

Dr Catherine Bell: One page overview statement

In my research and art practice I investigate ways to visualise personal and societal trauma, and challenge taboos surrounding death, dying and bereavement. This body of work investigates the experience of making art during a yearlong studio residency at St Vincent's Hospital (Victoria Parade Fitzroy) in the palliative care hospice and facilitating community art workshops with patients, families and staff.

St Vincent's Hospital is a public denominated hospital servicing the Yarra region and the patients represent the diverse cultural, social, historical and political identity of the municipality of Yarra. I am a Collingwood resident, my gallery, Sutton Gallery Fitzroy is located in the City of Yarra and the art work produced for this application comes from my studio residency at St Vincent's Hospital. Time, space and the body are thematic influences in the realisation of the work as the materials are salvaged from the hospital site, so are imbued with the history of the patients and health care setting.

The disposed flowers I collect become markers of time and emblems of mortality. The act of salvaging the bouquets from the patient rooms and the delicate preservation process casts me in the role of artist undertaker. The bruised petals and wilted leaves in varying stages of decay are in a state of becoming, embodying both the fragility and resilience of the terminal body. The artworks document cycles of death and renewal and represent the gradual deterioration of the body over time.

The process of massaging and moisturising the petals back to life, so they are pliable enough to attach smoothly to the wooden surface, represents the efforts to protect and prolong the still living body. The methods of preservation recall ancient mummification and the refashioned petals, preserved and collaged into rows and portraits of St Agnes, the patron saint of nurses, evoke Christian reliquaries and talismans. The indexical trace of the remaining petals, invites transcendental contemplation on the meaning of existence as they emit an aura of veneration and mystery.

I not only recycle the floral bouquets when they were removed from each patient's room but also reclaim and sculpt the spongy, green Oasis foam that is designed to hydrate and support the flowers arranged in it. This material dictates the mountainous forms of Dublin, the homeland of the Sisters of Charity, who founded St Vincent's Hospital in Australia in 1857.

The hollow urns, also carved from Oasis, fragile as an archaeological relic, are poised to receive the ashes of the deceased. The above works do not require additional resources related to conservation and storage and are ready for display and exhibition. The display cabinets are UV protected and are designed to archive fragile items they come with custom made Perspex shelves and steel brackets.