

HERESY TO HEREDITY
EVA FERNANDEZ







Blood Bounty: Eva Fernández and the art of annihilation and exorcism in 'Heresy to Heredity'

'In the face of unacknowledged trauma, we are confronted with the perennial choice of speaking or becoming complicit in our silence. What seems from one perspective protective becomes profoundly annihilative.'

(Charles & O'Loughlin 4)

The dangers of opening up to memories, confronting a traumatised past, could be said to be the terrain of the brave or the foolish. But what if the memories do not exist? What if where the past belongs - is absence? Yet it is clear that there was a body, a name, indeed a portrait, because there is a frame.

The absurdity of such a conundrum is poignantly captured in Eva Fernández *Asta Su Abuela*. A woman sits with the head of a mule, referencing Goya's *Los Caprichos No.39*. Where Goya's mule has his family album in hand open to images of generations of mules, a sardonic comment on inherited traits, the woman in Fernández' work holds open an album without images. On the wall, over her pointed ears, hang empty portrait frames. Fernández speaks to the holes rendered by the continual fragmentation of her family over generations of movement from Spain to Canada and then Australia, observing in her artist statement 'My photo albums are sparse and the frames on the wall hang empty.'

Fernández' mule turns to the spectator, looking askance as she exposes the questions of such a cryptic book; pages of fragments, memories filtered, pried from the margins, sown into the semblance of a speculative imaginary past. Whites of the eyes glint towards us, a wry humor as though a joke is shared, but it is one both terrible and terrifying.

In this compelling new series, *Heresy to Heredity*, Fernández has created an immensely powerful response to this profound moment, and questions of personal and cultural dislocation and generational loss. As she describes, 'I examine the few remnants...for traces that may reveal themselves'.

The works, drawing on iconic Spanish art and literature, from 16th century traditions of bodegón still life paintings, the biting social commentary of Goya in the 19th century to the poetry of Garcia Lorca, weave connective threads across centuries and waves of oppressive rule from empires to civil war.

A motif through the series is the depiction of objects hung with rope. Suspension is at the heart of the drama animating this story. Everything is held between worlds, a cord may break or a cord may catch one from falling. The line between protection and annihilation is walked with tenuous skilled grace. A feast of fruit and vegetables are offered as a cornucopia of abundant generosity but they are already on the way to death, rotting and alive more with pests than anything able to be eaten. Famine spills over the brim of rich metals and delicate china cups. The bounty of a Queen is bought with the blood of new colonies, stolen and mined. The element of suspension ensures that in raiding the Spanish art archive, Fernández' clever composites, drawing on 'still life' are anything but static. Through integration and re-creation, works such as *Isabel I la Católica*, are taught with tension. The past inhabits the present as historic allusions make pertinent political commentaries on contemporary colonization and exploitation by global powers, continuing to invade individual and collective spaces. Everything in

these creations rest on a knife's edge in melancholic beautiful constructions, richly layered with myriad tales of corruption, banality and grief.

In seminal writing on transgenerational haunting, Nicolas Abraham suggests that 'What haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others' (287). This observation is particularly evocative given the history in Spain that Fernández references here which impacted her own family; the Spanish civil war (1936 – 1939), an Amnesty Law in 1977 which prevented criminal prosecution for acts of torture and atrocity, legalising a 1975 'Pact of Forgetting' on the grounds of national unification. In 2007, as a counter to decades of denial, the Historical Memory Law was passed to support recovery of lost histories and exhumation of bodies. Such unresolved terrain of repression, concealment, rupture and retrieval, breeds ghosts that cannot lie quiet.

In the search for answers, histories are found in books that are not written by those who own the stories. They are told in other languages by other voices. This is an experience shared by many whose families have travelled across countries and oceans, driven by any number of forces - desire and opportunity, conflict and violence. Those of us who grow up as the first generation of migrant parents are immersed with traces of other places, lingering yet elusive as a familiar scent after someone has departed.

