

The Pigeon Archive

This exhibition presents a new body of work by the Australian-born artist Lyndall Phelps. Phelps has developed a distinguished practice that places her work within a specific frame of research and brings into reference other fields of expertise and disciplines; social, military, natural and industrial history, horticulture, archaeology and anthropology have all contributed in varying ways to her ongoing projects. With one foot in the past and the other firmly in the contemporary, Phelps' art crosses historical and cultural episodes of human endeavour.

The Pigeon Archive brings together a series of works that bear witness to Phelps' forensic research into the common use of homing pigeons during the First and Second World Wars. Typically, Phelps' examination of historical moments elicits the most poignant and endearing of human stories. She aligns subjective memory with historical fact to present histories and recollections that offer alternative viewpoints to conventional and official histories.

The exhibition follows a recent residency at the Natural History Museum, London and a resulting project called *Evacuate*, in which Phelps worked with curators at the museum to 're-site' artefacts from the permanent collection to country houses and stately homes, where they were once literally evacuated for safe keeping during the Second World War. This secret life of objects, and the profound investment and accumulation of meanings and references that objects attract through history is an ever-present refrain in Phelps' art. So too is the conflation between the public and the private, witnessed here in the very symbolic use of the pigeon; on the one hand the ubiquitous and prolific squatter of our public spaces and on the other the tamed enigma of the homing pigeon.

The Pigeon Archive comprises a range of differing media from video and large-scale photography to meticulously made objects. Three series of photographs document the extent of Phelps' research; images of pigeons in flight, encumbered by cardboard tube message carriers that Phelps herself has made. A second series of works documents the parceling of birds into makeshift parachutes and their customary drop from the air while a final series of images documents the equally incongruous practice during the Second World War of transporting two pigeons in each departing Lancaster Bomber. The pigeons were often housed in makeshift transport cases located next to the Radio Operator's position. Phelps' images communicate the poetic contradictions of cutting edge technology cheek by jowl with an age-old form of communication, as well as the powerful resonance of birds restricted in flight being transported in mechanical, man-made flying machines.

Within the exhibition Phelps presents three replica transport cases as well as thirty-two brown oil-skin backpacks or harnesses that the pigeons would have worn to carry top secret information. Each of these backpacks has been

meticulously handmade by the artist. The intricacy and devotion to detail apparent in these objects matches the depth and discipline of the artist's research, as if stitch by stitch there is a process of historical recuperation.

The labours of this research are captured in an enigmatic film made by the artist in 2008 in which a contemporary, light-weight surveillance camera is strapped to the pigeon's body and released in flight over the Cambridgeshire fenlands, skies once littered with military air traffic. The resulting film presents a dizzying documentation of the landscape, the very motion of the bird in flight, in real time though seeming hyperactive and unnerving, injects an urgency to the exhibition which runs counter to the stillness and reflection of Phelps' quieter works. This experience will also be captured as part of the exhibition through a specially organised 'release' in which the spectacle of a thousand birds in flight will signal the start of a special pigeon race held in nearby Campbell Park on the 18th of July.

In *The Pigeon Archive*, Phelps' overt appropriation of traditional museum displays calls into question the very structures and systems that convey historical fact. Equally, it calls into question the role of the artist in a practice that is research-based, in which the politics of re-enactment and the process of mediation and interpretation are as fragile as they are real.

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