Curious Colony

A twenty first century Wunderkammer

Curiouser and Curiouser

Lisa Slade

Historically, curiosity has been a double-edged sword – both a vice and a virtue, a mark of civilisation and a tell-tale sign of ignorance. At once desirable and dangerous, it describes people, things, places and emotions.[1] While curiosity is usually the province of Renaissance studies, best expressed through those European cabinets of art and wonder known as *Kunst* and *Wunderkammern*, during the first decades of the colony of New South Wales, curiosity clearly had a hold.

Although British colonisation of *terra australis* occurred in the age of Enlightenment (where reason and rationalism prevailed), the experience of the antipodes failed to cure curiosity or explain away wonder. In the words of art historian Richard Neville, the first decades of the colony witnessed 'a rage for curiosity'. The antipodes were awash with wonders. Perhaps this was inevitable; from at least the 5th century BC the antipodes has referred to the distant underworld of the southern hemisphere, a counterpoint for the northern hemisphere. To the curious European, it was an idea rather than a place; the great southern land had no choice but to be subversive and curious, a world upside down.[2]

Richard Read (senior)
Portrait of John Buckland
1814
watercolour on paper,
30.1 x 23.5 cm
Gift of Alderman Peter Palmer in memory of his father Tom Palmer 1973
Newcastle Region Art Gallery collection

The inability of the colonisers to fully account for their experience has been extensively documented and discussed. From first-hand colonial accounts by Watkin Tench and Thomas Watling through to the post-colonialism of Bernard Smith, *terra australis* stultified the European Enlightenment.[3] Early accounts from the colony bemoan the failure of science to account for experience. Collecting became the manifestation of this insatiable curiosity and entire species were threatened in the frenzied dispatching of antipodean novelties back home. Among the most prized specimens were those offering an object lesson in inversion theory, in the anomalous, upside down nature of 'down under': the black swan, brilliantly hued parrots that could not sing, the kangaroo and later the platypus. Aboriginal people themselves became the victims of this colonial kleptomania, collected dead or alive.

By the early 19th century, when Lachlan Macquarie, with his wife Elizabeth, arrived as fifth governor of New South Wales, the representation of the great southern land was still in flux. Described by historian Grace Karskens as Australia's first power couple, the Macquaries were great improvers and had an eye for imperial expansion. During Lachlan Macquarie's 11-year period of governance, which

1. Beginning in the 14th century the word curiosity is linked to an over-eagerness to acquire knowledge. However, the word shares its etymology with other words such as curator – the Latin root of both words, 'cura', is akin to care and implies diligence and protectiveness

2. Bernard Smith *European vision and the South Pacific, 1768–1850: a study in the history of art and ideas* Clarendon Press 1960 and Peter Beilharz, *Imagining the antipodes: culture, theory and the visual in the work of Bernard Smith* Cambridge University Press 1997

3. Smith 1960 and Beilharz 1997

commemorates its bicentenary in 2010, the imaging of the colony proliferated to offer a rich archive of visual representation.

Karskens comments that the Macquaries saw the town of Sydney as an artefact, an object in itself: something that could be refashioned according to their vision.[4] However, it seems apparent that their vision was not limited to Sydney but was instead panoramic, taking in the entire nascent colony. The Macquaries gathered around them painters, architects, poets and patrons. Avid collectors, not just of artefacts but also of people, they possessed the power of agency and their commitment to convict emancipation ensured that the culture of curiosity encompassed all levels of society (with the exception of the Aborigines, who were more often seen as curiosities rather than seen to possess curiosity).

The emergence of an antipodean cognoscente can be seen in the portraits of the period, such as Richard Read senior's 1814 watercolour of landholder John Buckland.[5] Buckland's profession, as listed during his voyage to New South Wales, was marine clerk, however he became a major land holder in the Campbelltown district and in Geelong, Victoria, where he later settled. The Macquaries had themselves benefitted enormously from patronage. Both born into relatively poor circumstances, they knew the power of patronage and encouraged a new class of curious colonials like Buckland. Furthermore, convict labour provided the conduit for colonial tastes and the convict artist Read senior was no exception. Transported to Sydney, Read established a considerable artistic reputation while only conditionally pardoned. This was indeed a world upside down, one where convicts possessed curiosity and upward mobility. In the words of art historian Ian McLean (author of the third chapter in this book), here was a 'Cockaigne land where even servants might dine at the master's table'.[6]