Eva Fernández is one of the most brilliant voices emerging at the forefront of a growing movement of international artists speaking to the experiences of transnational migration and intergenerational memory. Her work here enacts a performance of diasporic montage, as articulated by scholars of trauma theory such as Nathan To, who describes 'a process of collision, defamiliarization, reconnection, and reconfiguration that is at work in efforts to perform a montage of hauntings' (90).

In examining his own experience of the Canadian-Chinese diaspora and the transmission of trauma, To notes the limits and possibilities of working to remember as a descendant of those who suffered historic violence, yet without the language of his family and unable to search beyond English translations:

...instead of maintaining distinctions based on the 'validity' or 'reliability' of sources, what is more important is the act of assembling diverse fragments (from various sources and types), in order to 'listen' to voices of the living and the dead that must speak. Doing so uncovers a diasporic vision of distributed memory, where ghosts find a way to persist, regardless of whether a source is primary or secondary. Employing these actions, therefore is how one can compose a way of 'seeing' haunted histories through a diasporic montage (83).

Fernández comments on this reliance on English translation of Spanish texts in her epic image, *The Battle of The Armada*. The religious and political bias in relating multiple and dissonant histories around the cause of the Armada's defeat, are captured in a literal and figurative storm, driving the ships into each other, battered by the waves. Fernández stages a 'collision' through drawing on allegorical and mythic qualities that speaks precisely to the affect of fragmented assemblages. The point of such critically reflexive strategies as diasporic montage, is that it allows us to 'see ghosts' in the gaps and silences around post memory (To 13). I use post memory here as a term describing traumatic recall by the generations who come after those that that directly

experience personal, cultural and collective trauma (Hirsch cited in To 43). The children of those who bear the memories receive the resonances, the nightmares, the awareness of things that cannot be spoken.

In making the 'ghosts' visible through *Heresy to Heredity*, Fernández is ultimately engaged in acts of decolonisation:

Decolonization is a recognition that a "ghost is alive, so to speak. We are in relation to it and it has designs on us such that we must reckon with it graciously..." (Gordon as cited in Tuck and Ree 647)

If this is indeed how ghosts are to be recognized through a decolonising practice, Fernández reckons with these hauntings born from the 'horror of incomprehensible histories' (To 42) in the most gracious and disturbing fashion. One of the final images of the series, *Aquellos Polbos*, captures a timeless pain. The woman we met in *Asta Su Abuela*, has had her mule head replaced with a capirote, the canonical peaked cap the Spanish Inquisitors placed on condemned heretics. Her face is cloaked and mouth effectively gagged by the capirote, while her hands clasp her head. In searching for answers to the missing photos in the family album, what has the woman done? Has she chosen to speak the unspeakable, raising the dead and their secrets? It is a chilling price she has paid, replete with velvet and lace.

Elegiac and distilled, if these are the images to fill the frames left empty by those who could not be known and are lost to us, they are ones that travel centuries in a minute.

*'I want to sleep awhile,
awhile, a minute, a century;
but all must know that I have not died'*

(Lorca 'Gacela of The Dark Death' 1940)

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Asta su Abuela (Even her Grandmother /and so was her grandmother) after Goya's Los Caprichos No.39, 2016, archival digital print, 150 x 100cm

Aquellos Polbos, (Those specks of dust) after Goya's Los Caprichos No. 23, 2016, archival digital print, 100 x 150cm



Eva Fernández: Heresy to Heredity.

