

The hidden and the forbidden

**LOUISE MARTIN
CHEW explains why
Fiona Foley should
not be pigeonholed
as a political artist.**

Fiona Foley: Forbidden
University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane
19 February–2 May 2010



Fiona Foley, *Bliss* (video still), 2008, DVD, 11 minutes videography: Troy Melville, Move Media. Museum of Contemporary Art. Image courtesy and © the artist.



Fiona Foley, *HHH #1*, 2004, ultrachrome print on paper, edition of 15, 76 x 101 cm. Image courtesy the artist, Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne. © the artist. Photograph Dennis Cowley.

This is the first solo exhibition of work by Fiona Foley presented by an Australian institution and it makes evident her interest in some of the well-hidden aspects of Australian history.

It is an elegantly curated selection of Foley's work over fifteen years, tracing her artistic journey through the early work about her status as a *Badjala Woman* (1994) to the confronting *Black Velvet* (1996) and *Stud Gins* (2003), all of which deal with the way Aboriginal women have been described and treated over centuries.

It opens with the dramatic HHH series of photographs from 2004 (a witty yet sinister take on the Ku Klux Klan) with African Americans dressed in black hoods and colourful gowns and including the costumes, bereft of bodies, hanging spookily on the wall.

Most recently, Foley's work has looked at the role opium played in the submission of Aboriginal people in Queensland during the latter part of the nineteenth century. "It was a common practice to entice men and women with bribes of tobacco, adulterated liquor or opium dregs." (Rosalind Kidd, *The Way We Civilise*, UQ Press, 2005: p.34). Foley's DVD *Bliss* juxtaposes sensuous images of poppies moving in a field with the historical record of a deliberate strategy to render the Aboriginal labour force compliant — connecting the seductive beauty with seductive destruction.

Foley uses media as diverse as public art, film, photography, installation, and more traditional painting, drawing and prints; but what unites these works is humour and courage, her unflinching interest in tackling the tough subjects that history has given her as an Indigenous woman from Queensland and the biographical links which lend the work veracity.

At the opening of the exhibition, Museum of Contemporary Art director Elizabeth Ann Macgregor described how her own interest in Foley's work was stimulated during her first visit to Australia. Its international resonance with the histories of displaced peoples has also been widely remarked upon when shown overseas. "What I am trying to talk about is a notion of truth," Fiona Foley said. "I suppose my reputation has preceded me because when I see something that doesn't sit well, I always question it. But it is an oversimplification to call me a political artist and just slot me in a box. I don't see myself that way. I've worked with different themes at different times in my life. I see my role more as an educator."

The exhibition is accompanied by a handsome hardcover monograph tracing all aspects of Foley's art. Visitor figures during the exhibition's MCA season in Sydney were up 40% on average, suggesting that Foley has an ability to connect as much as to discomfort.