Rather than consolidating the identity of *terra australis*, the Macquaries' curiosity further problematised the antipodes: was it to be gaol or colony; penitentiary or paradise? And while the Macquaries mobilised a culture of curiosity, the subsequent regime, preempted by John Thomas Bigge's investigation into Macquarie's governance from 1819, revived the earlier penitential culture and attempted to vanquish curiosity. For decades thereafter, the age of Macquarie was judged as one of excess and folly, one where the British government's plan for a penal colony had been perverted. Was curiosity the Macquaries' fatal flaw? Their undoing? Literary historian Barbara Benedict's scholarship on curiosity helps us to make sense of the Macquaries' curiosity as a mark of ambition, 'a transgressive desire to improve one's place in the world'.[7]

It is during the Macquarie years that the imaging and identity of Newcastle and the Hunter region was established. As curator and art historian Patricia McDonald signals:

4. Grace Karskens *The colony: a history of early Sydney* Allen and Unwin 2009: 191

5. Newcastle Region Art Gallery collection

6. Ian McLean *White Aborigines: identity politics in Australian art* Cambridge University Press 1998: 16

7. Barbara M Benedict *Curiosity: a cultural history of early modern enquiry* University of Chicago Press 2001: 20

The centres of artistic production in the colony were initially confined to Sydney and Parramatta. From about 1813, however, an extraordinary flowering of art, culture and patronage took place at the Newcastle penal settlement, which almost certainly spawned some of the most significant 'icons' produced during the Macquarie period.[8]

In Newcastle in 1813 Commandant Lieutenant Thomas Skottowe created, with the aid of convict artist Richard Browne, one of these icons. Together amateur naturalist/commandant and artist/convict made an extraordinary compendium of the natural and cultural history of the Newcastle region. Known as the Skottowe Manuscript, it comprises 29 watercolours by Richard Browne (who goes by the name of T R Browne in the manuscript) and 26 pages of hand-written copperplate text in which Skottowe records his personal response to each specimen and the local Aboriginal (Awabakal) name.[9]

T R Browne
Title page with vignette of Aboriginal family group at camp (detail) from *Select specimens from nature of the birds animals &c &c of New South Wales collected and arranged by Thomas Skottowe Esqr, the drawings by T R Browne NSW, Newcastle, New South Wales* 1813
29 watercolour drawings in leather-bound album
Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW

It is believed that Browne, sent to Newcastle as a place of secondary punishment after he had re-offended in Sydney, made the drawings from specimens in Skottowe's own collection. This collection, however, would have been amassed not solely by Skottowe himself but through fieldwork carried out by local Aborigines and convict servants. Of course much of the motivation for creating the manuscript, and for the furious collecting of the colonial period in general, was the chance of finding a specimen that had never been described or illustrated (Skottowe believed himself to be the first 'possessor' of the regent bowerbird but ironically the bird had already been illustrated under another name in Lewin's *Birds of New Holland*).[10]

Through both text and image, the manuscript registers the convict's and commandant's curiosity for the new world and shifts readily from zoology and botany to the recording of Indigenous cultural practices. The manuscript also evidences the literal appetite for antipodean curiosities, noting whether specimens possessed any 'requisites for the table'. Like earlier Renaissance histories that encompassed heraldic symbolism, mythological values, sensory responses and fables, the Skottowe Manuscript converges art and natural history, hearsay and direct observation, charm and accuracy. This is a ricochet from an old 'order of things' – one where hearsay merges with empiricism and, in the case of the Skottowe specimens, hybridises with an Indigenous cosmology.

One of the most charming, and perhaps least accurate, drawings to be found in the manuscript is Browne's drawing of the kangaroo. Skottowe underscores the curiosity value of the creature in his description, 'its form, habits and appearance of Sagacity are equally wonders of Curiosity'. However, Skottowe also warns of the dangerous nature of this antipodean macropod (in doing so he pre-empts the cautions later articulated by Prussian zoologist and naturalist Willem Blandowski):

8. Patricia R McDonald 'Art, artists and patrons' in James Broadbent and Joy Hughes (eds) *The age of Macquarie*. Melbourne University Press 1992: 105

9. Mitchell collection, State Library of NSW; Tim Bonyhady has pointed to the reliability of Skottowe's recording in that the names are very close to those recorded in 1826/27 by missionary Lancelot E Threlkeld

10. Tim Bonyhady *Introductory essay to the Skottowe manuscript*: David Ell Press and Hordern House 1988: 28

These Animals when Hunted, and find they cannot effect their Escape from their pursuers by speed, fight most Viciously, striking their hind legs, inflicting therewith dreadful Wounds, and often Killing the Dogs.[11]

Brook Andrew reframes this colonial curiosity in a recent body of work. Andrew travelled to the United Kingdom to view Blandowski's mid 19th-century album, *Australien in 142 Photographischen Abbildungen*, which was made in 1862 with the assistance of illustrator Gustav Mützel. In response, Andrew produced a series of large-scale unique state prints titled *The Island*. Andrew scales up the images and re-prints the engravings onto a decadent and distressed foiled surface. To borrow the title of an earlier work by Andrew, the new images are at once 'sexy and dangerous' – they capitalise on a lingering curiosity for the antipodes and engage in payback. The gaze is returned and in this reverse ethnography the strangeness and 'othering' of Western curiosity is exposed.

