

**Through pools of light to get
to the dark—reflections on
*Batavia: Giving Voice to the
Voiceless***

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Voices Need Bodies

Giving voice to the voiceless implies a sensuality, an embodied-ness that reaches into the skin and sinew of the past. For a voice to speak it must manifest lips, throat, tongue—tactile mouth-feel. It must draw breath in and push it out. It must seize life.

For a voice to be heard, it needs someone to listen.

When art and creative response merge with science and archaeology, the resultant visual biography does something with history: ghostly bodies take shape. These phantoms, and the stories of what happened to them, form a flesh made of layering. Ideas and possibility—the substance of potentiality—build up upon a foundation of earth, wood and butchered bone, the things that last.

From the pre-dawn moments of 4 June 1629, when the Dutch vessel *Batavia* hauled back its 1,200-tonne, 12-metre-high bulk and smashed full-speed into a coral reef off Yamatji country, on a small group of islands near what is now known as Western Australia, the ship and the 341 souls trapped within it (Paterson) smashed their way into our history.

Yet it was what followed this catastrophe that punched a gateway between historical and trans-historical time: the bodily desecration and abasement, the indescribable abjection perpetrated against the survivors of the wreck. Almost as soon as the survivors had crawled ashore, the mutineer Jeronimus Cornelisz and his followers began a three-month rampage of sexual violence, murder and abuse that left one hundred and fifteen people dead. Cornelisz made those islands a world. He soaked that world in blood.

Batavia: Giving Voice to the Voiceless opened at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery in 2017 following a two-year process of collaboration between

artists, and Western Australian Maritime Museum and University of Western Australia scientists. Curated by the Chief Cultural Officer, Professor Ted Snell, it is a project inspired by the first systematic archaeological survey of the site of the *Batavia* wreck. In intermingling scientific, historical and artistic knowledge-making, the resonances between each practice emerge: the beauty and creativity in the scientific and historical research is highlighted, the rigour of the artistic engagement is revealed. Perhaps at its heart, this is the interdisciplinary intent of *Batavia*: to reach through that trans-historical gateway, grasp hold of Cornelisz' centuries-old world and fix it in place through paint and paper, metal and glass. Because that is what art does: art pays attention to draw attention. It shines light on the abject to understand its darkness. Art grabs you by the throat and makes you listen.

Touch

Like the work in this exhibition, the lighting of *Giving Voice to the Voiceless* is seductive. The space is black-soaked, picked out with pools of light that paint the air and draw the eye, allowing you to make your own connections in the dark. As I pass through shadows to stand before soft-lit paint, aluminium, projection and paper, I search—as I always do in projects that explore history—for the women.

Within Corioli Souter's *Fragments of Batavia's Daughters* (2017), a multi-component work including an LWAG+ app narrative and accompanying installation of archaeological artefacts, I find Judith Gijsbertsz. Judith was the daughter of the *Batavia*'s 'predikant' or pastor (Souter 2018 33), and one of only a handful of women who survived the *Batavia* mutiny. To meet her through the LWAG+ app, I bow my head before a small screen set low on the wall, slip on a pair of wireless headphones and step close.

Avery Gordon evocatively argues that 'it is essential to see the things and the people who are primarily unseen and banished to the periphery of our social graciousness' (196); it is essential to recognise and account for 'the evidence of things not seen' (195). For women, this 'seeing' must often be undertaken through contextual analysis and educated supposition because, as Souter observes, 'women's voices are few and far between in seventeenth century archives' (2018 33). Through music, documentation and historical artworks, the LWAG+ app's narrative exploration of Gijsbertsz' experiences provides evidence for the nuanced understanding that can emerge from intermingling contextual, creative and traditional research. Linking everyday-yet-precious fragments of knowledge to the lives of the women on the *Batavia*, the work invites us to consider these women as 'active participants' in their own stories (Souter 2018 34). A

process that conjures narratives that are flawed and fragmented, but evocative and waiting to be heard.

Juxtaposed with the up-to-date LWAG+ app is Souter's ceramic, archaeological installation. Designed to be viewed during quiet moments in the app, the installation is composed of two jugs, or 'cordon pulle' (Souter 2018 33)—one complete, the other a composite amalgamation made from shards of different pitchers discovered on the sea floor next to the *Batavia* wreck. Both pieces are sealed inside a glass case.

The fragmented vessel contains three oval medallions inscribed with the image of a woman holding an anchor—a virtue representing 'hope'. My fingers itch to turn these medallions over in my hands, to feel the bump and ripple of each woman's image. I am struck, as I often am in galleries and museums, by the lack of tactility that is engendered—by necessity—in a gallery environment. This object was made to be used, to be touched. Its clay was scraped bodily out of the earth, dampened, slid through fingers, formed, fired in flame, hardened, cooled. It was crated up, lugged and loaded onto the *Batavia*. It sat in the bowels of the boat beside casks of rum and a sheep. It was fished out, its belly filled with wine. It rocked on a wooden table in that wooden ship, waiting to be grabbed, tipped, held to lips. This jug smashed open when the ship smashed to ground and it endured the salt wash of centuries on the seabed before being pulled back



Corioli Souter, *Fragments of Batavia's Daughters*, 2017, artefact installation; photo: Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery.



Corioli Souter, *Fragments of Batavia's Daughters*, 2017, artefact installation; photo: Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery.

up to sit obediently in a glass case for only eyes to touch. Fragments that mean nothing, really, but are special because they survived: because they were there.

Embodied history craves touch. That is the slippery ethics of giving voice. When you reach back into the past, grasp hold of the dead and shake them into life, who is spoken for? Who speaks? Who remains silenced, mouths filled with salt water or blood, or forced shut by the hands of the person assaulting them? Who is left gasping for air above the slit in their throat?

