ART HISTORY AND THEORY 2
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ASSESSMENT 1 - Analysis of a Specific Work

FIONA HALL
PARADISUS TERRESTRIS ENTITLED, 1996
Collection of the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), Australia, Ian Potter Centre
Paradisus Terrestris Entitled (1996) is a bewitching suite of small metal sculptures that invites and requires active contemplation. Each sculpture is constructed from two sardine cans and aluminium from a soft drink can; the metal unembellished but for the shine from working. One sardine can left almost intact, with its lid partially rolled down, reveals an erotic image impressed into aluminium. Crowning this frame is a delicate rendering of a plant from the metal of a second sardine can. The two elements are inseparable, with Hall making deliberate couplings of botany and body. Each item is individually named with the plants name in the language of an Indigenous Australian group, the Latin classification of classic Western taxonomy and the common name.

Fiona Hall intuitively produces series – each development relies on the past but allows for further exploration, understanding and refinement¹. As such, Paradisus Terrestris Entitled cannot be discussed or interpreted without reference to Hall’s accumulated body of work to date², especially the suite of which this work is essentially a second installment – Paradisus Terrestris (1989-90)³.

The impetus for Paradisus Terrestris is in Hall’s intense passion for gardens and botany, and considering our (human) place in nature. In this context, the story of The Garden of Eden is an understandable vehicle for her investigations, together with her growing interest in the human body and sexuality⁴; further, it is a continued use of Christian mythology to investigate the human condition⁵. Hall combines the garden and the body with language, an extremely important inspiration in all of her art. The title Paradisus Terrestris – paradise on earth – is gleaned from the seminal work on gardens as a source of pleasure [as opposed to strictly being source of medicine or food], John Parkinson’s Paradisi in Sole, Paradisus Terrestris, 1629⁶.

For this group of twenty-three sculptures Hall chose plants with reference to paradise and the divine – creating a Garden of Eden. According to Genesis, it was in a garden that humans [through Eve’s desire for knowledge] first betrayed nature. Adam and Eve lost their ‘innocence’ and became ashamed of their nakedness. And so the combination of the two elements: plants and bodies, nature and humanity⁷.

In meticulously rendering accurate botanical detail of the plants and in labeling each work with the exact “Linnaean Latin of biological classification”⁸ followed by the common name, reference is made to the obsession of Europeans of the eighteenth century to name plants⁹. By thus imposing order on nature, humans attempt to not only reclaim their place within nature, but to impose control on its inherent chaos. Perhaps through scientific endeavour and accumulated knowledge humankind strives to make the best of a condition for which innocence and harmony with nature was sacrificed. Further enforcing the order of classification, Hall presents the sculptures in alphabetical order.

The temptation in the Garden of Eden is given form in the erotic scenes – copulative acts categorise our genus and essentially make us human, as the way in which plants reproduce forms the basis of botanical classification. Temptation and sexuality were henceforth considered forbidden – reflected in the partial revealing and framing of the erotic scene, as though the viewer is peeping through an aperture at the play. The cropping of the image makes the sex anonymous, less confronting and therefore perhaps more palatable: “even today sex remains faintly shocking in the art museum”⁴⁰. But the erotica is still tightly controlled, inside its frame; while the plants are free to venture in all directions – emphasising humanity’s removal from the joy of nature.

The scenes involve both women and men, and so no obvious reprimand for females/Eve as the evil-doer in the Garden of Eden – perhaps because the artist is female¹¹.
There is a delightful humour in the combination of the plants and inner scenes – with witty puns on the name of the plant, or the image parodying its physical properties\(^{12}\). As such, each element relies on and plays with the other – plant, erotic image (body) and name (language)\(^{13}\).

Sardine cans are first seen as one of the many elements used in *Pride of The Seven Deadly Sins* (1985) photographs\(^{14}\). In this first appearance Hall was continuing an established work method of constructing tableaux from discarded or ‘found items’ and photographing them – playing with photography’s capacity for ambiguity and deception. Most items used by Hall are sourced and anchored in the domestic\(^{15}\). However, the use of the sardine can in the *Paradisus* suite may be said to be primarily due to its physical properties.

