

NARELLE JUBELIN

born 1960 Gadigal Country / Sydney



...the artist's work is a...
...the artist's work is a...
...the artist's work is a...

The title of this work by Narelle Jubelin, *A fallen monarch*, is borrowed from a photograph of a fallen tree (the 'monarch' of the title) taken by Nicholas Caire around 1878–1900 that is in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Photo historian Gael Newton singles out Caire as a photographer who first saw the 'redemptive beauty of the landscape of Australia ... with the terrain not seen as suitable only for development or study'.¹ Jubelin's appropriation of the image serves a different purpose; she is interested in the history of settler interactions with the Australian landscape. In this image, two men (presumably bushwalkers given they carry staffs) are posed on a fallen tree. It is an awkward image with the man in the foreground strangely balanced on the trunk with his legs crossed as if he is sitting in an armchair.

Jubelin has transformed the original image by Caire from black and white to colour, and from a photograph to petit point embroidery. The painstaking medium of petit point used in this early work has since become Jubelin's signature style. Originally trained as a painter, she transfers a highly complex understanding of colour to her adopted medium, evident in her description of the way in which she mixed the colours of DMC mercerised cotton thread used in this work:

The threads are almost all variegated in colour—in these works I use 4 strands of cotton, blended as I see fit to produce a varied colour. Thus any stitch may be from 4 different shades through 3 strands of one blended with one other or simply 4 strands of a pure colour.²

A fallen monarch was first shown in a joint exhibition titled *The crossing* with fellow artist Adrienne Gaha held in 1987 at First Draft Gallery, an artist-run initiative in Sydney. The title refers to the crossing of the Blue Mountains, the part of the Great Dividing Range immediately west of Sydney, as well as conceptual crossings such as the intertwining of nature and culture. The artists' exhibition proposal makes evident some of their critical concerns: 'the nostalgia and "Europeanisation" of the wilderness, the cultural and historical loading of monuments—the production of cultural icons.'³

Born in Sydney, Jubelin emerged as an artist in the mid 1980s—the heyday of postmodernism in Australia. Her approach is informed by both feminism and what has been called critical postmodernism, that is the appropriation or reuse of existing images to unpick mythologies of nation and to uncover marginalised perspectives and stories. Art historian Ann Stephen describes Jubelin's approach with great concision: 'Jubelin's early achievement was in grafting the critical appropriation of needlework—developed by earlier feminist artists—onto architectural and landscape discourses, and hence sexualising their rabid nationalising cultures.'⁴

SUSAN BEST

1. Gael Newton, 'Richard Daintree and the Australian image', *Voices*, Summer 1992–1993, National Library of Australia, at photo-web.com.au/gael/docs/Daintree-SpellIO.htm, accessed 10 December 2019.
2. Narelle Jubelin, letter to Darryl Collins, Australian National Gallery, February 1988, at artsearch.nga.gov.au/detail.cfm?irn=61901, accessed 11 December 2019.
3. Narelle Jubelin and Adrienne Gaha, artists' exhibition proposal cited in Andrew McNamara, 'The crossing', *Photofile*, Summer 87/88, p31.
4. Ann Stephen, 'Falling for modernism', *Narelle Jubelin: Vision in motion*, University Art Gallery, University of Sydney, 2012, p70.