

Hold

An Installation by Bridget Nicholson

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presentation of the installation, in an
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Hold

To hold a thought, a feeling, a memory in your mind for a significant period of time can be difficult, and yet does not the holding of a thought, a feeling, a memory lead somewhere, help you to better understand, to move on from that place. There are examples from all over the world of processes and articles that are used for this purpose. However these were not the first thoughts to go through my head when I saw a ***mourning*** or ***widows cap*** in the Cumbo Gunnerah Museum at the Red Chief Local Aboriginal Land Council in Gunnedah, NSW. My initial response was simply how beautiful, I was deeply moved by the object, and I could not let go of the image. The following story results from that first encounter.



Artist's Statement

Women would cover their heads in clay when someone died. Their period of mourning was defined by the length of time it took for the clay to crack and disintegrate. Occasionally men would speed up this process by giving the heads a light tap!

Robert Horne, Curator, Cumbo Gunnerah Museum, Gunnedah

I visited Gunnedah for the first time in April 2004. Two experiences stayed with me. The first was a tapestry of colours and patterns created by crops being grown on rich black soils. The second was an Aboriginal 'mourning cap' at the Cumbo Gunnerah Museum at the Red Chief Local Aboriginal Land Council. I was visiting Gunnedah as part of a group of art students from the Canberra School of Art Environment Studio, a project set up with the assistance of the Murray-Darling Basin Commission. We listened to scientists and economists talk about growing salinity, the fragility of the aquifer, and the impact of changing industry as well as the closing down of the abattoir and a mine. All these things shape individual lives of the members of the community.

Putting these two experiences together I saw the mourning caps as representing a means of reflecting on a changing environment and the effect this has on a community. I wanted to explore this further as a physical experience. I was intrigued by the idea of putting a material such as clay on your head, and experimented on myself. I found the process oddly soothing and abstracting, once the clay was on my head. I felt distanced from the moment, somehow in a time and place removed from where I was physically, a place where I could think and feel safely. I could remove the clay and fire it resulting in a 'mould' of my head, like a finger print, a very personal/individual memento of me and that experience.

I returned to Gunnedah in July 2006 because I wanted to pursue this idea with the community. The concept was to create caps that would represent the community members both as individuals and together in a final installation that would reflect them, their place and their stories.

The project grew and evolved as I talked to people and engaged with them in the process. I learnt about individuals' lives, their connection to Gunnedah, their families and most importantly felt a commonality of sentiment around the fundamental values of family and place.

Many times I was asked why Aboriginal women put clay on their heads in mourning? It always struck me as a strange and very Western question. The idea that there would be a definitive answer and that I would know what that was. Research led me to accounts by anthropologists which varied greatly in terms of how they were made and who wore them, however most commonly it appears that women wore them when their husbands died. The intricacies of the practice is something I would rather leave to those whose practice it is. I wanted to raise awareness of this cultural activity, to bring into the open a more general understanding of, and respect for, different cultural practices. My own experience, and I think all those who participated would agree, is that it is a soothing and strangely comforting thing to do.

I would like to thank the Aboriginal women of Gunnedah who enabled me to explore and engage with this cultural practice. Without their cooperation this project would not have been possible. Through their generosity, I am able to re-present their 'mourning' to a broader community and expand an understanding and respect for different cultures.

Bridget Nicholson March 2007

Background

Bridget Nicholson first visited Gunnedah with the Canberra School of Art Environmental Studio in 2004.

Over twenty art students made field trips to the district, camping out and learning about Gunnedah's environment, landscape, history and social and economic status over several intense days of driving, walking and flying over the land and of talking to scientists, farmers, community workers and members of the Indigenous community. As well, visiting sites like Skull Rock and Ydire was an important part of their research.

The project culminated in an exhibition at the 2004 Two Rivers Festival of work inspired by these field trips. Gunnedah was treated to different interpretations of the landscape by artists working in glass, metal, paint, photography, multi-media and recycled materials. The exhibition was well attended and fascinating for both local artists and the wider population.

There was a great sense of continuity of the project when Bridget Nicholson decided to pursue a ceramic work inspired by the mourning caps she had seen in the Cumbo Gunnerah Museum on her original field trip. Both the Shire Council and the Red Chief Local Aboriginal Land Council were more than willing to provide Bridget with assistance with making links with women in the community and with accommodation. While in-kind assistance was available, Bridget used her own funds to make and complete the caps (some 220 kilos of clay) and the catalogue.

What transpired over the months she was resident in Gunnedah was beyond our expectations. Bridget spent some weeks planning the project, making models in various clays and establishing a strong relationship with Gunnedah Brickworks to fire the 'caps'. She approached the Land Council for permission to base the installation on the traditional mourning caps, making the members aware that the process would, to some extent, dictate the outcome and that it would eventually be her own work of art.

Bridget's enthusiasm was contagious and women from all walks of life were more than happy to have their heads 'done'. Indigenous women particularly women Elders and non-Indigenous women alike were intrigued by the concept. Most had not been involved in a community-based art project like this before. She set up temporary studios in the Creative Arts Centre, in the George Griffin Building and travelled to offices, meeting rooms and nursing homes to 'do' as wide a cross-section of women from the Gunnedah area as she could.

Needless to say, preparing the clay, coordinating 186 women to have the caps plastered to their heads then sit patiently for half an hour until it was leather-dry, was no mean feat! The process was an interesting one, with many women feeling the power of the grieving ritual as some have noted in this catalogue.

As the caps were made and dried, she took them to the brickworks to be fired. The results were thrilling as they came out of the kiln in various shades from bone to ochre. The next step will be to hang them in the final installation. All 186 women are waiting anxiously to see their 'heads' suspended in the gallery.

'Hold' provided a great opportunity for Indigenous and non-Indigenous women together to play a part in a quality art project of this scale, especially one that carries cultural meaning and historical value for the Gamilaroi women of Gunn-e-darr. Undertaking a new form of an ancient practice gave us a strong feeling of mutuality and connectedness between the women, as well as generating interest in our local history and forging links to a past which many had not known about.

We were very fortunate to have an artist with Bridget's imagination and passion to fuel this project. She has left her 'head print' on the town and we appreciate her generosity in sharing this experience with us.

Gina Field
Manager
Red Chief Local Aboriginal Land Council

Susan Wilson
Cultural Development Officer
Gunnedah Shire Council



Miki Maas

A unique project aimed at binding women of different cultural backgrounds together in friendship and understanding.

Lived in Gunnedah 38 years



Sheelah Baxter

Congratulations on a mammoth project that I feel privileged to be part of. On a personal note I am very excited to be immortalised as a cap.

Lived in Gunnedah 31 years



Aylene Gale

A wonderful project to bind friendship
and understanding.

Lived in Gunnedah 25 years



Anne Bell (Knight)

I was initially uneasy about the
project - toying with other cultures
without fully understanding them
- but I admire Bridget's sincerity,
integrity and original vision - so here's
my head - the power of one.



Anne Pickett

A most unusual exercise, but most enjoyable couple of days. Fun was had by all.



Pat Tobin.

It has been a happy experience & a pleasure for me from the raw clay making of the skull cap to the click of the camera for the catalogue.



Lorna Thompson

It was a most unusual request but a friend & I turned up - and laughed and laughed. We found it very interesting. Great to think my 'cap' will outlive me.

Lived in Gunnedah 53 years



Yvette Hugill

I initially refused the offer of having my head 'done' because my dear Dad had just passed away & I felt it would be too upsetting. I found the process very comforting & soothing.

Lived in Gunnedah 34 years



Gaye Brady

I came to Gunnedah 8 years ago, the best thing I ever did. Having my head done for the sake of 'art' was a great thrill and honour.

Lived in Gunnedah 8 years



Jeanette Swanson

I found the experience of having the caps made physically soothing & fun with the group of women I was with. I am also holding my mother Mary Perkins's cap, as she has recently passed away.

Lived in Gunnedah 38 years



Linda Korn

Born in Gunnedah, lived in Coonabaraban. What a strange shaped head I have.



Shirley George

I heard of this project at a Probus Club meeting & thought I would take part in this interesting project.



Annabel Hoskins

I moved to Tamworth 8 years ago after 9 years in Gunnedah but I keep coming back! I still take part in the Gunnedah art scene and loved being part of this project.