The cans are a showcase, providing a frame for each image and keeping them in order. Their uniform shape introduces homogeneity to the presentation of the works, a repeated icon, and therefore the key to the cohesion of the group. Together they are a collection, in much the same manner naturalists would have collected and displayed their exotic specimens.

The more important feature of the cans\(^{16}\) is the roll-down lid which uncovers and contains the erotic scene. There is the potential to roll the lid back up and return to the purely scientific world [represented by the plants and labels] if it [the wild sexual expressive world] becomes too much – though the return can never be complete, as the opening doesn’t go back as it originally was.

The nude metal, and so the work, is essentially monochrome; the gallery lights provide highlights and even a reflection of the viewer in the metal as they are enticed to look closer. This dispassionate lack of colour is typical of much of Hall’s work\(^{17}\) - perhaps colour clouds the purity of the image and intention.

This was Hall’s first major sculptural work, and in it Hall continues to move away from photographing her constructions to showing them directly, sidestepping the veil of the camera lens\(^{18}\).

*Paradisus Terrestris Entitled*, 1996, has some significant differences from this first suite.

It was produced in response to a contemporary issue\(^{19}\), whereas the original work was a natural development of the artist’s previous explorations. This series was provoked by the Wik decision on Native Title, reinforcing the earlier Mabo decision (1992). It addresses the colonizing of Australia by Europeans - the application of their naming systems to native flora and fauna, and their treatment of the native inhabitants and their culture. Therefore many of the aspects of the first series have an adjusted emphasis.

Adding *Entitled* to the series title raises the question of land title, pivotal to the intention of the work. This is a portrayal of a real paradise lost – indigenous peoples were expelled from their own land, their own garden. This work is a call to consciousness, a request for recognition of the joint history\(^{20}\).

The plants represented are natives to Australia, and an Indigenous Australian name for the plant is included in the title for each sculpture – an reversal of the manner in which the local culture was usurped by the Europeans, giving the native voice an equal say\(^{21}\). The works are again presented in alphabetical order, this time according to the indigenous name\(^{22}\).

The framed erotic scenes are not as explicit as the original series; they seem lonelier and isolated. Where the first series had obvious involvement of consensual parties, the images for this group are matter-of-fact and without signs of others. The second series was no longer an exposition of temptation, with the intention markedly more sombre. It now echoes the manner in which the colonizing population viewed the indigenous population as human by virtue of their physical form alone, for in every other respect they were certainly viewed as almost sub-human\(^{23}\). Finally, perhaps it was no longer necessary to be as audacious in terms of representing sexual acts\(^{24}\).
The wit and cheekiness of the original series carries through, in coupling the plants and inner scenes.\textsuperscript{25}

The construct of the sculptures remains constant throughout the extended series [a third instalment was made in 1999, the Sri Lankan series], and metal remains uncoloured. If taken to the extreme, a monochromatic scheme is black and white – exactly the division set up at colonisation.

When viewing the work, the plants are first noticed. Not until closer approach do the sexual images become discernable. The scale, the scenes’ subjects, and the obvious hand of the artist in the meticulous forming of the foliage, creates a strong sense of intimacy.

The NGV exhibits the series in a gallery otherwise dedicated to late nineteenth century paintings\textsuperscript{26} – images that neglect any evidence of the indigenous population but show the Europeans in their new surroundings. Nearby is a case of silverware from the same period, creating a dialogue between the exquisitely detailed flora [and repousse technique] in Hall’s work and that used by the silversmiths as they started to develop a sense of ‘Australian’ identity.\textsuperscript{27,28}

The fifteen sculptures are mounted on a white wall [reinforcing the monochrome scheme] in two rows of seven, with the fifteenth sculpture a little off kilter\textsuperscript{29}. As a group they have more presence than in the original single-line format. This format encourages searching for patterns, a scientific habit indeed. How many females? How many males? What positions? Can they be paired? \textsuperscript{30}

A significant failing of the display is the omission of the titles of each individual work. This series relies on the interplay of nature, humanity and language; and the rejection of one of the elements is a betrayal of the artist’s message and intention and robs the viewer of the key to understanding and appreciating the work\textsuperscript{31}.

