



The Painted Wall: passages in archaeology

An exhibition of images and processes from the excavation of an ancient theatre in Paphos, Cyprus

Diana Wood Conroy

21st June to 21st July, 2001 ~ FCA Gallery, University of Wollongong

Opened by Professor Richard Green from The University of Sydney

Faculty of Creative Arts Gallery
Building 25, University of Wollongong, Northfields Avenue, Wollongong 2522, Australia
Tel: 4221 3996 Monday to Friday 9 - 5, Sunday 1.30 - 4.30



University of Sydney
NSW 2006, Australia

Artist statement

Examining and describing the vivid fragments of fresco excavated in Paphos from 1996-2001 brings together scholarship, the craft of drawing and the interpretation of the ancient past. What resonance can this past have in Australia?

My art practice comprises images of the classical past that I find personally compelling juxtaposed with a 'grounding' in the landscapes of Australia, in drawing and tapestry.



The Painted p a s s a g e s i

Diana Wood Conroy's practice as an artist and writer moves across the fields of textiles, archaeology and the visual arts, drawing connections invisible to those bounded by these disciplines. As Bernard Smith has noted: 'while European settlement has a history of only two hundred years in Australia...the European-based institutions and cultural forms transported to the Australian soil possess an antiquity reaching back to Rome, Greece, the Hebrews and the ancient cultures of the Middle East'.

Wood Conroy's deep interest in the ancient world, and field work as an archeologist and artist on the excavation of the Paphos theatre in Cyprus have enabled her to make connections across the centuries and across hemispheres, linking European myth to Australian place with its deep past of Aboriginal inhabitation.

This exhibition brings together two aspects of her practice, her scholarly interpretations of the Paphos theatre frescos and her drawings and tapestries that imaginatively connect fragments from the past to the present. Her insights into the abiding centrality of myth in shaping our understanding of experience revealed through these interconnected practices, explain why working across disciplines is becoming an increasingly important aspect of current research.

Kay Lawrence AM

The South Australian School of Art
University of South Australia

Bernard Smith "On cultural convergence", in 'The Death of the artist as hero. Essays in History and Culture' p 295 Oxford University Press, Melbourne 1988

The Painted Wall: an archaeological investigation

The discovery of painted plaster fragments in the area of the western entrance to the Paphos theatre, a vaulted parodos, is of particular interest because of the rarity of painted frescoes on the architecture of ancient theatres. Decorative motifs such as garlands, swags of drapery, fillets to tie around the head, flower sprigs and imitation marble are typical of the imagery associated with Dionysos, the god of theatre. Comparable frescoes are found in Ephesus in Turkey, and in Alexandria in Egypt, also dated to the second century AD.

It seems likely that the extensive use of plaster on walls in the Paphos theatre may reflect a lack of suitable stone which, in other comparable theatres, provided the materials for relief carvings. Plaster gave a gleaming surface not able to be achieved with coarse conglomerate and sandstone. Painted plaster decoration offered a practical alternative to the importation of costly marble for decorative reliefs which are so lavishly evident in the theatres of South Turkey, just to the north of Paphos. Of particular significance is the reference to textiles through ornamental repeating patterns. The painted fragments are notable not only because of the variety of their colour and motifs within a small area but also because of their unusual position at the entranceway to the theatre, giving hints of a distinctive theatrical architecture in the prosperous Greco-Roman city of Paphos.

The digital reconstruction of a section of the painted wall is based on the analysis of numerous fragments, put together with sections of plaster still in situ.



'Alexandria' Woven tapestry, linen and wool. 2000. 65cm x 1.8m

Wall:

n a r c h a e o l o g y

D i a n a W o o d C o n r o y

Paphos Theatre Excavations 1995~2001

Paphos, on the western coast of Cyprus, was a newly-founded city of the later part of the fourth century BC, built at a harbour site some way up the coast from Old Paphos, home of the sanctuary of Aphrodite whose birthplace was recorded at the milky waters of the beach nearby. The city grew rapidly in importance as the capital and main transit port of the island under the Ptolemies of Alexandria. Its theatre was a focal point in the life of the town not only because it provided the venue for what was the major form of public entertainment - the dramatic festivals - but because, as a venue, it was probably the only place at which the population of the city came together as a whole and perceived its own identity. The theatre seems to have been constructed in the earliest days of the city, shortly before 300 BC, and to have continued in use with an ever-changing variety of performances until Late Antiquity, perhaps the last years of the fourth century AD.

Systematic excavation was begun in 1995 by a team from the University of Sydney, working under the auspices of the Department of Antiquities of the Republic of Cyprus. The team comprises mostly undergraduate and postgraduate students assisted by various specialists and by a group of contributing volunteers. The site is prominent within the World Heritage Listed area of Paphos, an archaeological zone which is currently being defined and developed for visitors.

Continuing debate about the nature of university research has widened the understanding of the term to include artistic interpretations as well as journal publications and scientific data. Staff and students from the Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong have contributed to excavation seasons from 1996 through the involvement of Diana Wood Conroy whose research crosses art and archaeology.

J. Richard Green

Director, Paphos Theatre Excavations

Arthur and Renee George Professor of Classical Archaeology

University of Sydney



Biography

Diana Wood Conroy's artwork explores relationships between ancient and personal worlds in tapestry and drawing, shown in survey exhibitions touring Australia, the U.S.A, South America, and Poland (1994 - 2001). Her critical writing has been published in Australia and overseas, with a particular emphasis on the theoretical intersection between archaeology and contemporary textiles.

Since 1996 she has been concerned with the seasonal excavation of a Greek theatre by the University of Sydney in Paphos, Cyprus, as artist-in-residence and writer. An installation 'Images, vestiges, shadows' exploring the relationship between art and archaeology was presented at the MacLaurin Hall, University of Sydney in October 1996. A further exhibition on this theme was 'Out of Oblivion' in 1999, shown at the University of Sydney, the University of Canberra and the University of Wollongong.

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'Tendrils with flower' Woven tapestry 15 x 20 cm

Acknowledgements

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Digital reconstruction: Hilary Rhodes with photographs of Patrick Caldon

Design: Simon Dalla Pozza

Curatorial assistance: Clare Vlatko, Philippa Welfare

With warm thanks to Richard Green (Director, Paphos Expedition), Geoff Stennett, (Excavation Architect), Jelle van den Berg (Gallery Director)



Paphos Theatre excavations, the parodos wall, April 2001