



Traces of Memory – Stories of a garden

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photographer



I had my own photographic business in Melbourne for years. I was doing corporate industrial and I loved going out and lighting big semitrailers and big tankers and things like that. I was going into all kinds of interesting factories and places that people don't normally go and then in 1994 I had a really bad, a very bad back injury. I was either in bed or in hospital for two years and even when I could be vertical I couldn't dress myself or open the fridge door and I couldn't hold a camera.

One day, at the two year mark, I went into the dark room which I hadn't been in since I got ill and I took with me some scarves and some underwear and I made photograms. It was just so wonderful and empowering and exciting because I could do something by myself. I could create images again.

I live in Fryerstown in central Victoria which was the epicentre of the gold rush. My house is a four-room miner's cottage built in 1862 and a Mrs King lived here with her 13 children. I actually have a photograph of her with two of her children and I often wonder what her life was like and I wonder whether some of these plants that I now walk

past, whether she actually planted them. There are so many plants still here in this area that were grown to remind people of 'Home'.

Every day I get up and go across to the paddock to feed my horse who's retired now and I walk past the briar roses and the jonquils and the irises and the Peruvian lilies and I can't help but think about the women who planted them. You go into the town cemetery here and there are so many graves of young women who obviously died in childbirth and little babies who died, little children. This was a tragic, hostile environment for those women and you can just imagine the absolute joy that a briar rose or a bridal creeper or a quince tree would've brought them.

We have fiercely active Landcare groups here and I have to say they're just fantastic. They've done a great deal of good work but when I see them running around chopping down all the trees like hawthorn and so on, I feel caught right in the middle. I know they're doing really great things but what my work is about is the emotional reasons for these plants being introduced here in the first place. And how these plants are entwined in the complexity of human lives.

There's a quote that started my exhibition:

'Pioneer women persisted in cultivating familiar plants, in part because they were remedies against that most disheartening of ills of the new world, homesickness.'

These plants brought solace and I think it's really important to acknowledge that. That's what I am doing in *Traces of*

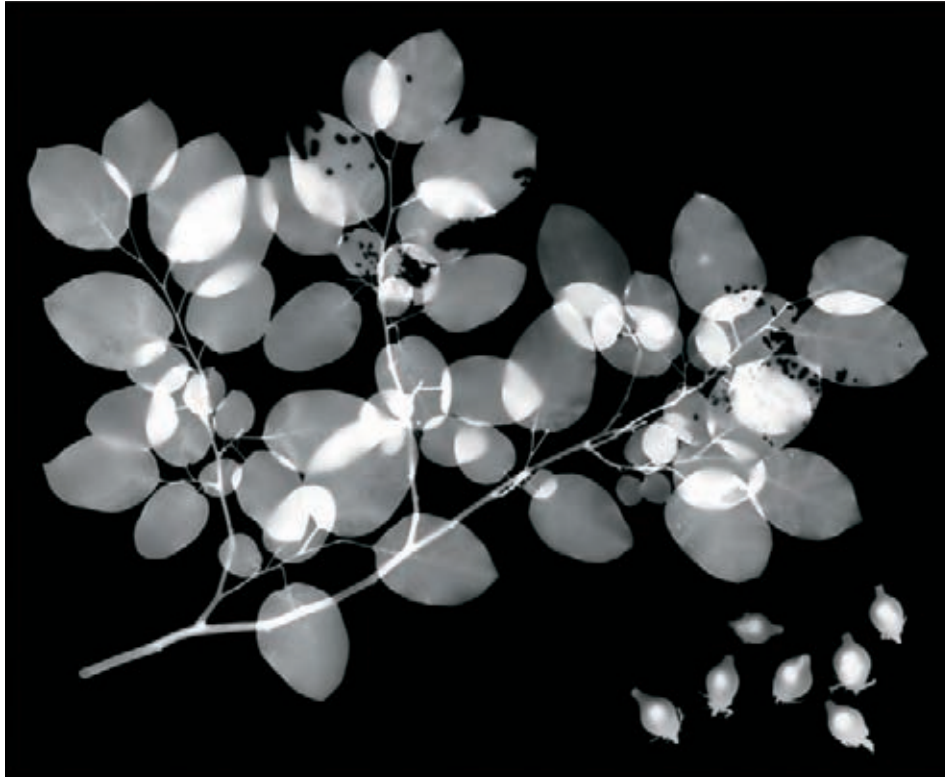
Memory. It was a major exhibition at Monash Gallery of Art and then it came up here to Bendigo.

It took me about 18 months in a fairly concentrated way to prepare the exhibition and there was about six months before that where I was really just buggerising around trying to work out how to do it. It was when I realised that I could combine the photograms with images stitched together to form a panorama, that's when I was on my way. I also wanted quotes from diaries and letters to go with the images but of course most of these things were chucked in the incinerator when somebody like Mrs King died. Nobody would have kept Mrs King's bits and pieces.

In the end I had to make a decision to include quotes about gardening from beyond central Victoria. They are quotes from pioneer gardeners and I wasn't happy about it but at least it is sharing the experiences.

I don't know what it is about a photogram that is so poignant but many people have been very moved. I think it's because they are so pure. And beautiful. When you're standing in the dark room you never know what you're going to get. I go in there and I start cutting up bits of paper to make what we call test strips and then I get my time right and my exposure right and then I get out the big sheet and put the object on. That's when you first get the idea of what the potential is. You really have to take yourself in hand at some stage though because you realise you've just been standing in there, going through packets and packets of paper, saying to yourself, 'I'll just try one more' – again and again and again.

Those years when I was so ill made me understand that things happen in your life that you're powerless to prevent and even though it's very hard, you have to go with it and do the best with it that you can. *Traces of Memory* is about ordinary everyday people who are no longer here, but their traces are. I'm certain Mrs King planted the Peruvian lilies. I'm absolutely positive about that.



Traces of Memory – Quince 2006
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Traces of Memory – Oxalis 2006
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