\textit{Paradisus Terrestris Entitled}, 1996, while not at the forefront of the reconciliation movement is a strong voice in the call to consciousness. In terms of clarity, it may not be as popular and readily understandable as the 1989-90 series, but the many layers make investigation worthwhile and uncover Hall’s thoughtfulness, her obvious passion for research, scientific knowledge and its legacy, and making her art relevant to contemporary Australian society.
LISTING OF LABELS OF PARADISUS TERRESTRIS ENTITLED

the descriptions are my observations from the gallery, assuming the ordering has remained alphabetical

(a) Badil (Yidiny) / Cycas media / rickety bush
pendulous breasts

(b) Bunya-bunya (Yagara) / Araucaria bidwillii / bunya pine
male genitals, possible view from back [the bunya pine is known for its huge nuts]

(c) Canagon (Palawa) / Carpobrotus glaucescens / pigface
female genitals, explicit view from behind [the plant looks like spread legs]

(d) Dulmbil (Kuku Yalanji) / Schefflera actinophylla / umbrella tree
hand on female abdomen [the plant's leaves are the shape of a hand]

(e) Enindurrkwa (Enindilyakwa) / Banksia dentate / old man banksia
male genitals, flaccid [the shriveled state of the penis may be reference to the old man]

(f) Gulgadya (Eora) / Xanthorrhoea australis / black boy
superbly erect penis [obvious connection with the physical characteristics of the plant]

(g) Gulwirri (Yolŋga) / Livistona benthamii / cabbage palm
erect penis

(h) Ilwemp (Alyawarr) / Eucalyptus papuana / ghost gum
female spine

(i) Karko (Kaurna) / Allocasuarina verticillata / she-oak
female genitals with pubic hair, front view

(j) Kurok mukkin (Gunditjmara) / Dicksonia antarctica / tree fern
breasts, perhaps viewed from ‘owners’ perspective

(k) Larrkarti (Walamajarri) / Adansonia gregorii / boab
male abdomen, partial front view of genitals [the plant has a wonderfully bulbous shape]

(l) Malukuru kuru (Pitjantjatjara) / Clionanthus formosus / Sturt’s desert pea
open female genitals [as per (c), the plant looks like spread legs]

(m) Miwulngini (Ngan’gikurunggurr) / Nelumbo nucifera / lotus
female belly

(n) Vuyu wiri (Adna-mat-a) / Craspedia uniflora / Billy’s buttons
view of scrotum, with partial view of possibly erect penis [buttons possibly referencing the shape of the scrotum]

(o) Wuuloitch (Tjapwurong) / Themeda australis / kangaroo grass
male spine
Paradisus Terrestris Entitled (1996)

While this image does not show how the work is currently being displayed at NGV, it does show the original display.

(i) www.arts.monash.edu.au

(l) ibid.

(m) www.roslyn oxley9.com.au
Paradisus Terrestris (1989-90)

Xanthorrhoea australis / black boy  Narcissus x odorus / daffodil

Dionaea muscipula / Venus fly-trap

images from www.roslinoxley9.com.au

2 A brief description of Hall’s major works prior to Paradisus Terrestris (1989-90):

Reconstructed paintings (1980)
- includes ‘The Marriage of the Arnolfini’, after Jan Van Eyck and ‘The Great Wave’ after Hokusai; a series of colour photographs of constructed collages using contemporary fragments to depict famous art works

The Antipodean Suite (1981)
- includes Birds and Southern Cyclone System; series of colour photographs of dioramas,