In *The Island V* 2008, a large male kangaroo, set upon by a pack of dogs, appears as conqueror, leaving the injured hounds in his wake. The letterpress that accompanied the original engraving in Blandowski's album endorses Skottowe's 1813 cautionary tale:

If the kangaroo is publicly known as harmless, this is a misconception. Many, even very strong dogs die during the kangaroo hunt. Others have shattered shoulders and do not care to go near a kangaroo again, least of all near the old male kangaroo named 'Boomerang', who knows how to keep a whole pack of dogs at bay. Humans have to watch out for him as well, for it has happened on occasion that the kangaroo has grabbed a person, carried him to the nearest water and held him under the surface until he believes the person has drowned.[12]

The Skottowe Manuscript bears some remarkable connections to another 'icon' made in Newcastle during the age of Macquarie – the Macquarie Collectors' Chest.[13] Built for private pleasure and intended as decorative 'domestic' furnishing, the chest spent more than 150 years in a Scottish castle before returning to Australia in 1989, and in late 2004 was acquired by the Mitchell collection of the State Library of New South Wales.

Among the myriad specimens contained within the chest are 80 birds, scores of insects, spiders, beetles and butterflies, and samples of shells and seaweed. Their number and diversity provide a taste of the extraordinary traffic in antipodean curiosities that occurred during the early 19th century. This *naturalia* (products of nature) is cased within drawers made from Australian timbers, which are in turn sequestered behind 13 oil paintings, attributed to convict painter Joseph Lycett. The paintings remind us that art (*kunst*) is the perfect accompaniment to wonder

11. Bonyhady 1988

12. This is an English translation of the text from *Australien in 142 Photographischen Abbildungen* that describes the scene depicted in the work. Available online: www.qag.qld.gov.au/collection/indigenous_australian_art/brook_andrew

13. The Macquarie Collectors' Chest is the subject of a forthcoming publication by Elizabeth Ellis titled *Rare and curious: the secret history of Governor Macquarie's Collectors' Chest* Melbourne University Press, Melbourne 2010

(*wunder*). The chest is a complete work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), evolving over months, possibly years, of collaboration between convict artisans, Aboriginal collectors and commandant Captain James Wallis, who, like Thomas Skottowe before him, was Macquarie's conduit and agent in the transformation of Newcastle.

The Macquarie Collectors' Chest has inspired a contemporary response, initiated from Newcastle – the very place in which it was made almost 200 years ago. Called the Newcastle Chest, the contemporary chest has been crafted by master cabinetmaker Scott Mitchell from native timbers collected over a 20-year period. The predominant timbers are those found in the Macquarie Collectors' Chest: rose mahogany (*Dysoxylum fraseranum*) and red cedar (*Toona ciliata*), species that were prolific in the Hunter area before extensive logging led to their near extinction.

Philip Wolfhagen
Colonial endemic (detail) 2010
oil on Australian red cedar (*Toona ciliata*),
42.5 x 32.0 x 1.2 cm
Newcastle Region Art Gallery collection
courtesy the artist and Dominik Mersch Gallery, Sydney

The chest conceals and reveals the work of five of Australia's leading contemporary artists. Tasmanian painter Philip Wolfhagen has made 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, perhaps best seen in Lycett's large oil painting *Newcastle NSW looking towards Prospect Hill* c1818.[14] The squalling skies of late summer performed on cue when Wolfhagen first visited Newcastle in 2010. Clouds offer a shared experience and hence are part of a universal visual language. One can imagine that 200 years ago, daytime skies, unlike the unfamiliar stars of the night sky, offered some comfort for artists new to the antipodes.

Today perhaps, the skies forewarn of less comforting times. We all look to the heavens more than ever, looking for signs of a climate changing in an increasingly fragile world. Despite the shared lineage to the Romantic tradition, Wolfhagen does not see himself as an explorer artist. His painting is reiterative: he returns time and time again to familiar subjects, binding himself to place, all the more significant in a world increasingly disconnected from nature.

As an artist with an ancestral connection to Tasmania, Wolfhagen is well aware of the weight of history and our convict origins. He feels a deep connection with 19th-century Tasmania and cites William Buelow Gould, a 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 includes a green rosella, known only in Tasmania. It seems that Lycett too felt a connection with Tasmania; some of the most dramatic imagery in his series *Views in Australia* 1824 are to be found in his renderings of Van Diemen's Land. Lycett painted Tasmania with profound interest, and yet there is no proof that he ever visited the island.

