

# Profile: Jessica Hood

One of the AGHS's newest National Management Committee members shares her views on garden history from the viewpoint of an art-based practitioner.

I joined the Australian Garden History Society in late 2010 as a young scholar with an ongoing interest in sites of cultural heritage. In an earlier article 'The photographic garden' (*AGH*, 23 (3), 2012), I spoke of my involvement in my family's historic property Tiptree, located in Christchurch, New Zealand, where I was born and spent my childhood. In that article I outlined my approach, as a practicing artist, toward garden history, one that requires me to engage across multiple modes of enquiry. I would describe my art practice as 'research-based,' where the starting point for the creation of an artwork is established through written and visual research of diverse sources and frameworks, such as archives, art theory, philosophy, and most importantly site. Rather than tracing history through a series of linear points written along a timeline from past to present, my engagement with the history of a site seeks to link an aspect to shared experience of it in the present. Therefore my work often engages with the cultural, spatial, and temporal implications of a site in relation to the way in which a visitor experiences and recollects it in the present.

It was while attending my first AGHS event in 2011, a talk at The Johnson Collection centred on *The Garden of Ideas*, that I meet long-time member Richard Aitken. This was, I suspect, because of a technologically savvy note-taking device I was using at the time, a draw card that quickly gave way to me speaking on the beginnings of my own research project: the idea of the garden as archive. Our discussion that day, about the balance between access and preservation in archival collections was an issue I was grappling with in my own research, one that led me to pursue a related course of enquiry. It became a turning point in my research with the suggestion that I approach the Botanic Gardens of Adelaide regarding access to its collections. This was particularly fruitful for my doctoral project with Adelaide Botanic Garden becoming the primary site of my research.

My doctoral research, titled *Garden/Archive: photographic relation and exchange* worked with an idea of the garden as archive by relating photography to an experience of the garden itself. The starting point for the project was a series of

black and white lantern slides of trees, taken in Adelaide Botanic Garden around 1920, held in their archival collections. I drew on what I saw as a crucial relationship between a photographic record of a tree and how that shaped my own experience in the space of the garden itself. It was through this possibility that I embarked upon reproducing the 1920s' tree portraits, which I undertook between 2012 and 2013. In some instances I was able to find and photograph the same tree, as demonstrated in the photographs included here. Alongside I photographed a series of the same species of tree that were not in the same location, and also many not included in the 1920s' archival photographs. As part of my wider research I visited the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, where I found in its archival collection prints of these 1920s' tree portraits from Adelaide, that were sent to Kew 1931. In light of these photographs enacting a form of correspondence and exchange of knowledge between sites, I produced a similar photographic series of trees at the Kew site.

In the final outcome of my research, *Garden/Archive*, an exhibition of these photographs at the Santos Museum of Economic Botany in September 2013, I related this larger form



Jessica Hood installing her exhibition *Garden/Archive* into a display cabinet at the Santos Museum of Economic Botany within Adelaide Botanic Garden.

Photo: Jessica Hood



of exchange between Adelaide and Kew to a viewers' individual experience of the garden. I encouraged the viewer after seeing the exhibition to allow the photographs to inform their own view of and movement through the garden, to a point where each photograph seen in the exhibition might become apparent in their own experience—to see the garden as photograph. This viewer would therefore be following my footsteps as a photographer in the garden, as I had done with a photographer before me. My project was about much more than outlining and recording a history for the trees and garden photographed; it was about actively taking part in that history, being part of its renewal, questioning how it is, and continues to be recorded in the future. At the conclusion of the research, the photographs I produced were placed into the collections of the Botanic Gardens of Adelaide, where they now sit alongside the original 1920s' tree photographs. And this is how I see my project *Garden/Archive*; not renewing an old or closed archival source, but rather sitting alongside and contributing to it, as an open-ended series, able to be continually accessed through the actual site of the botanic garden itself.

The access that the Botanic Gardens of Adelaide offered to me in its collections allowed me to develop and refine my research-based art practice, in a way that benefited both parties. For myself I was able to define my interest in cultural landscapes and gardens, and in doing so establish a course of enquiry that I hope will sustain my art practice and writing for many years to come. For the Botanic Gardens of Adelaide I believe my research introduced a different approach to the garden site, not only for those actively involved there day-to-day, but to a wider public that engaged with the exhibition. It was therefore on the basis of this access that a series of exchanges between site, plants, history, the present, and the archive were established. That such exchanges occurred through the production and viewing of the garden as artwork and as art-site highlights to me the power that art practices might have in relation to significant cultural landscapes and historic gardens.

Having been recently elected to the National Management Committee I aspire to support the work of the Australian Garden History Society through encouraging us to strive not only for access to landscapes and gardens of significance, but to be engaging through a wider, multifaceted approach to that access that promotes 'committed,

relevant and sustainable action' (per our mission statement). How does our advocacy of landscapes of significance and historic gardens engage with fields beyond that of our own organisation? And how can that engagement assist us in our action?

There are numerous examples of art practices where artists have engaged with the potential of the garden as artwork and the garden as art-site. Such works may not explicitly deal with history or conservation, but rather present—to a wide audience—a consideration of a garden, landscape, or plant's potential to question our relationship with the world and our individual positions within it. A 2005 exhibition organised in New York by the Queens Museum of Art, *Down the Garden Path: the artist's garden after modernism*, drew on art practices covering a seventy-year period that both physically and conceptually engage with the garden, producing both newly commissioned gardens and related theoretical scholarship. Another example is New Zealand artist Joyce Campbell's *L.A. Botanical*, a series of photographic 'portraits' of plants produced as an attempt to document each plant that grows in Los Angeles for which there is a documented use, playing on ideas around retaining plant and gardening knowledge in the urbanisation of the city.

In Melbourne's Edinburgh Gardens an artist-run public art program engages an empty plinth dating back to 1901, located at the centre of the garden. Plinth Projects curates an ongoing program of short-term exhibitions that are 'temporary, provocative, and engaging for both art-going audiences and the picnicking public' (from the website). Plinth Projects is an example of an initiative that, through access to a historic marker in a garden, supports and fosters a dialogue that is not necessarily engaged with the history of the plinth, but rather is an ongoing contribution to its garden site's enduring significance.

I believe that we need to forge exchanges across a wide range of approaches to the significant landscapes and historic gardens for which we are advocates. Plinth Projects is one such example that we might benefit from an engagement. For I believe that it will be through a multifaceted approach to such engagement that we will sustain the AGHS well into the future. I retain a strong belief in the capacity of art to be a means of wide social and cultural engagement, and that collaboration with art practices has, in the current context, the ability to enrich our understanding of gardens.

**Jessica Hood**

Black and white lantern slides of trees, c.1920, alongside Jessica Hood's reproductions, 2012–13.

Courtesy of the Botanic Gardens of Adelaide and Jessica Hood