Genesis series (1984)
- includes Creation of Adam, Garden of Eden and Exit from Eden; series of four tonal photographs of the story of Genesis, the scenes being constructed by collage of two- and three-dimensional components

Morality Dolls (1984)
- marionettes, one for each of the seven deadly sins, assembled from photocopied anatomical diagrams” (Davidson, pg. 13)

The Seven Deadly Sins (1985)
- tonal photographs of assemblages representing the seven deadly sins again

Beach photographs (1984/5)
- a series of black and white photographs of humans in landscape, at Bondi Beach

Comet Book (1986) and Untitled (1986)
- two concertina books

Illustrations to Dante’s ‘Divine Comedy’ (1988)
- series of twelve polaroid photographs following Dante’s 14th century poem of travels through hell, purgatory and paradise; the assembled scene includes human bodies made from formed aluminium from soft drink cans

Words (1989)
- photographs of group of letters, and so words, formed from human bodies (again constructed of soft-drink cans)

Words (1990)
- a sentence made of letters in human form created from soft-drink cans

The collection of the artist.

3 Hall’s growing interest in the human body and sexuality can be traced through her beach photographs of 1984 and 1985, Morality Dolls (1984), Illustrations to Dante’s ‘Divine Comedy’ (1988) and but most especially Words (1989) and Words (1990).
See Julie Ewington, *Fiona Hall*, 2005, pg. 85. Though an atheist, “…in the 1980s Fiona Hall’s struggle for understanding was expressed through grand Christian themes”.

5 See Bibliotheca Antiqua, [http://www.abovamuseum.it/uk/bibliothecaantiqua](http://www.abovamuseum.it/uk/bibliothecaantiqua) (30 March 2005). The title page of Parkinson’s book shows the alternative title as “A choice Garden of all sorts of Rarest Flowers, with their Nature, place of Birth, time of flowring, Names, and Vertues to each Plant, useful in Physick, or admired for Beauty” – “Together with the right ordering, planting and preserving of them, with their select virtues”.

6 See Timothy Morrell, ‘Undermining the systems of a post-everything world’, Art Monthly Australia, April 1994, no.68, p.9. When asked if the plants in these works “function as symbols”, part of Hall’s reply is: “It’s more an on-going fascination with the infiltration of plants into human existence: political, social, sexual, medical, metaphysical.”

7 See Loren Eiseley, *Darwin’s Century: Evolution and the men who discovered it*, 1958. Carolus Linnaeus (1709-1778), a Swedish taxonomist who first established the classification of plants, was a legend in his time – “…his prestige in English science was enormous – a genuine mass phenomenon” (p.16). “He rose to fame in a period of great wonder and eagerness to explore and catalogue the products of far lands” (p.18), and “worked and flourished in a time when the educated public had become fascinated with the word, the delight in sheer naming” (p.16). “It was in his time, and owing greatly to his influence, that naturalists began to be apportioned posts on voyages of exploration. Cook’s voyage on the Endeavour in 1768, to which Sir Joseph Banks contributed so heavily, is a case in point” (p.22).

8 Though an atheist, “…in the 1980s Fiona Hall’s struggle for understanding was expressed through grand Christian themes”.