Dead Reckoning

Robert Cleworth's women are waiting in the next pool of light, on a cluster of three oil on wood panels all prefaced with the words *Storyboard, scenes for a movie*. There are: *Jan Hendricxsz and his concubine* (2017), *Andries Jonas, Jan Hendricxsz and Wouter Loos, 9 July* (2017), and *Jan Hendricxsz, Mattys Beer and Jan Pelgrom* (2017).

Set high on the wall, you can't see these paintings properly until you step back, crick your neck. Opalescent ocean. Western Australian sun. The piercing light you only understand if you have felt it sear the back of your own eyes. Incorporal chunks of arm, torso and cock, floating midair in the middle of it. Smooth, hairless, contemporary and porn-esque bodies

with gym-muscled men and ghostly women pale as eggshell. No pubic hair, no sunburn, no dirt. No-one living for months on rations, a trickle of water and hunted wallabies, watching as their fellow passengers are randomly selected to die. All of the women are in pieces. Jan Hendricxsz' 'concubine' doesn't have a name, or a head.

Janet Malcolm suggests that when you die, especially as a young person, you are always going to be the way you were at the time of your death. Stuck. The living can grow, develop, but the dead, especially those who suffer an unusual or traumatic death, remain 'fixed in the chaos' (8). Their memory a screen suspended in the past, mutely waiting to be cast upon at will by those who remain.

There were twenty-two women among the 341 passengers cramped together aboard the *Batavia*. After the wreck, most were already dead:

the mutineers had ruthlessly exterminated those who were too old or too pregnant to interest them. The handful of young women who remained were gathered on Batavia's Graveyard where Jeronimus and his men took their pick. (Dash 207)

Of the seven who were left, those 'from the lower deck were set aside "for common service", which meant simply that they were available to any of the mutineers who wished to rape them' (Dash 207).

Lucretia Jansdochter (or Creesje Jans), a young matron of higher status, was 'by far the most desirable' woman who survived and, as a result, Jeronimus 'claimed her as his own' (Dash 208). Mike Dash writes that 'almost as soon as he took power in the island, the captain-general had Lucretia taken to his tent, where, rather than assaulting her, he made every effort to seduce her' (208). For two weeks, Jans endured Cornelisz's perverse 'seduction'. Dash states that in the end Cornelisz complained that 'he could not accomplish his ends either with kindness or anger' (208), and another homicidal psychopath named Zevanck intervened:

'you will have to make up your mind. Either you will go the same way as [recently murdered] Wybrecht Claasen, or else you must do that for which we have kept the women.' Through this threat Lucretia had to consent that day, and thus he had her as his concubine. (Dash 208)

Cleworth's *Storyboard, scenes for a movie—Jan Hendricxsz and his concubine* (2017) is a gorgeously rendered painting of a nameless, headless 'concubine' getting fucked from behind by 'leading man' (the named) Jan Hendricxsz. But does it encompass the power relations implicit in that act? *Storyboard, scenes for a movie—Jan Hendricxsz, Mattys*



Robert Cleworth, *Storyboard, scenes for a movie—Jan Hendricxsz and his concubine*, 2017, oil on wood panel, 37.5 × 29.8 cm.
© Robert Cleworth. Photography Christophe Canato.

Beer and Jan Pelgrom (2017), an equally luminescent work, manifests two more glowing ghost-women. Hovering passive amid exquisite turquoise and lapis lazuli, they kneel or lie supine before towering men who shove erect, named, 'movie star' penises into each woman's wide-open waiting mouth. Does leaving these disembodied women without names and coalescing any of their recognisable features around an orifice that can be penetrated capture any particle of their trauma if this painting represents an assault? Do these works move beyond the act of the sex, of almost casually eroticised voyeurism, to help us understand the dynamics within either scenario? Does this conceptual and methodological approach suggest agency on the part of the 'concubines'?

Does it give them voice?

Archaeology of Voice

In 1629, the insurgent Jeronimus Cornelisz made a world, and there were plenty of bodies in it. The man and his mutineers had voice, and they used it—Cornelisz's name has been spoken through the centuries and his actions have punched out his place in history.

In this domain, where women's bodies are spoils or treasure to be bargained over and consumed like a nice jacket or a loaf of bread, women's voices are harder to hear. As a result, exploration of context, power and agency—understanding of who speaks and for whom—is paramount. As Avery Gordan suggests, 'perceiving the lost subjects of history—the missing and lost ones and the blind fields they inhabit—makes all the difference to any project trying to find the address of the present' (195). The potential of creative practice, particularly when grounded in scientific and historical research, is to facilitate this historical embodiment. The resultant work has the potential to imaginatively recover these 'lost ones' in turn, providing deeper understanding of the complexity of our past, and how particular events may continue to influence the present.

In *Batavia: Giving Voice to the Voiceless*, both Corioli Souter and Robert Cleworth conceptually engage with the fragmentary nature of historical understanding. Yet, can the experiences of a young woman 'set aside for common service' because she was poor and of the lower classes truly speak when she does not have a head? Can a woman barely mentioned in extant archival documentation be given voice, when she is represented crouched before a man with his erect penis in her mouth? When history is in pieces, why choose this piece?

The depth of interdisciplinary practice in *Giving Voice to the Voiceless* provides fresh and exciting insights into the *Batavia* mutiny. This impressive project also provides evidence for ways in which the

creative arts can enhance both understanding of the past and our present-day engagement with it. Yet, within some of the work exhibited, women's stories remain submerged beneath the overarching narratives of perpetrators and rescuers, fathers and husbands. Individuals who, perhaps, were never as voiceless in the first place.

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