Insinuated within a roving dynamism that ascribes its oeuvre, culture is a prowling and spirited thing. It is defined in part by the way we inhabit its realm as a matter for both contemplative imagining and flighty rationalism. We can, at times, make sense of it through the language of art – or, as is the case here, photography that bears witness to and becomes the principle mechanism for documenting experience, whether live or vicarious. In her exhibition, *Heresy to Heredity*, Eva Fernández has produced a prodigiously coherent body of work that investigates the experience of culture through history and across generations of her own family. By recontextualising the imagery of iconic Spanish historical paintings and etchings, Fernández traces an anachronistic impulse of signification that effectively evinces the enduring and implacable march of history. She calls to light the flinty ghosts of political repression and the cyclical momentum of human conflict. Granted a living cipher, the ominously beautiful images created by Fernández communicate generationally across the ages into the contemporary iterations of conflicts and repressive political regimes.

Constructed images, whether technically hewn or roughly imagined, span generic and disciplinary boundaries. They invite an interpolation of vision and visibility into the way that they relate with and confer to issues of identity and historicism. Eva Fernández lends her visionary eye to the ‘grammar...and ethics of seeing’, where images are grounded just for a moment to represent the world in all its shimmering fragments. Her photographs do the memory work for generations past and those yet to come; composite images calling into being the multiple voices embedded in her own history. They are artful objects that nudge at the memorialisation of the past by signifying what is symbolically sovereign to her stories, replete with the haunting reminiscence of conceptual cornerstones to complex narratives. In siphoning the rich lexicography of the photographic artwork, Fernández creates a compelling narrative of her Spanish ancestry whilst framing a site for the contemplation of imperialist global tributaries of history. The artworks in *Heresy to Heredity*, chronicle an elegiac sphere of quiet poetics that resonate with the imponderable repercussions of the Spanish Civil War. These were fraught times when officials imposed the grim order of an autocratic regime; citizens rose against citizens and neighbour pitted against neighbour in ideological adversity. Vestiges of the trauma would spill over and over into future tense where subsequent generations inherit the stories and the ideological sense of continuing partisanship and tyranny. It is poignant and fitting that Fernández, a descendent of the diasporic generation exiting Spain, tells this story simultaneously from the inside and as a somewhat removed observer. Like so many of her ilk, patterns of migration and exile have engendered a generational sense of identity disparity and ill-defined allegiance.



Gracias a la almorta (Thanks to the vetch) after Goya's Los Desastres de la Guerra No.51, 2016, archival digital print, 150 x 100cm

Mantilla and Skull (A las cinco de la tarde), 2016, archival digital print, 150 x 100cm

Familial dynamics transmitted across generations² frame the ‘memoirs [that] often bear the traces, gaps and lacunae of trauma like raw scars³, essentially becoming the signifying ellipses of how societies deal with a past of political repression over long periods of time. When historical events are so devastatingly difficult to abide, a kind of communal suppression or distancing of events is often triggered as a mechanism for preservation. Touted as the means to progress and move beyond the grief of a nation, *The Pact of Forgetting* in 1975 was a duplicitous political covenant between a government and its people. Posited as the impetus for leaving the past behind and focusing on the future, the pact existed tenuously on the

crest of mass grief, trespassing on the irrevocable human need to mourn loss unfettered. But, like the whirling dust of the dead, memories become narrative agents for a generation. 'Collective forgetting' is not a failure of memory; it is more a dialectic about ameliorating traumatic and traumatising memories with something bearable, something that allows the audacious complexity of the human psyche to assimilate and assuage adversity and live through it.

Whilst language and vision are closely coupled, we are all of us predisposed to the subjectivity that makes things contextually intelligible. Since its inception, the photographic image has insinuated itself within the grammar of a 'new' visual code. Drawing on the rich, often macabre, iconography of Goya, Fernández alludes to the demons of privation and the devastating squalor of persecution and death. Her photographs build on the allegorical scaffold of Goya whose growing cynicism arose from what he saw as the phantasms, witches and ghosts infesting a cesspit of human folly and suffering. In *Asta Su Abuela*, for example, Goya's foppish mule traces the apparent vicissitudes of his family. Fernández draws on the irony of the mule dressed as a human then pushes the derisive thrust of the quiescent human dressed as a mule. A dark humour and the themes of corruption and persecution suffuse the works that the artist interprets for this project with breathtakingly rich iterations of satire and parable transcending the ideological space of the apologue.

