as the colonial chest, *The Newcastle Chest* conceals and reveals treasures made by five of Australia's leading contemporary artists.

Tasmanian painter Philip Wolfhagen has painted a series of oil paintings on red cedar panels in response to Lycett's panels on the Macquarie chest. Wolfhagen's subjects include views of Newcastle's coastal landscape. As a cloud watcher and painter, he has been drawn to the high drama of Lycett's cloudscapes. The squalling skies of late summer performed on cue, when Wolfhagen first visited Newcastle early in 2010.

As an artist with an ancestral connection to Tasmania, Wolfhagen is aware of the weight of white Australian history with its convict origins.

He feels a deep connection with 19th-century Tasmania and cites William Buelow Gould, convict painter sent to Tasmania just following the Macquarie period, as one of his favourite painters, and Gould's birds as his favourite among the convict artist's *oeuvre*. One of Wolfhagen's chest panels, titled *Colonial endemic* 2010 includes a green rosella, known only in Tasmania.

Sustained looking at Lycett's work has endeared Wolfhagen to the convict artist's many idiosyncrasies. A recurring feature of Lycett's coastal landscapes is his detailed treatment of rock platforms and escarpments – the distinct sedimentary rock configurations are enlivened by Lycett's brush. One of Wolfhagen's panels, in an homage to Lycett, depicts the rock strata above Newcastle's beloved Bogey Hole.

The cultural significance of the coastal environment is the subject of the work by Bidjigal artist, Esme Timbery. The Bidjigal people have had a millennial attachment to the rivers and coast of what is now Southern Sydney. Timbery belongs to a long line of shell workers from La Perouse, and with the assistance of her daughter Marilyn Russell has made new work inspired by the shell, algae and seaweed drawers of the Macquarie Collectors' Chest. Like Wolfhagen, Timbery and Russell spent time in Newcastle earlier this year.

Timbery has used Macquarie tartan, with its strong contrast of red and green (also the colours of the La Perouse all blacks football team), to cover the tiny slippers and boomerangs that line the two concealed side drawers of the new chest. White





shells, collected from Newcastle, Sydney and beyond, colonise the tartan surfaces of the slippers and boomerangs, returning them to nature and 'country'.

Melbourne-based artist Louise Weaver has responded to the Macquarie chest's drawers and trays of avian specimens. For Weaver, of all of the curiosities in the original chest, the 80 birds register the greatest affect; lying cheek by jowl in deep trays or placed within small drawers under glass, they are as brilliant today as if collected only yesterday.

Titled *Arena 2010*, Weaver's work for *The Newcastle Chest* features a native budgerigar, a zebra finch and a rainbow lorikeet. A wreath of wattle made from handblown-glass orbs encircles the three birds and provides partial camouflage for the specimens. Wattle, Australia's national floral emblem and the origin of its attachment to green and gold, is also the name given to the distinctive and somewhat ornamental flaps of skin found under the ears of some bird species. Weaver's birds are 'taxidermied from the outside', mummified in brightly coloured crochet with their beaks and feet gilded. Both the shape and colour of Weaver's work also makes a subtle reference to the Aboriginal flag, the garland of birds and wattle forming the flag's glowing, central sun.

Colombian-born, Sydney-based artist Maria Fernanda Cardoso engages with the entomological world in her work, inspired by the spiders, beetles and butterflies displayed in kaleidoscopic patterning deep within the Macquarie chest. Cardoso has focused on the specimens that are NOT seen in the original chest, that is, those creatures from the insect world that use mimic camouflage as a survival strategy. Insects that mimic plants proliferate in Cardoso's work and offer a metaphor of the societal pressures placed on the individual to assimilate, to blend in – pressures felt by Cardoso herself as a migrant in Australia.

This visual deception is also evidence of what Cardoso calls the 'excessive perfection' found in the insect world. The specimens are further 'perfected' by Cardoso, who arranges them into patterns that mimic the symmetry found in the natural world, the Macquarie chest, as well as the type of repetitive ornamentation found in pre-Columbian design.

Sydney-based artist Lionel Bawden has been inspired by the booty within the bottom drawer of the Macquarie Collectors' Chest. Its curious contents include artefacts and specimens collected from across the southern hemisphere, presumably during Macquarie's voyage home. This miscellany includes toucan bills, Brazilian seeds pods, a flying fish, a shark egg, the rattles of rattle snakes and items made from tortoise shell.

Bawden, widely recognised for his sculptures made entirely from coloured pencils, has crafted a bower for the bottom drawer. In describing his experience of viewing the chest early in 2010, Bawden has remarked that 'each object remains a wondrous gateway to imagined worlds where anything is possible and strange nameless creatures still roam the earth'. Like the bottom drawer curiosities Bawden's sculptures beseech us to explore a new world, partly real and partly imagined.



from left to right:  
artists Lionel Bawden,  
Louise Weaver,  
Maria Fernanda Cardoso,  
Philip Wolfhagen and  
cabinetmaker  
Scott Mitchell

*The Newcastle Chest* will remain in the Newcastle Region Art Gallery collection where it will inspire future audiences in its rich conversation with both the past and present. It is indeed a cabinet of contemporary curiosities.

*Lisa Slade*  
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The essay contains extracts from the catalogue essay *Curiouser and Curiouser*, also written by Lisa Slade, and published for the exhibition *Curious Colony: a twenty first century Wunderkammer 2010*.