Louise Baker

Met Bridget though the art group & Susan Wilson. Thought it was a very interesting idea. Being a potter I loved the idea of the clay and the different head shapes we got.

Born in Gunnedah



Beryl Collyer

Daunting at first then lots of fun. I enjoyed helping Bridget and look forward to seeing the end result.

*56 years in the Boggabri
Gunnedah area*



Sarah Ferguson

For a moment I had an inkling of how a terracotta warrior might have felt.

Born in Gunnedah



Lorraine Woodhead

Thought the idea was very different
and enjoyed doing it.

Lived in Gunnedah for 46 years



Olwyn Jones

Have done many craft things but this
has been different to anything else.
Wonderful time.

Came to Gunnedah in 1969



Bev Delve

So pleased to be part of the project.
Thank you for using our region's
history and your artistic ability and
imagination.

Came to Gunnedah in 1960



Lorraine Madigan

This was a unique experience shared
with an amazing group of women.

Came to Gunnedah in 1980



Jean McIlverney

Interesting insight into an indigenous custom.

Born in Gunnedah went away for school etc.. came back in 1956



Leonie Chapman

An interesting cultural experience.

Born in Boggabri



Sylvia Renton

Something different to try.

Lived in Gunnedah for 15 years



Myrtle Robinson

Very interesting thing to try.

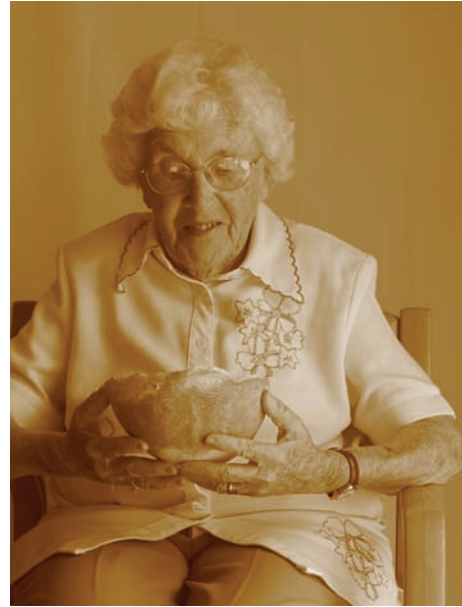
Lived in Gunnedah for 10 years



Jean Gerdes

Experience some form of different culture.

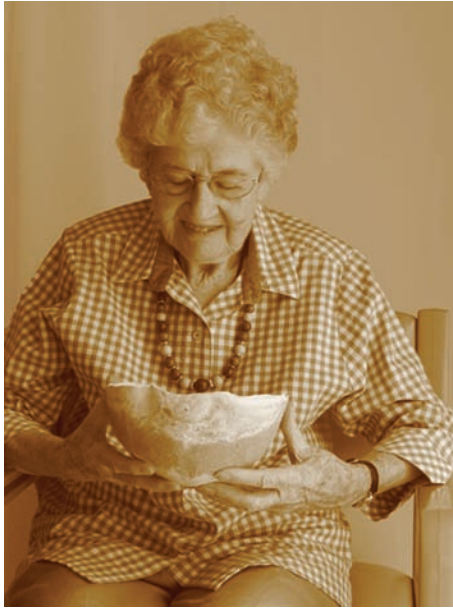
Lived in Gunnedah for 50 years



Grace Swain

An interesting and new experience.

Lived in Gunnedah all my life



Peg Holtsbaum

Thought that it was fascinating, fun
and a different experience.

Lived in Gunnedah all my life



Joan McDonald

Interesting and fun experience.

*Lived in Gunnedah area for 10
years*



Marj Thomson

Quite interesting and wondering how it is going to go together.

Lived in Gunnedah since 1952



Nita Connolly

Can't wait to see the finished product.

Lived in Gunnedah since 1928



Roma Torrens

Very interesting and fun experience.

Lived in Gunnedah 28 years



Hope Cahill

I thought it was interesting and fun .
Amazed at the shape of my skull.

Lived in Gunnedah area for 32 years



Gill Woods

An interesting and touching experience.

Born in Gunnedah in 1943 moved away for 40 years and then came back



Bettie Norsworthy

It was something very different. I really enjoyed this experience.

Born in Gunnedah 1936



Marie Capezio

Enjoyed being part of the group. It was an experience and something different.



