

# THE UNNATURAL ART OF FIONA HALL

Fiona Hall is an artist possessed by insatiable curiosity. Exceptionally energetic, yet equipped with ferocious powers of concentration, Fiona Hall constantly scavenges the world around her for ideas and images, searching for understanding, striving to make meaning.

*Understorey* is an exuberant yet shocking account of the inter-relationships of life and death. The work contrasts two views of the tropical environment: the eighteen and nineteenth century European notion of the equatorial forest, or 'jungle', as site of luxuriance/fecundity/adventure (and also zealous hunting for plant and animal specimens); and the contemporary reality of on-going civil unrest and the displacement of people from traditional territories due to land clearance, urbanisation and the political after-effects of colonisation. The work depicts elements of plant and human material, using a variety of media, though predominantly glass beads, the currency of colonisation. It includes a number of three-dimensional objects made entirely from minute glass beads threaded onto wire. A recurring motif is the use of camouflage patterning – a symbol of our time that transforms the patterns of nature into the fabric of conflict and hostility. *Understorey* brings together fragments of a beautiful, fragile, transient realm, and in the way of science, traps them in the filing system (morgue) of the museum display cabinet.

Fiona Hall

These are edited extracts from *Fiona Hall* by Julie Ewington, 2005, Piper Press, Sydney, published in conjunction with a major solo exhibition, *The Art of Fiona Hall*, on show at the Queensland Art Gallery until 5 June, and at the Art Gallery of South Australia 8 July – 11 September 2005.

*Tender* (2003-05), also relates to conflict and destruction, but this time the focus is on animal habitats. Hall turned once more to the complex intersections between the natural world and the human systems of trade. The work consists of dozens of simulacra of birds' nests of all shapes and sizes, improbably fashioned from American one-dollar bills, each bearing the official declaration: 'This note is legal tender'.

Understanding the nexus between the natural world and social life is crucial for Hall's recent work, where the cycles of growth and decay are matched by the unholy, inescapable, contingent and ultimately less productive cycles of global trade. In a double irony, in *Tender* the natural beauty of a bird's perfect nest, made out of twigs or grass or leaves, is mimicked by the currency Hall has fashioned into avian architecture; at the same time, the face value of the American note is destroyed. This is an unholy and unsanctioned exchange.

Julie Ewington



Fiona Hall, *Tender*, 2003-05, US dollars, courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery



Fiona Hall, *Understorey*, 1999-2004, glass beads, silver wire, vitrine, courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery

