

Fiona Foley artwork for Mackay Bluewater Trail
Louise Martin-Chew

Mackay's Pioneer River is the site of one of the most significant public art developments in Australia. A handsome budget was awarded to Fiona Foley, who is amongst Australia's most experienced public art makers (her works are part of the public infrastructure of Australia's seminal cultural sites such as the Museum of Sydney, the Australian National University Sculpture walk (Canberra), the Museum of Victoria (Melbourne), Redfern Park (Sydney) and Brisbane's Magistrates Court. This commission for Mackay - in its scope and vision - saw a regional city leapfrog other major cities to put its own imprimatur on creativity. Similar ambition and investment in creative capital saw the construction of Mackay Artspace in 2003. It remains one of Australia's most innovative regional galleries (in both building, programming, and collecting), punching well above its weight nationally in terms of profile, reputation and ambition. Mackay also has significant investment in public art and infrastructure, with works by Christopher Trotter, Craig Walsh, Jill Chism, Bonnie Bombach & Robin Muller, Luke Mallie and Sue Linton in public spaces in and around the city.

The scale of the works for Mackay's *Bluewater Trail* was influenced by the brief and a simultaneous major upgrade to the wharf area. Foley was given the opportunity to devise artwork concepts and had some flexibility for the number and location of the works. After extensive research and consultation, including the aesthetics of the broad landscapes encompassed within the *Bluewater Trail* and examining Mackay's history, she came up with six works. Four of these are clustered around the most populated areas near the wharf and bridge redevelopment, and the other two – *Mangrove Cap* and *Crows* – are located individually within appropriate landscapes.

The budget covered the construction of six major destination artworks and allowed for the development of a cohesive artistic vision, which relates local stories, a narrative that unfolds around this trail which circles and encloses a 'ring of activity' bordering Mackay's CBD. The trail itself is some 19 km long. While each work is spectacularly wrought and commanding in its own right, the cumulative aesthetic power of the six works encountered on this journey has compelling power.

Foley said, "I tend to work in an intuitive way that is responsive to the site and explores the physicality of the space in which the work will be sited. History and native habitats play a role in informing my work."

Foley's research and discussions with local communities, the Indigenous Yuibera people and the Mackay-based South Sea Islander communities, inform and infiltrate these works. Her incorporation of local indigenous narratives, their exploration of some of the difficult histories of Mackay, has brought air and recognition to the dispossessed. While the disquiet inherent in these stories may be uncomfortable for the descendents of the oppressors and the dispossessed alike, ultimately it is hoped that acknowledgement and recognition may assist the healing of old wounds, and the mending of relationships still fractured.

It is a function of contemporary art to challenge the status quo, but the sentiment behind these works is to create new pathways through material that may otherwise have remained hidden. Public acknowledgement of difficult histories in a forum of this kind has taken bravery and commitment on the part of Mackay's population. Fiona Foley is proud to have undertaken this journey.

Foley was awarded this commission in 2008, the year of the Apology to the Stolen Generations from the Rudd Government. Her creative partners on the project were Architectus and Urban Art Projects (both Brisbane-based). While it is her habit, when commissioned to make major public sculpture, to undertake significant research, Foley was committed from the beginning of this project to acknowledge the local traditional owners of the land on which these works stand. The presence of the Yuibera people is otherwise low-key in Mackay, and in these major works Foley has delivered strong aesthetic statements. They include acknowledgement of the histories and importance of those whose voices are otherwise muted.