Joyce Dorrington

It's so different, I've never known anything like it. I think its great that we have the shape of our skull.

Lived in Gunnedah area for 65 years



Lucy Staughton

Not only did Bridget recreate the mourning caps, but she also recreated the Aboriginal ladies' sense of community and togetherness as the caps were made.



Frances Thomas

At first I felt uncomfortable with the concept of using a ceremony from another culture. But after considerable thought I decided that my respect for creativity & art outweighed these feelings.



Jenny Bowles

Being a new member of the area (10 years) I enjoyed being part of an amazing concept. I love the colours and final outcome.



Pat Lauanders

This was a very interesting experience.

Lived in Gunnedah for 59 years.



Pam Thomas

It is very exciting to have Bridget developing this project and to have been part of it.

Moved to Gunnedah 14 years ago



Del Redman

A privilege to be involved with the Indigenous cultural project

Lived in Gunnedah for 51 years



Catriena Brockman

Culture is a wonderful thing and I was excited to be involved.

Lived in Gunnedah for 55 years



Rosalind Dight

How much knowledge has been accumulated over thousands of generations about living in this country and how much of that knowledge has been ignored & lost since European settlement.

Moved to Gunnedah in 1985



Angela Wise

Always have respected history in the Aboriginal people, this was an amazing experience.

Born in Gunnedah in 1963



Sabine Altmann

Why was this done to grieve, and what is the time connection? In today's society there is so much emphasis on being attractive, how challenging it is to look unattractive.

Lived in Gunnedah for 10 years



Judy Baker

I felt rather honoured to be involved in this cultural activity which has been part of traditional Aboriginal practice.

Born in Gunnedah in 1930



Veronica Mackay

I was happy to join in this cultural activity.

Moved to Gunnedah in 1971



Marlene McManus

Very interesting pleased to be involved.

Born in Gunnedah



Emily Osmond

It was very heavy and very cool when it was on my head.

Moved to Gunnedah in 1998



Annette Osmond

This was an interesting activity.

Born in Gunnedah



Lisa Hagley

It was interesting finding out about a different aspect of another culture.

Born in Gunnedah



Val Egan

The caps are a very interesting project and I look forward to the exhibition.

Lived in the area for 15 years



Beryl Morgan

An interesting project and I was happy to participate. It was nice to learn another form of the Aboriginal culture.

Lived in the area since I was 9



Jan Sumner

The project was fun - from Bridget's vision to completion.

*Have lived on a farm outside
Gunnedah for 14 years*



Kelly Sumner

Fascinating and enjoyable, glad to be able to be part of Bridget's vision.

Came to Gunnedah 14 years ago



Leila James

When I was having this done I felt timelessness. An isolation from the day to day. To be part of something made me feel good.

Came to Gunnedah in 1965



Betty Brady

A different experience, a very warm feeling and very rewarding. I've never forgotten it as Leila & I had a discussion about it after.

Came to Gunnedah in 1950



Brenda Porter

Liked the way my skull got moulded.
Can't wait to see the final artwork.

Lived in Gunnedah since 1988



Susan Wilson

A heady experience! Great to be
involved with a project that included
so many women in Gunnedah.
Can't wait to see the installation.

Came to Gunnedah in 2001



Chris Dorrington

Pleased to be part of something so special - our culture.



Jane Bender

I am pleased to be part of something that will help Aboriginal women's heritage.



Jenny Campbell

Different experience and something special.



Kylie Barker

Recognition of heritage and culture.



Margaret Windsor

I was pleased to be part of the group
to have it done.



Pam Silver

Glad to be a part of the mourning
caps.



Tammy Bush

Good to see our cultural heritage recognised.



Tracy Goodwin

Informing of our culture.



Tara Cunningham

Our history, our culture.

Note: Women were asked to give one sentence describing their experience, included verbatim.

