

Penny Harris - Artist Bio

Penny Harris is an Australian based bronze sculptor with dual English and Canadian citizenship and a Permanent Australian Resident. She is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Wollongong and teaches into the Visual Arts program. Her creative practice is grounded in metal casting and material mimicry. She casts found objects and petrifies them using a lost wax casting process and has adapted a bricolage construction technique to assemble the objects once cast. Her practice is underpinned by an interest in visual poetic narrative including archaeological histories and objects interpreted through cast textiles and found objects as project based wall installation. Penny uses the sculptural objects to construct a fragmented poetic wall story that re-interprets the narrative strategies developed by the postmodern novelists. She exhibits in Canada and Australia.

The exhibition 'Waiting' (2001) explored her Canadian heritage and was the creative component that underpinned her doctorate. This exhibition was a poetic response to her study of colonial migration through the photography of the Snapshooters at the turn of the 20th century. These amateur migrant photographers documented the prairie settlement experience and their voyage to the Canadian east coast from Europe. Penny studied a collection of her grandfather's photographs and the supporting thesis explored these histories through narratives of absence and loss framed by a study of the relationship between photography and casting. The doctoral exhibition was an installation that responded to the thesis research and was underpinned by a series of intimate photographs that documented grief through narratives of longing and absence.

In 2011 Penny completed a series of 7 exhibitions under a project title 'The Collected Poetry of Doubt' * which responded to a novel by German writer Gunter Grass titled 'From the Diary of a Snail'. The novel wove together multiple stories and followed a character named Doubt who was a snail collector and believed he could cure melancholia with snails. The novel drew on the author's research of a 1514 print titled 'Melancholia 1' by the German artist Albrecht Durer. Penny responded to the story of Doubt poetically using assembled cast objects and installation to tell a disrupted and fragmented visual poetic narrative.

*('From the Diary of a Snail' (1992), 'The slug and I' (1995) 'Doubt's Passion' (2007), 'Doubt's Garden' (2009), 'The Cellar and the Grove Snail' (2009), 'I Draw What's Left Over' (2010), 'Here it is as a Picture Postcard' (2010).

Earlier in 2010 Penny travelled to Cyprus with colleagues and Postgraduate students from the University of Wollongong for a study tour and artist in residence at an ancient theatre excavation site in Nea Paphos. The Hellenistic-Roman theatre site is being excavated by staff and students from the Archaeology department at the University of Sydney. Artwork responding to the excavation fieldwork and research undertaken during the residency was included in the exhibition 'Aphrodite's Island: Australian Archaeologists in Cyprus' in the Nicolson Museum' (2012) The residency was significant as the fieldwork and research initiated her current project titled 'Cargo'.

Penny returned to the excavation in Nea Paphos in 2011 and then travelled to the Underwater Archaeological Museum in Bodrum, Turkey to research the wreck of the Bronze Age trading vessel, The Uluburun. While in Cyprus at the excavation in 2010 she studied metal small finds and became interested in the fragments of metal slag, casting waste, and went on to research the long history of Copper mining in Cyprus. The Uluburun was a trading vessel thought to be on route to the Nile and carried exotic objects to royal patrons, ship cloth furnishings and a large cargo of copper ingots from Cypriot mines stacked on brush matting. The exhibition that developed out of the fieldwork and research and was titled 'This is a list of Cargo as described by Palek' and was exhibited at Gallery Art Mur, Montreal. (2014).

Penny interweaves her interest in poetic narrative and storytelling with historical research however principally it is notions of material mimicry, petrification and the material identity of objects that underpin her work. This shift in material identity is most evident when she casts cloth in bronze. She uses an archaeological process called Pseudomorphism to poetically imagine her cast objects as excavated petrified cloth buried or submerged in shipwrecks tangled in amongst the copper ingots.

"I explore salvaged textiles through the frame of an archaeological process called psuedomorphism. A psuedomorph is a fragment of cloth that has chemically

absorbed mineral salts, in this instance from copper, when buried underground or at wreck sites. The textiles once organic material over time disintegrates but the structure of the cloth absorbs the salts from the copper. A motif for my casting process and a thread of the storytelling embedded in the materiality of the sculptures.”

“I use a lost form casting process adapted from the ancient process of lost wax casting. I stabilise the cloth or fragile objects initially with hot wax, burn the fabric from the mold and pour the metal.”