These works are prominent in Mackay, visible along the riverfront and to both pedestrian and vehicular traffic in Mackay's CBD. It is expected that they continue to relate narratives – past, present, and to become part of the future - to those both local and visiting, and to render the invisible visible in one of Australia's most vital and growing cities. A community informed about its past may embrace its present with maturity. As Eliot noted in his "Burnt Norton" in four quartets:

Time past and time future

*Allow but a little consciousness.
To be conscious is not to be in time
But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
Be remembered; involved with past and future.
Only through time time is conquered.*

BURNT NORTON

(No. 1 of 'Four Quartets')

T.S. Eliot

1. Mangrove Cap 2009

weathered Corten steel, solar-powered LED lights

900 x 950 cm

Fiona Foley has personal and family memories and traditions that revolve around the mangrove. She said in 2010, "While living at Booral, Hervey Bay, my extended family would go out on to the mud flats and hunt and gather oysters, periwinkles and mud crabs. For me it was a treasure trove – I'd collect flotsam and jetsam washed up from high tides. I'd bring home turtle bones, dugong bones and various parts of mangrove seed-pods. I am not a deeply religious person but when I first stood under the mangrove cap on the current site in Mackay, I felt like I was in church."

The monumental mangrove cap (some nine metres tall) that Foley designed sits beside the Pioneer River in an open grassy landscape. The health of our rivers, fish and environment is nurtured by the quality of our mangrove stocks, and in creating this giant statement, in steel designed to visibly age in the salty environment, and giving it an other-worldly starry ambience by using solar-powered lights which glow through and beneath the cap in pricks of light, Foley extends the natural phenomena of the mangrove in the public imagination.

In Mackay generally and the Pioneer River in particular, the mangrove is a dominant albeit individually tiny element within the ecosystem. Foley has created, for this site, a mangrove on an unimaginable scale, a size translating their individual collective importance. While this is one of

the largest public artworks created in Australia, it goes beyond the Queensland tradition of 'big things', creating an object with aesthetic presence and integrity in keeping with its size. It is an artistic tour de force, and has international precedents in work by Anthony Gormley and Andy Goldsworthy.

2. *YUWI* 2009

fabricated aluminum, wetspray finish

Last year in discussing these works, Fiona Foley stated, "Research involves the act of looking as well as the act of listening. Surveying the landscape to see who was written in and out of the history of Mackay suggested to me that there was more to Mackay than met the eye. I am aware, from previous art-making in public places, that not all history is visible or sits on the surface plane."

This two metre high text names local Aboriginal people and their lands. The letters are created so as to be narrow from the front with depth of field visible from the side. This adds to the interest of the object as people move around and past the letters, and means that from the front, the Pioneer River is highly visible in the background. There is poetry in this akin to the reputation of Aboriginal people, and their ability to melt into the bush, to be seen and unseen. The text is foregrounded with a bronze ring (or wreath) inlaid into the ground as a symbol of a sacred land.

Places in and around Australia had names when settlers arrived in colonial times. While some of these were adopted, others were misheard, or romanticized, so as to render them palatable and legible for the incoming Europeans. By rendering the local name for place in large red letters along this thoroughfare in Mackay, Foley gives the first inhabitants of this land visibility and honors their memory. The wreath laid in front of these letters remembers those lost, killed and dispossessed, and notes the sacred qualities of these lands.

3. *Mackay Fishbones* 2009

cast aluminium and mosaics

seven fish bones, 600-800 cm tall

Located the other side of the bridge from *YUWI*, Fiona Foley's *Fishbones* are like wings, lined up, evoking the fish spine. They also become chapters of history, parts of a narrative. These artworks honour and evoke memories of Mackay's maritime history and act as a marker to the wharf precinct.

Three artworks are clustered together on this development site adjacent to the bridge linking north and south Mackay, providing a thoroughfare into the main street. The other two, the shields and the sugar cubes, also honour those who have traversed this history and those who remain.

Inspiration for these works was drawn from history - the Yuibera people were noted by early settlers for their fishing prowess. However, bones necessarily evoke death - those who have passed on, or were 'dispersed'. Mackay's history includes incidents in which local Aboriginals were killed.ⁱ

However this work also describes current activity on the Pioneer River. Foley suggested, "What struck me about that area now was the wharves and the fish market on the Pioneer River. Fishing is still a big part of the recreational life in Mackay, and there is craft in the bush poles that people use to tie up their boats and to devise walkways out onto the river."

