

## **In the ground, on the air**

This work follows on from my 2001 exhibition *Lost to Worlds* (Stills Gallery and Sutton Gallery). That show was based around two C19 female convict sites in Tasmania, the so-called female factories at South Hobart and Ross. Female factories were places of secondary punishment for convict women who re-offended after they arrived in Van Diemens Land. (Often their offence was to get pregnant.) Both sites are more or less empty today.

More recently I started looking closely at the history of children in those two factories. Babies born to factory women were weaned at 6 months and placed in communal nurseries that were overcrowded and poorly staffed. Typically the mother was then sent away—often a long way away—to work.

The babies very often did not survive. Searching through the archives in Hobart I found that at least 1500 children had died, mainly at the Hobart factory, between 1829 and 1856. At the time it was considered a scandalous mortality rate but little was done to stop it. Realising that so many lives had been squandered, often just for the lack of proper care, made me decide to make some work about it.

It didn't feel right to be trying to memorialise lives that had ended almost before they began. Hence the two works that comprise *in the ground, on the air*, and which are my attempt to deal with lives so short that they exist only in the form of birth, death and burial records. One consists of 11 woven textiles, similar in size and shape to small blankets, each just big enough to cover a baby but too lightweight and too harsh in texture to offer comfort. I'd like to think they could convey something about a quality of care, both the care that wasn't provided at the time, and the thinking and labour that went into making the work. To produce them I collaborated with a designer based in England, Frederique Denniel, who worked with me on the design and did the weaving.

Nine of the eleven refer to the causes of death most commonly recorded for these babies: dysentery, diarrhoea, convulsions, marasmus, catarrh, syphilis, hooping cough, pneumonia, bronchitis. In each the two first letters of the disease have been cut into the surface layer of the woven cloth to reveal another colour inside. A second statistic coded into the design is the proportion of babies who died of that particular illness. The work also includes two 'extra' blankets, one light and one dark, that don't conform to the code, and which I think of as representing the air and the ground, respectively.

The second work is a video piece, also conceived as a visualisation or animation of the records, less abstract in a way than the blankets since it uses actual babies' names. There are 700+ names included, those of all the babies who died in the nurseries during their first year of life. The names first appear at the right of the image and pass slowly from right to left. They appear randomly scattered but in fact there's a logic to the placement. The first-born come ahead of the rest, and so on until there are no more babies in the factories. As each baby reaches the end of his or her life span, the name stops moving then starts to fade, slowly disappearing into the ground. There are always some fading and more coming. They come in three big groups, with a short gap between, each group representing a decade. The steady movement of names is not unlike the passage of clouds in the sky, or on the air. The piece is 75 minutes in duration.