14. Newcastle Region Art Gallery collection

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. Almost anthropomorphic, they suggest the inner life of the land. Wolfhagen's panels, and their 200-year-old inspiration, confirm our lingering attachment to the coast and the littoral providence of this land girt by sea. They also point to the ancient significance of place for first Australians.[15]

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.

Esme Timbery
Macquarie slippers and boomerangs (detail) 2010
Macquarie tartan, cardboard, shells and glitter, dimensions variable
Newcastle Region Art Gallery collection

In the original chest, sponges, barnacles, egg sacks, seaweeds and coralline algae occupy two secret drawers, and concealed within the middle of the chest are two shell drawers. These 'fruits of the sea' are displayed with an eye for patternation rather than scientific placement, and they provide another ricochet from the Renaissance cabinet in which collectors prized marine life for its power to work as charms and ward off evil.

For Timbery and her family, shells are also protective. They possess healing properties and help link the present and past. 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 encrust 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'. Shell work, originally introduced by missionaries to the Aboriginal women of La Perouse as 'busy work', has become a post-colonial act of resilience and survival.

Melbourne-based artist Louise Weaver has responded to the Macquarie chest's drawers and trays of avian specimens. For Weaver, of all 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. The sheer number of bird species conveys the rampant curiosity and collecting in the early 19th century and the insatiable appetite, often literal, for avian wonders from the antipodes. One example of this collecting craze can be found in Newton Fowell's 1788 letter home: 'Loreyquet ... the Plumage of them is very brilliant so much so that Paint cannot discribe their Brilliancy however I have sent one of them Stuffed to give you an idea of it'.[16] All of the avian specimens found

15. For more on this subject see Jeanette Hoorn 'Joseph Lycett: exposing the lie of terra nullius' in Rex Butler (ed) *Radical revisionism* Institute of Modern Art Brisbane 2005: 127–31

16. John Grant 1805 journals and letters quoted in Richard Neville *A rage for curiosity: visualising Australia 1788– 1830* 1997, State Library of NSW Press, 1997: 32

within the original chest are endemic to the Newcastle area, although several are migratory, and many are illustrated in the Skottowe Manuscript. The source of the specimens is unknown, however their diversity points once again to the involvement of Awabakal, and possibly Worimi hunters and collectors. Macquarie's diary entry dated Tuesday 20 November 1821, written as he was preparing to leave Newcastle for the last time, acknowledges a gift of live kangaroos and birds to his son Lachlan by Major Morisset and the presentation of 'a number of rare Stuffed Birds of Hunter's River' by Ensign McAllister to Mrs Macquarie.[17]

Louise Weaver is cognisant of this traffic in avian wonders and her work engages directly with the natural history museum, often touted as the Enlightenment descendant of the Renaissance cabinet of curiosity and its hysterical quest for control over nature. Titled *Arena* 2010, Weaver's drawer installation for the Newcastle Chest features former museum specimens, including a native budgerigar, a zebra finch and a rainbow lorikeet. A wreath of wattle made from crocheted 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 crotchet with their beaks and feet gilded. By perverting the outward appearance of nature, Weaver's creations call into question our historical treatment of nature, and our ongoing desire to make it over. Weaver's installation is also reminiscent of the 'eye foolery' found in abundance in Renaissance collections, where nature is manipulated to become culture (the mounted ostrich egg for example, and the carved emu egg, its Victorian heir). In a role that converges artist and collector, Weaver also explores the eroticism of concealment; her avian wonders are fetishised within ornamental cladding and concealed within a drawer that is further obscured within the chest.

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 'an excessive degree of perfection' found, according to Cardoso, in the insect world.[18] The specimens are further 'perfected' by Cardoso, who arranges them into patterns that mimic the symmetry found in the

17. Macquarie's journal *A voyage – and tour of inspection – from Port Jackson – to the settlements of Port Macquarie, and Newcastle– in November 1821.* Available online: www.lib.mq.edu.au/all/journeys/1821/1821b.html

18. Maria Fernanda Cardoso quoted in Gary Genosco 'Our Lady of Mimicry' *Antennae* Issue 11, Autumn 2009:19

natural world, the collectors' chest, as well as the type of repetitive ornamentation found in pre-Columbian design. Not only does her work invite a rebound to Renaissance *Wunderkammer* treasures, where artists attempted to perfect or out do nature, but also to 17th-century *vanitas* painting, where the insect world was again a prized subject and the butterfly a concise symbol of the brevity of life. Cardoso's use of the insect world as *memento mori*, or a reminder of death, has particular cultural and personal resonance given the ever-present and extreme proximity of death and danger in her native Colombia.