4. Shields 2009

Water jet cut stone inlaid into paved surface

In this work, historic shield designs that belong to the Yuibera People were sourced at the Queensland Museum and brought back to the area, inlaid into the pavement, to become part of the permanent structure of this populous area in Mackay. Their installation in the fabric of the stone adds a cultural layer to the Bluewater Quay development zone. In this busy area, they are a gentle reminder of the original owners and the traditions that have been enacted on these lands in times past. They are subtle yet powerful additions to this artwork narrative.

5. Mackay Sugar Cubes 2009

Box-formed stainless steel with acid-etched lettering
seven pillars, each 300 cm tall

Foley's approach to public art encourages viewers to see the landscape differently. What she creates allows, even obliges, observers to expand on their understanding of the site. This circular installation beside the Pioneer River represents the complexity of history involving the sugar industry. Sugar cubes are stacked like pillars. This industry has been one of Mackay's most significant successes, yet these works also acknowledge the historical importance of South Sea Islanders to both this industry and to Mackay. This city is home to Australia's largest population of South Sea Islanders.

The work's layered meaning is elucidated with details that include, in addition to the sugar cubes, thumb prints of the South Sea Islander's descendants and the transporting ship's names in recognition of the history of their human cargo. A weathered Liechhardt tree marks the site of the original port of Mackay, and the etched sugar-cane plantations represent the connections between the South Sea Islanders and the greater Mackay community – past present and future.

During the research phase of the project, Foley met local woman Rowena Trieve at Mackay Library. "I spoke to her about her grandmother's life. Trieve's grandmother was taken onto a boat as a young girl and brought to Australian shores and Mackay. As a fifteen year old she was shackled into indentured labour on a sugar cane farm in Mackay – and remained there for many years." This story moved Foley significantly, and guided her to tell the South Sea Islander history in Mackay, and to honor the economic contribution of these people to the area.

6. Crows

Laser cut stainless steel

This work is installed above head height adjacent to Mackay's Bluewater Lagoon. It extends onto the ground by the use of shadow.

On one level this work operates in a playful and whimsical fashion with the use of animals and birds that are commonly known and seen in all parts of Australia. The children's playground close-by allows this reading to be dominant. However the concepts that underpin the work also cast a shadow. In the 1800s South Sea islanders were "black-birded", a colloquial term used to describe the forcible removal of people from their islands to Mackay where they were forced to work as slaves in the sugar industry. The crows, the black birds, now have as their companions the Willie Wagtails and flying foxes which live close-by, and evoke change with the movement of the shadows throughout the course of the day and the changing seasons.

ⁱ Whither the Aborigines ... “The Kennedy division of the Native Police was established in 1862 under Lieutenant Commander Walter Powell and later Sub-Inspectors Freudenthal and Gough. There were soon plenty of incidents to keep them busy. Although based at Nebo and Bloomsbury they were busy “dispersing” aborigines wherever there was a problem with stock.”

Acknowledgements

During this process, Fiona Foley worked with, was inspired by, and wishes to thank the following organizations and individuals:

- . Client Mackay Regional Council and Councillors past and present
- . Urban Art Projects, designer Belinda Smith and Project Manager Gordon Conn.
- . Architectus
- . South Sea Islander organisation Madassia and Chairwoman Donneil Fatnowna. Julie Manaway also assisted in navigating a path forward.
- . Dale Arvidson from Mackay Botanic Gardens
- . Indigenous representatives Melanie Kemp and Gary Mooney
- . Queensland Museum and staff, Brisbane
- . Mackay Library and Rowena Trieve
- . Artspace Mackay, director Michael Wardell and exhibitions curator Anna Thurgood.
- . Professor Clive Moore, Head of the School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics at the University of Queensland.
- . Bernice Wright, local historian Mackay.