9 There are many references to Hall’s use of sardine cans and metal in general. Hall herself is quoted as saying: “…sardine cans … have been used frequently in my work over the years. You can make something look very delicate and extremely rich out of what otherwise would be a discarded item.” [refer to The Art of Fiona Hall, education resource to the exhibition at The Queensland Art Gallery; via [www.qag.qld.gov.au/exhibitions/coming_soon/fiona_hall](http://www.qag.qld.gov.au/exhibitions/coming_soon/fiona_hall), accessed 16 March 2005]. Radok offers: “Hall started using metal, the recycled metal from aluminum drink cans, significant global evidence of throwaway consumerist detritus, in the late eighties when she began to cut, arrange and re-photograph it in elaborate tableaux” [‘Trade”, *Artlink*, vol.21, no.4, 2001, p.48]. With respect to Hall’s original use of metals in her photographed assemblages, Tim Morrell proposes that the “mirror-finish metal finishes are incorporated, (thus) dissolving objects into their reflections and further questioning their existence” [‘Picturing the Apocalypse – the art of Fiona Hall’, Art and Australia, 1987, vol25 no2]. As a final word on the subject, Hall says: “The use of the sardine can, for example, is calculated to suggest other vital references and to thwart expectations. If I’d used silver or other specially purchased metal, the pieces would have been rather like Faberge eggs; decorative little knick-knacks. The choice of sardine cans may at first seem like a joke, but it is an essential part of the works’ meaning” [Tim Morrell, ‘Undermining the systems of a post-everything world’, *Art Monthly Australia*, April 1994, no68, p.9]

12 A joyful example is: *black boy*; *Xanthorrhoea thorntonii*
environment so that’s where my materials often come from and my ideas about the ways those materials might be used”. In the 1990s these discarded and recycled items were to be employed as strident comment on consumerism and mass production – refer to Medicine Bundle for the non-born child (1993-94), in with she knits a layette for a baby from shredded Coca-Cola cans.

16 See Julie Ewington, Fiona Hall, 2005, pg. 120; these types of cans are no longer in production and so need to be specially sourced.

17 See Julie Ewington, Fiona Hall, 2005, pg. 57: “Monochrome … became Hall’s vehicle for both order and chaos… She began using metal vessels … to unify her photographs … (and it) also provoked acute ambiguity – it is often difficult to distinguish objects from images”.

18 See Tim Morrell, ‘Picturing the Apocalypse – the art of Fiona Hall’, Art and Australia (1987, vol. 25, no. 2). The use of the large format Polaroid camera in the preceeding work gave such intense realism “so much so … (they) give rise to the question of why she photographs … instead of simply displaying them as assemblages”. Further, in Tim Morrell, ‘Undermining the systems of a post-everything world’, Art Monthly Australia, April 1994, no.68, p.8: Hall herself says that: “I think if was a logical move from making objects to photographing them and then to direct presentation of the objects”.

19 During the 1990’s Hall’s work became progressively more involved and inspired with current issues – feminist issues, consumerism, globalization, trade, the first Iraq conflict. Referring to the list of works, it seems that the Iraq conflict was the instigating event.

20 See Deborah Hart, “Fiona Hall’s Garden: fertile interactions”, Art and Australia, vol.36, no.2, 1998, p.202; quoted in Craig Judd, ‘Artist Commentary’, 30 March 2005: Hall is quoted as, “It is amazing to me that sections of the Australian population still can’t comprehend that this land and the plants that grow in it, and the people whose land that was, have together a very long history of coexistence that must be acknowledged and respected. The recent work Paradisus Terrestris Entitled attempts to make a political comment about this. The multiple parallel systems of plant names seem to me to eloquently indicate widely different outlooks and levels of awareness.”

21 See Tim Morrell, ‘Fiona Hall: Cash crop’, Art Monthly Australia, Nov 1998, no.115, p.4. “The Paradisus terrestris entitled series added the indigenous names of plants to the botanical and popular names, to reveal the lie of naming Australian flora in the spirit of terra nullius, as though these trees and shrubs and grasses had been discovered for the first time and given names by Europeans.”

22 A surprising number of references to these works indicated that the latin classification is first, with the native name second, and the common name third [for example, the education resource for The Queensland Art Gallery 2005 exhibition, and even Ewington 2005]. However it is more reasonable that Hall would place the indigenous name first, as having the latin first would perpetuate the colonialist hierarchy and would be at odds with the intention of the work. The National Gallery of Victoria listing of the names of each sculpture shows the Indigenous name first, latin second and common name third.