Sydney-based artist Lionel Bawden has been inspired by the booty within the bottom drawer of the Macquarie Collectors' Chest. Its curious contents include *naturalia, artificialia* (artifacts of human contriving) and *exotica (*objects from strange realms) trawled from across the southern hemisphere, presumably during Macquarie's voyage home. This miscellanea includes toucan bills, Brazilian seed pods, a flying fish, a shark egg, the rattles of rattle snakes and items made from tortoise shell. Together they revisit the slippery, pre-Linnaean juxtapositions found in Renaissance *Kunst* and *Wunderkammern*. Each object could also represent a decisive moment or experience in the life of the collector. For instance, the seed pods or toucan bills may well have been collected by Macquarie as souvenirs during his interlude in the Portuguese port of St Salvador in May 1822.[19] These items also recall earlier European collections, including Cosimo de' Medici's *cupboard fourteen* in Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, which boasted elephant's teeth, crocodile and fish skeletons, oyster shells and bamboo stalks.[20]

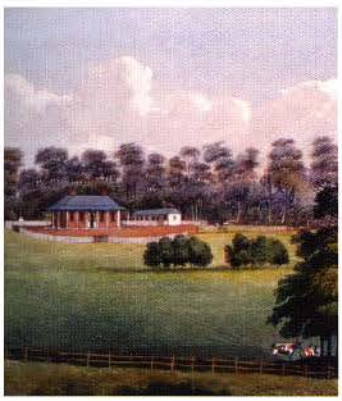
Bawden, widely recognised for his sculptures made entirely from coloured pencils, has crafted a bower for the bottom drawer. In describing his experience of the chest, Bawden has remarked that 'each object remains a wondrous gateway to imagined worlds where anything is possible and strange nameless creatures still roam the earth'.[21] Inspired by this slippage of recognition that is triggered by the objects in the bottom drawer, Bawden has carefully handcrafted new objects, trinkets and baubles, many of which echo the puzzling form of the originals and provide a lure into a new imagined world.

With the luxury of hindsight, it now seems apparent that the small convict outstation of Newcastle produced more than its share of curiosities. Since 1937 the State Library of New South Wales has held a doppelgänger of the Macquarie Collectors' Chest, known as the Dixson Chest, after Sir William Dixson, who purchased it from an English antique dealer in 1937 and donated it to the Mitchell collection. Little is known of this chest's provenance and its contents are mostly missing – only the two shell drawers have survived. It has now been eclipsed by the Macquarie Collectors' Chest, however its very presence begs the question of whether or not there are more out there.

19. Macquarie's journal. Available online: www.lib.mq.edu.au/all/journeys/1822/1822a.html. While it is tempting to see Macquarie's miscellany as souvenirs of his island hopping journey home, mobility has made the bottom drawer vulnerable and susceptible to loss and damage, expropriation and displacement (some of the more valuable contents of this drawer were sold separately when the chest was sold at auction in Melbourne in 1989)

20. Adriana Turpin 'The New World collections of Duke Cosimo I de' Medici...' in RJW Evans and Alexander Marr (eds) *Curiosity and wonder from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* Ashgate 2006: 71

21. Lionel Bawden, correspondence with the author May 2010



Joseph Lycett
Burwood Villa, New South Wales. The property of Alexander Riley Esq (detail) from *Views in Australia* 1824
hand-coloured etching and aquatint on paper,
image 17.6 x 27.9 cm,
plate 23.1 x 33.0 cm
Gift of the Macarthur Institute of Higher Education 1989
Campbelltown Arts Centre

It is within a private Australian collection that a third chest has recently been located. Known as the Riley cabinet, this object has a remarkable 200-year-old history here in Australia and a single provenance to one Australian family. The cabinet can be traced to the Riley brothers, Alexander and Edward, free settlers to the colony who established elegant homesteads around Sydney from 1809 onwards. These residences include Burwood Villa and Raby near Liverpool, both properties of Alexander Riley, as well as Ultimo and Woolloomooloo House, which were occupied by Edward Riley. All are the subject of Lycett watercolours and engravings.

While the Macquarie and Dixson chests were motivated by the opportunity to present a *theatrum mundi*, or theatre of the world, consisting mostly of natural history specimens for those who had not experienced the antipodes (like the *Wunderkammer* with its carefully assembled theatre of nature), the Riley cabinet appears to be have been motivated by an altogether different purpose. Its array of 15 different types of native timber, including red cedar (*Toona ciliata*), casuarina (*Casuarina sp*) and silky oak (*Grevillea robusta*), suggests that the cabinet was in fact designed as a specimen piece for antipodean timbers.