Drawing on the art historical symbolism of late 16th century Spanish painting, *Isabel I la Católica* is a monumental photographic montage of iconic elements alluding to the bodegon tradition of painting. Customarily focused on the mundane and the prosaic, the bodegon format has been refashioned here with an extravagant sweep of metaphoric alchemy. Queen Isabel is resplendent, surrounded with the bounty of colonising quests abroad. The suspension of fruits and vegetables depicted here has an applied pragmatic origin in the preservation of food; but Fernández veers deftly into the Baroque. All moody drama and chafing with signification the fruits are exotic but they are spoiling. Colonised by the rumbling life of insects and bacteria, the artist draws a parallel with the 'social fabric of the time when Spain was a global power'.⁴ In her version, Fernández predicates the queen's returned gaze on a sense of entitlement, symbolically holding firm the quince and the Spanish galleon to connote her sovereignty.

In this triumphant body of work, Eva Fernández calls up the voices of history to help illuminate the present. She interrogates the blemishes and the double talk. Ultimately, she reconfigures an historical critique by endowing it with an enlivened language. A powerful corollary runs through this suite of works espousing a progressive reflection on what has passed and what is yet to be.

Sue Starcken
Artist, curator, lecturer, writer



Still Life with Lentils, 2016, archival digital print, 150 x 100cm

1. Sontag, S. in Julia Thomas, (ed). (2000). *In Plato's Cave*. New York: Palgrave. pp 40.
2. More than a mere biological phenomenon, 'generations' are also referenced in their context as a social phenomenon that confers a certain mode of thought and experience.
3. Schwab, Gabriele, (2010). *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*. Columbia: Columbia University Press, p 5.
4. Paraphrased from artist statement.

BIOGRAPHY

Eva Fernández was born in 1967 in Toronto, Canada and lives and works in Perth, Australia. Fernández works across digital based media, video and installation. Her practice is essentially concerned with the exploration and negotiation of the space which she inhabits in context to it's complex histories and the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism.

This solo exhibition, developed from an intensive period of research during a mid-career fellowship, specifically focuses on cultural displacement and dislocation, as she negotiates her pluralistic identity in context to contemporary issues of global displacement and Spanish Diaspora in the 20th century, as the child of post Spanish Civil War migrants.

The legacy of the Spanish Civil War left many families displaced and with a fragmented history. By carefully delving into the disremembered spaces her family's pasts, Fernández has been able to unearth narratives in order to evoke images to piece together fragments of a shattered, emotional and forgotten past. Drawing on these fragments, these works embody the traces, voices and memories from the past that are blended and embedded in Spanish art and history.

Heresy to Heredity

Eva Fernández, 2016

PS Art Space

12 – 26 November 2016

www.psas.com.au

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project is supported by the State Government through the Department of Culture and the Arts.

I gratefully acknowledge the support of Jessica Gatt, Kyle Wilde, Alexandra Wilde, Clothilde Bullen, María Martínez Hernández, Andrew Nicholls, Tracey Moffatt, Odette Kelada, Susan Starcken, Chrissie Parrott, Clare McFarlane, PJ and Fitzgerald Photo.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their constant support, enthusiasm and encouragement. A special thanks to my beautiful mother Alexandra, whose wonderful stories were enlightened by her vigour for life, humour and continual strength to overcome adversity.

All artworks are archival digital prints
Editions of 8

Catalogue: November, 2016
Edition: 300
ISBN: 978-0-646-96469-0
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www.evafernandez.com.au

Catalogue Design: Clare McFarlane

Cover image: *Isabel la Castilla*, 2016, archival digital print, 100 x 170cm
Inside Cover: *The Battle of the Armada*, 2016, archival digital print, 100 x 170cm



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Culture and the Arts