The participants:

Sabine Altman
Renee Badoir
Louise Baker
Judy Baker
Holly Baker
Kylie Barker
Kassie Bernays
Joy Bartlett
Sheelah Baxter
Jennifer Beeson
Jane Bender
Noreen Boehm
Karyn Bond
Jenny Bowles
Betty Brady
Gaye Brady
Joanne Briggs
Catriena Brockman
Mary Brown
Ann Brown
Tammy Bush
Pearl Butler
Hope Cahill
Jenny Campbell
Maria Capesio

Mandy Capezio
Leonie Chapman
Janet Cherry
Beryl Collier
Hazel Collins
Nicole Commins
Nita Connolley
Larette Coombes
Maureen Crowley
Erin Crowley
Daphne Cubby
Tara Cunningham
Bev Delve
Rosalind Dight
Gwen Donaldson
Joyce Dorrington
Chris Dorrington
Robyn Draper
Val Egan
Paula Escourt
Wendy Eveleigh
Sarah Ferguson
Gaylene Fern
June Field
Gina Field

Gloria Foley
Cindy Foley
Aylene Gale
Rebecca Gauci
Shirley George
Jean Gerdes
Tracy Goodwin
Penny Gorky
Victoria Gunther
Lisa Hagley
Jo Hall
Debbie Hartley
Kate Hartley
Ang Hartley
Angela Hatton
Barbara Heath
Emma Higgins
Louise Hobson
Rhana Hobson
Peg Holtsbeaum
Annabelle Hosking
Noeline Hough
Yvette Hugill
Annette Humble
Bobbie Insch
Louise Jaeger
Leila James

Doreen Jobson
Rikki Jones
Olwyn Jones
Denise Keeler
Alison Kelly
Mandy Knight
Anne Knight (Bell)
Linda Korn
Sharon Lamb
Karla Lane
Angelique Langton
Pat Lauanders
Caroline Leys
Rita Long
Shirley Long
Miki Maas
Leigh MacPherson
Veronica Mackay
Lea MacKenzie
Lorraine Maddigan
Sharon Masige
Anne Masige
Norah Masige
Susan Mathews
Lorene Mathews
Joy McAndrew
Joan McDonald

Jean McIlveen
Tracy McIlveen
Margaret McKee
Marlene McManus
Janet McNail
Judith Meyer
Jen Miller
Caroline Mitchell
Beryl Morgan
Judy Muggleton
Jacqui Muller
Katie Muller
Jenna Muller
Philippa Murray
Evelyn Murray
Julie Neader
Bridget Nicholson
Betty Norsworthy
Georgina North
Melissa O'Brien
Annette Osmond
Emily Osmond
Mary Perkins
Gwen Phillips
Anne Pickett
Brenda Porter
Eddie Raglus

Del Redman
Sylvia Renton
Pagan Reynolds
Joan Roberts
Abbey Roberts
Tracey Roberts
Myrtle Robinson
Sue Roser
Pam Sams
Jodie Sandford
Helen Scott
Nicola Seton
Joanne Shepherd
Grace Sheridan
Vicki Sills
Pam Silver
Vicki Snow
Di Stacey
Cheryl Stahn
Kylie Stanger
Lucy Staughton
Gailina Stone
Mary-Anne Stone
Mila Stone
Rachel Suey
Jan Summner
Kelly Sumner

Gae Swain
Jeanette Swanson
Valmai Templeton
Pam Thomas
Frances Thomas
Lorna Thompson
Kassie Thomson
Marj Thomson

Kathryn Timmins
Pat Tobin
Sharon Tollard
Roma Torrens
Barb Urquhart
Barbara Varcoe
Jan Varcoe
Jo Ven Elten

Chris Waghorn
Jennifer Wassal
Jill Watkins
Camille White
Susan Wilson
Margaret Windsor
Robyn Wise
Angela Wise

Lorraine Woodheae
Gill Woods
Carol

Thankyou:

- to the 186 women who participated
- to Ross Barnard and Jill Niquet for so generously providing me with a home
- to the Namoi Valley Brickworks, who helped work out how to fire the caps and then individually placed each cap in the kiln and removed them
- to the team at the Red Chief Local Aboriginal Land Council
- to Adam Marshall and the Namoi valley Independent for running numerous calls to action
- to the Two Rivers Arts Council for support
- to Martine Moran, Yvette Hugill and Noreen Boehm for organising and taking photos
- to Susan Wilson and Louise Baker who encouraged me to pursue the idea
- to the Gunnedah Shire for enabling me to be here
- to Russell Jaeger and Jamie Swanson who helped generally with everything
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