Like the collectors' chests, the Riley cabinet was also possibly made by convict cabinetmaker William Temple. Transported from England in 1813, Temple arrived in New South Wales on the *General Hewitt* in 1814 (along with Captain James Wallis, Joseph Lycett and convict architect Francis Greenway). In 1817 Temple received another prison sentence for an unlisted offence and was sent to Newcastle before being granted a conditional pardon from Macquarie in 1821.[22] While the precise context of the chest's construction remains nebulous, this information suggests that the Riley cabinet was also made in Newcastle during the Macquarie years.

A hybrid object, the Riley cabinet combines two pieces of campaign furniture grafted onto each other: a cupboard with two doors containing drawers which forms the base, and a pull-down writing desk with cupboards and drawers featuring three exquisitely painted miniatures (attributed to Lycett). Together they function as a secretaire. Vertical paintings of shells run along two narrow drawers and flank the central vignette. The shell paintings are so finely executed that local specimens can be identified, although their design eschews science in favour of visual impact and owes more to the 17th- and 18th-century arrangement of shells in drawers known as *coquilliers*. These are the only shell paintings attributed to Lycett and one cannot help but imagine that Lycett was so taken by the collected shells in the collectors' chests that he decided to embark on some modest eye foolery and paint his own.

The small nocturnal vignette, treated like a frontispiece that invites the beholder to turn the page or in this case open a door, can be easily placed within Lycett's *oeuvre*. Listed as a portrait and miniature painter in the records of the *General*

22. Temple is also attributed with a number of furniture pieces from the Macquarie years, including the Macquarie chairs

Unknown cabinetmaker
Painted decoration attributed to Joseph Lycett
Secretaire (detail) *the Riley cabinet* c1818
native timbers, brass fittings and oil paint
closed: 110.0 x 91.0 x 48.0 cm
private collection

Hewitt, Lycett would have relished the challenge of containing the scene within such a small space. The high drama of the nocturne, where Aboriginal figures gather around a fire under moonlight, is a recurring subject for Lycett and one that underscores the influence of Romantic traditions on his work, particularly the chiaroscuro seen in the work of artists like Joseph Wright of Derby, with whom Lycett would have been familiar. Lycett's chiaroscuro also pictorialises persistent ideas of the time about the antipodes as a place of inversion, a place where day is night.

The viewpoint of the nocturne is similar to that offered in Lycett's gouache, and subsequent hand-coloured etching *The Sugar Loaf Mountain, near Newcastle, New South Wales* 1824. In this work and in the small nocturne on the Riley cabinet, Lake Macquarie, known in the early 19th century as Reed's Mistake, sprawls out before Mount Sugarloaf. Home to the supernatural spirit *Puttikan*, Mount Sugarloaf is a sacred site for the Awabakal people. In the daytime scene, a group of Aborigines is shown in the foreground, including a mother and child. They are juxtaposed by the gesticulating European gentry in the middle ground. By contrast, in the nocturne, European presence is vanquished and the picturesque conventions that Lycett employed in his more public works are supplanted with a dramatic voyeurism.

The nocturne also bears a direct resemblance to Lycett's *Corroboree at Newcastle* c1818.[23] In this large painting on panel, a pastiche of Aboriginal activities, including a corroboree and a tooth removal ceremony, is performed against the backdrop of Nobbys Island and Signal Hill, illuminated by the full moon. This painting may well have been inspired by a corroboree arranged by Captain Wallis during Macquarie's 1818 visit to Newcastle. Macquarie's journal includes the following entry on Thursday 6 August 1818:

> *At Night Jack, al[ia]s. Burigon King of the Newcastle Native Tribe, with about 40 men women & children of his Tribe came by Capt. Wallis's desire to the Govt. House between 7 & 8 o'clock at Night, and entertained with a Carauberie in high stile for Half an Hour in the grounds in rear of Govt. House.*[24]

Close observation of this large painting (for Lycett, that is) reveals that it may well have had another life, possibly as the cover of a chest or bureau. Traces of screws and a brass hinge along the top edge of the work and the existence of a damaged painting depicting a (mostly erased) reclining figure, drapery, flowers and a distant landscape on the back point to the possibility that the panel was one of a proliferation of paintings made for decorative furniture in Newcastle during the Macquarie years.[25] Unlike the public images made in the age of Macquarie, these cabinets and chests were perhaps intended for private consumption and pleasure, akin to the Renaissance cabinets of curiosity, which deliberately kept objects out of circulation. Furthermore, many scholars have pointed to the power of the cabinet

23. Dixson Galleries, State Library of NSW

24. Macquarie's journal *Journal to and from Newcastle*, 27 July 1818 – 9 August 1818. Available online www.lib.mq.edu.au/all/journeys/1818/1818.html

25. Information provided by Collection Record Details for *Corroboree at Newcastle*, oil painting by Joseph Lycett. Available online: acms.sl.nsw.gov.au/item/itemDetailPaged.aspx?itemID=404695

in signifying the upward mobility of a collector or patron – the free settlers and emerging class of emancipated convicts of the Macquarie period would have known the power of the collectible.