In 2008 Penny’s exhibition ‘Flutter’ explored the material identity of cast cloth and in 2013 she curated the exhibition ‘Intersensorial Threads’ to further explore her interest in the languages of cloth and material mimicry. “It was the painted fresco imagery of cloth fillets on the theatre walls at the excavation site in Nea Paphos that underpins the sculpture ‘The Fillet’ and more broadly the exhibition ‘Intersensorial Threads’.” Penny invited 18 artists to re-vision cloth through a range of materials

(paint, thread, cloth), processes (digital weaving and printing, casting, construction, sewing, drawing), Photography, Performance and new technologies (LED, computer and video). Artists selected included Canadian artists (Barbara Layne, Ruth Schueing, Leila Surj, Maria Lantin, Ingrid Bachmann, Kelly Thompson, Patrick Traer) and Australia (Diana Wood Conroy, Agnieszka Golda, Kay Lawrence, Maryanne Coutts, John di Stefano, Elizabeth Eastland, Leonie Watson, Penny Harris) Indonesia (Aprina Murwanti) and the UK (Janis Jefferies). This project is ongoing and she is working with a Canadian collaborator, Kelly Thompson on a follow up project in Montreal.

The exhibition ‘The Story of El Cobre is Uncertain’ was exhibited in Cuba in 2014 and further developed her research in the maritime histories of copper trade through the cargo of shipwrecks. Penny was invited to exhibit in Cuba and continued her study of the global trade in copper researching the salvaged cargo of a trading Galleon named the ‘Nuestra Señora de Atocha’ and associated histories of colonial mining in Cuba and silver mining in Latin America. The Galleon was on-route from Havana to Seville sinking a day out of port. The vessel carried a large cargo of silver and Copper ingots mined in the north east of Cuba in the colonial

mines of El Cobre. She exhibited the work at the Romerías de Mayo festival in Holguin.

In 2014 Penny moved to Indonesia for a year long self funded residency to develop the 'Cargo' project and to find trade links between Cyprus and Cuba. She was researching the history of trade between South East Asia and Cuba through Latin America with a focus on the Manila Galleon trade based in the Philippines. The Spanish Galleons traded bolts of Chinese silk/ cloth, ceramics and South East Asian spices in exchange for Silver mined in Latin American. The Manila Galleon cargo was off loaded in the Mexican port of Acapulco and then taken south overland by donkey to the Spanish colonists. Alternatively the Galleon cargo was transported overland and by sea to the Cuban port of Havana then onwards up the North American east coast to the Spanish town of Seville.

The project titled 'Cargo' is a series of six exhibitions that are framed around the histories of global trade in metal along the colonial maritime trade routes linking South East Asia to the Mediterranean and Latin America through the salvaged cargo of shipwrecks. In South East Asia the Chinese/Arab traders also travelled to the Mediterranean but along the Maritime Silk Road to the Middle East and on to the Mediterranean coast. The traders travelled between Chinese coastal cities and ports through the Molucca Sea along the coast trading with merchants of South East Asia and Indonesian islands carrying their own cargoes of Chinese textiles, spices, local tin and copper linking South East Asia with the Mediterranean along sea and land routes.

'This is a list of Cargo as described by Palek' (2014) is the first exhibition in the Cargo project and will be followed by an exhibition that re-imagines the study of the salvaged cargo of Roman trading vessels discovered wrecked in the Mediterranean Sea. These vessels were barges transporting worn Greek sculptures, whole and fragmented, with scrap bronze to foundries for re-melting in Brindisi. The third exhibition is underpinned by a study of the remains of Chinese / Arab merchant vessels found in the Molucca Sea off the coast of Indonesia that link South East Asia to the Mediterranean along the Maritime Silk Road. I will follow the Manila Galleons from the Philippines to Latin America through the trade in Chinese textiles and silver and these narratives will underpin the fourth exhibition with the fifth exhibition 'The Story of El Cobre is Uncertain' (2014). The final exhibition in

the Cargo project will be a response to a wreck off the North American coast that had been on route to Europe carrying a cargo of silver and Canadian colonists returning home.

The archaeological fieldwork and historical research is re-imagined to create a visual poetic narrative, a bronze wall poem. The constant in her creative practice is the use of petrified cloth in her work, postmodern storytelling narrative devices and creating poetic narrative visually through installation.