23 While Darwin published his seminal work, “On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life” in 1859, “his was not the first scientific theory of evolution but it was the most comprehensive one ever put forward” [Ronald Strahan, ‘The Creationism Crusade’, Confronting Creationism: Defending Darwin,1987, vol.2, pg.5]. At the time of first settlement and through to the end of the nineteenth century (and perhaps even later), there was increased questioning of humanity’s place in the order of nature. Many so-called scientists used Darwin’s theory of natural selection as the basis of justifying the view of natives of colonized lands as ‘savages’ and barely above apes. See Alfred Russel Wallace, Contributions to The Theory of Natural Selection: A Series of Essays, 1870, for an extraordinary contemporary account of society’s view of indigenous populations. The most shocking arguments are found in the ‘The Development of Human Races under the Law of Natural Selection’, originally published in Anthropological Review, May 1864. Arguments such as: “harsh discipline of a sterile soil and inclement seasons produces a more provident, harder and social race, than where the earth produces a perennial supply of vegetable food, and where neither foresight nor ingenuity are required to prepare for the rigours of winter. And is it not the fact that in all ages, and in every quarter of the globe, the inhabitants of temperate have been superior to those of hotter countries? All the great invasions
and displacements of races have been from North to South.” And: “The Neanderthal skull may be a specimen of one of the lowest races then existing, just as the Australian are the lowest of our modern epoch”.

24 Explicit images of sex had by now lost some of their taboo power, with publications such as Madonna’s Sex book in 1992.

25 Black boy being paired with an erect penis appears in both the first and second series.

26 See Stuart Koop, ‘Fieldwork: Australian Art 1968-2002’: with respect to the positioning of Fiona Hall’s work, “chronological sequence has been subtly subverted in favour of contextual juxtapositions.”

27 See Anne Schofield and Kevin Fahy, Australian Jewellery: 19th and Early 20th Century, 1990. The gold rushes in Australia heralded the beginnings of the weaning of Australian artisans off the notion that acceptable art only came from Europe. During this time local artists were outrageous in including native flora and fauna in their work, though they were still working in the naturalistic style popular in Europe. The works on display in NGV also show that the inclusion of ‘found objects’ in art is not necessarily a post-modernist invention, with emu eggs and carved wood being popular additions to silverware.

28 See Radok, ‘Trade’, Artlink, vol.21, no.4, 2001, p.48. With respect to the 1990 series, “…opened sardine tins inside which are aluminium human bodies and out of which fold tin plant forms. These astonishing and erotic works reference the elaborate silver filigree table decorations of the nineteenth century as well as earthy fecundity…”.

29 The text next to Paradisus Terrestris Entitled in NGV Australia Ian Potter Centre: ‘Paradisus Terrestris Entitled’ transforms sardine cans into refined aesthetic objects. It refers to the work of the nineteenth century gold and silversmiths who used Australian native flora and fauna as a stock of novel decorative forms. The wound-down top of each tin reveals a human erogenous zone or body part. Sprouting above these are representations of native trees and flora – suggestive, sometimes humourous equivalents of the anatomical details or physical acts. Hall’s combination of Indigenous names with Latin and common plant names refers to colonial appropriation of land and of laying claim to land through language.

30 This was certainly something I instinctively embarked upon – there are 8 females, 7 males; male and female back, male and female abdomen, two very open female genitals (paired with very flat open plants) and two erect penises, and so on.

31 My observations of people viewing the work in the gallery: many were immediately attracted to the work, probably due to its obvious modernity in a gallery of traditional works; but when they got closer they reactions differed. One older lady got the giggles when she noticed the erotic scenes, and hopped from one to the next, her embarrassment barely covered by her laughter, and in the end she walked away. A younger couple was interested in the work, and while they tried to understand the work via reading the accompanying text, they still seemed to walk away not completely satisfied. This sort of reaction was common, enjoying the work but confused as to its intention; a desire to understand that I believe is heavily handicapped by the absence of the labels of each work.

32 Provided in personal email correspondence with Jennie Moloney, Permissions and Copyright Co-ordinator, NGV (18 March 2005)
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