In contrast to Lycett's inherently gothic nocturnes, where the idea of the antipodes as a world turned upside down is writ large, his public pictures, including three oil paintings held within the Newcastle Region Art Gallery collection, celebrate the emerging civility and order of the colony. Constrained to the margins, the fate of Aboriginal people as fringe dwellers is spelt out. As with the specimens of native plants, of which the grass tree or *Xanthorrea* seems a particular favourite (offering the double entendre as a 'black boy'), Lycett manipulates the landscape to appease the potential free settlers, for whom these views were ultimately intended.

Sydney-based artist Joan Ross has, with the assistance of new media artist Ben Butler, created a contemporary installation inspired by Lycett's trademark picturesque tableaux. In many of Lycett's paintings and etchings, self-conscious settlers pervade the middle ground, more often than not announcing their ownership of a piece of land, waterway or mountain. In these colonial compositions, ground is cleared, grass readily grows and a dramatic backdrop assures the presence of God in the new world. Lycett often employs a coupling effect, where the humans and animals populate this new world two by two, as though from the biblical ark.

In the contemporary installation, which includes animation and sculpture, Ross has extracted and combined the figures, flora, fauna and landscape elements found in Lycett's work to comment on our paranoid surveillance and demarcation of public space. In Ross's tableau, birds, animals and figures all wear high visibility protective clothing. No longer worn only by emergency services, 'hi-vis' clothing has become an epidemic, according to Ross, and a visual sign of the increasing legalisation and ultimately colonisation of nature. With humour and charm, Ross reminds us that curiosity is first and foremost a visual impulse, one that is tied to the desire for possession and control.

Like Ross, contemporary artist Danie Mellor also explores colonial curiosity and collecting practices as a recurring subject in his work. Descended from the Mamu and Ngagen people of northeast Queensland, Mellor reclaims the right of the antipodean to parody, provoke and reveal the folly of European ways of seeing. In his installation titled *The Native's Chest* 2010, Mellor salvages the coat of arms, featuring the red kangaroo and the emu, as national emblems appropriated from indigenous fauna. In this work both the kangaroo and the emu are 'stuffed', a potent indicator of the plight and political status of first Australians. The kangaroo wears a king plate, another vestige of a colonising European taxonomy. By selecting species that evidence 'a world upside down', Mellor reminds us that it is the world of

26. Michelle Hetherington initiates this idea in her essay 'The world upside down: early colonial records at the National Library of Australia' for the exhibition *The world upside down Australia 1788-1830* National Library of Australia Canberra 2000

Aboriginal people that has really been turned upside down through colonisation.[26]

The 'native chest' alluded to in the title of Mellor's installation is in fact a gilded coffin. As a collectors' chest, the coffin (mounted on skulls) suggests the museum practice of keeping and classifying Aboriginal remains, a solemn reminder that Aboriginal people were themselves collected as curiosities. By gilding the coffin, Mellor alludes to the gilding of history (the archaic etymology of the word 'gild' means to smear blood, an apt description of our bloodied past). The coffin, an obvious *memento mori*, also recalls to Macquarie's own bloodied hands. In 1816 he ordered Captain Wallis to carry out the massacre of Dharawal men, women and children near Appin, southwest of Sydney.[27]

Mellor's own mixed family heritage includes Scottish ancestry. Fascinated by Governor Macquarie's somewhat outsider status as a Scot, Mellor through his research on Macquarie, also uncovered that the governor was a mason. Freemasonry, with its clandestine rites and rituals, has been a recurring subject in Mellor's work and in *The Native's Chest,* he has embedded freemasonic emblems in the gold coffin. By weaving together such diverse references, Mellor actively converses with history and reveals the complexity of postcolonial identity.

When the Macquaries left the antipodes in 1822, they left with an ark from the new world. The hold of their departing vessel *The Surry* contained, among other things, live cargo including six emus, seven black swans and seven kangaroos (many of the animals died on the voyage). More prosaic animals such as sheep were also exported, in fact 42 live sheep made the journey.[28]

Did curiosity leave the colony with the Macquaries? Certainly subsequent regimes have been historicised as a revival of the strictures and surveillance in place before the Macquaries' arrival. However, within the work of Sydney-based contemporary artist Robyn Stacey we find the trace of a lingering colonial curiosity. Stacey's large and lustrous photographs restage the collections of the generation following the age of Macquarie. Among her subjects is Alexander Macleay, appointed as colonial secretary of New South Wales in 1826. A known collector and celebrated entomologist, Macleay and his family brought with them to Sydney one of the largest collections of insects in Europe, a reminder that the traffic in curiosities was two way. The Macleay gardens and specifically their collections of bulbous plants, which proliferated in the now lost botanic gardens at Elizabeth Bay House, provided Stacey with the inspiration for *Bombe (Cape bulbs)* 2009.[29] Stacey's bouquet can be read as a eulogy to the past and an offering to the curious of the future.

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Laurence Butler (attributed to)
Secretaire 1803 featuring
Sarah Smuts-Kennedy
Pyramid scheme (detail) 2009
Australian red cedar (*Toona ciliata*), NSW Rosewood (*Dysoxylum fraserianum*), beefwood (*Casuarina cunninghamiana*), glass and brass fittings
170.0 x 80.0 x 49.0 cm
private collection, Sydney

27. 'A few of my men? heard a child cry', wrote Captain Wallis. 'I formed line ranks, entered and pushed on through a thick brush towards the precipitous banks of a deep rocky creek. The dogs gave the alarm and the natives fled over the cliffs? It was moonlight... I regret to say some [were] shot and others met their fate by rushing in despair over the precipice? Fourteen dead bodies were counted in different directions?' Verlie Fowler *Massacre at Appin in 1816* 2005 Available online www.cahs.com.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=59&Itemid=71

28. Macquarie's *Journal of a voyage from New South Wales to England In 1822.* Available online: www.lib.mq.edu.au/all/journeys/1822/1822a.html

29. Newcastle Region Art Gallery collection

The Newcastle Chest 2010
pages 48-51
Cabinetmaker: **Scott Mitchell**
Artists: **Lionel Bawden, Maria Fernanda Cardoso, Esme Timbery, Louise Weaver and Philip Wolfhagen**
Commissioned by Newcastle Region Art Gallery
Purchased with the assistance of James and Judy Hart, Robert and Lindy Henderson, Valerie Ryan, Newcastle Art Gallery Society and Newcastle Region Art Gallery Foundation 2010
Newcastle Region Art Gallery collection

Philip Wolfhagen
(top)
Waiting for trade winds 2010
oil and beeswax on Australian red cedar (Toona ciliata), 41.3 x 66.4 x 1.2 cm
The Newcastle Chest 2010
Newcastle Region Art Gallery collection
courtesy the artist and Dominik Mersch Gallery, Sydney

Philip Wolfhagen
(opposite left)
Colonial endemic 2010
oil on Australian red cedar (*Toona ciliata*), 42.5 x 32.0 x 1.2 cm
The Newcastle Chest 2010
Newcastle Region Art Gallery collection
courtesy the artist and Dominik Mersch Gallery, Sydney

Philip Wolfhagen
(opposite right)
Homage to JL 2010
oil on Australian red cedar (*Toona ciliata*), 42.5 x 32.0 x 1.2 cm
The Newcastle Chest 2010
Newcastle Region Art Gallery collection
courtesy the artist and Dominik Mersch Gallery, Sydney

Maria Fernanda Cardoso
Dead and green leaves (detail) 2010
Dead leaf butterflies (Kallima inachus inachus),
Leaf insects (Phyllium giganteum), branch, metal
pins, foam, and glass, 33.5 x 64.0 x 9.5 cm
The Newcastle Chest 2010
Newcastle Region Art Gallery collection
courtesy the artist and Grantpirrie, Sydney

Louise Weaver
(above and right)
Arena 2010
hand-crocheted lambswool over taxidermied zebra finch (*Poephila guttata*), budgerigar (*Melopsittacus undulatus*), rainbow lorikeet (*Trichoglossus haematodus*), hand-blown glass, wooden beads, cotton embroidery thread, gold leaf and mono filament, 8.2 x 47 x 36 cm
The Newcastle Chest 2010
Newcastle Region Art Gallery collection
Photography by Mark Ashkanasy
courtesy the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Esme Timbery
Macquarie slippers and boomerangs (detail) 2010
Macquarie tartan, cardboard, shells and glitter,
dimensions variable
The Newcastle Chest 2010
Newcastle Region Art Gallery collection

Lionel Bawden
Bower 2010
coloured Staedtler pencils, epoxy, incralac and linseed oil
11 forms, dimensions variable
The Newcastle Chest 2010
Newcastle Region Art Gallery collection
courtesy the artist and Grantpirrie, Sydney