

Carly Fischer
*Creating False Memories
for a Place That Never Was*

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Last year *Mad Max: Fury Road* was released, 36 years after Max began his rampage into the heart of Australia and our national identity. I was in Alice Springs at the time and watched as everyone went to the opening dressed in costumes, mimicking the characters and, perhaps, themselves. Tribal-punk was already part of the everyday in this town. *Fury Road* was meant to be set in the Australian desert but, due to an unexpected growth of wildflowers during filming, was relocated to Namibia to look more ‘deserty’.¹ The centre of Australia was more familiar to many through film anyway than through actually being there. Perhaps it was this very vagueness of the desert that had allowed so many generalised notions of Australia to be placed onto it.²

I found a similar slip between fact and fiction on the shelves of an Australian souvenir shop back in Melbourne. Among didgeridoos and boomerangs, was a strange wooden mask painted with Indigenous Australian dot painting. Somewhere between Australian, African, Indonesian and Polynesian, the mask seemed to be from both everywhere and nowhere. Like *Mad Max*, it ran with the notion that people

didn't really know what was Australian anyway. In its cultural confusion it seemed to be both the perfect Australian souvenir and the perfect prop for gathering stories about Australia.

According to the girl in the souvenir shop, the mask was from an Indigenous tribe in Central Australia. She told me that the tribe practiced a kind of Australian voodoo, wearing the masks and dancing in tribal rituals. I'd never heard of either masks or voodoo in all my time in Central Australia, but who was I to know- it was a pretty big place. It seemed like the vastness and vagueness of the desert was again being used as place to project infinite possibilities of Australia. Tracing her story as a point of departure, I travelled back into the desert with the mask and its mystery, collecting stories and souvenirs along the way.

From memory the tribes in *Fury Road* wore pretty elaborate masks, but I couldn't find any masks in the actual Australian desert. Perhaps they'd been left on set back in Africa. No one I talked to in and around Central Australia had seen anything like the wooden mask from Melbourne, but they all had something to say. From souvenir shops to museums and cultural centres, from anthropologists to Indigenous artists, everyone and everywhere had a different story about the mask. Mapping all the possibilities, we were creating a pretty interesting place.

'Creating False Memories For a Place That Never Was' presents some of these collected possibilities as sculptural and audio reconstructions. In the installation, souvenirs and stories are cut up, remixed and reassembled, creating narratives that parallel the conflicting path of the investigation. Weaving interviews from artists, gallerists, museum staff, anthropologists and souvenir shop staff in response to the mask, the installation's audio soundscape merges possible facts, fictions and fantasies. Mixed by sound artist Mieko Suzuki, fragments of stories and memories of places collide and combine, creating ambiguous audio overlays that loop without end. Reflecting these narratives back onto objects collected through the investigation, the installation presents sculptures that slip between found and fabricated cultural fragments. Wooden souvenirs collected from here and elsewhere are cut up, sanded back and reconfigured into strange

totems, suggestive of the transnational tribalism of the mask and its journey.³ Other fragments act as clues or cairns collected along the way, disparate but somehow connected through the path of the investigation. Shifting between reality and representation, memory and material manifestation, the sculptures are suspended in their cultural confusion.

As I travelled from Melbourne to the heart of Australia and back again, I thought about the parallel stories that the mask may be weaving on the other side of the world. Somewhere someone would be sitting in their living room looking up at this strange wooden mask they had bought in a little souvenir shop in Melbourne, Australia. They would tell people the story of this mask, filled with vast red deserts, ancient tribes and voodoo rituals. This story would travel around the world like *Chinese Whispers*, creating false memories for a place that never was.³

Audio soundscape mixed by sound artist Mieko Suzuki.

Mieko Suzuki is a sound artist and DJ from Japan who is based in Berlin. <https://www.mixcloud.com/MIEKO/>

Carly would like to thank the participants interviewed for the audio soundscape, including artist Kerry Madawyn McCarthy, anthropologist Adam Macfie and staff at the Museum of Central Australia, director Karl Bajzik and Pam Collier of Yubu Napa Gallery, the staff at Mbantua Fine Art Gallery and Cultural Museum, the staff at Talapi Fine Art, the staff at Iranti Art Gallery, the staff at Lone Dingo Souvenirs and the staff at Alice Springs Souvenirs, Alice Springs and the staff at Deans Souvenirs, Melbourne. Carly would also like to thank Mieko Suzuki for the audio soundscape and Georgia Papagiannis, Jeph Neale and Michael Bullock for their contributions.

1. Joe Hildebrand, "It's Mad Max out of Africa- and Broken Hill isn't happy about it", in *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney, New South Wales, 8 November 2011).

2. Roslynn Haynes, *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). 185.

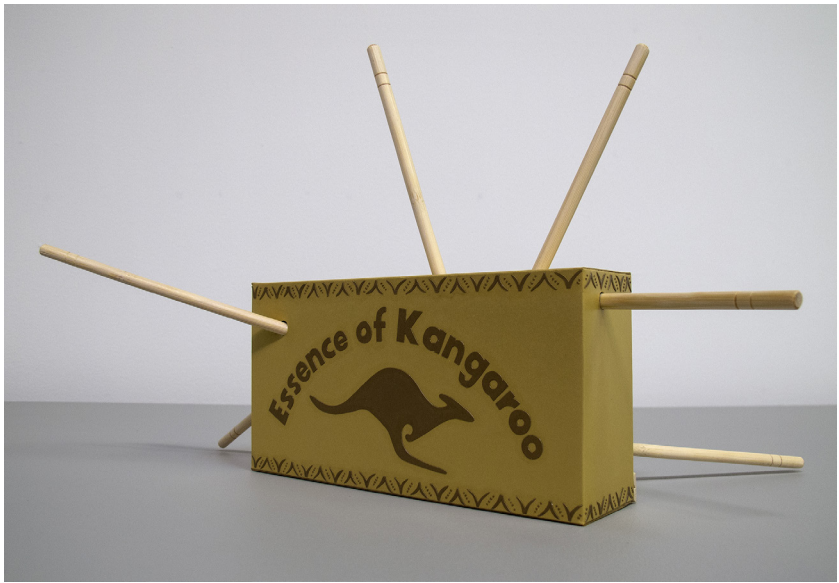
3. The altered objects are not of Indigenous origin, but cheap reproductions.

4. The name 'Chinese Whispers', referring to a children's game in which a message is whispered between players, often with incomprehensible results, comes from an historical origin of racial stereotype and discrimination. In being based on cultural confusion and stereotype, it could be seen as reflective of the mask.



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'Creating False Memories for a Place That Never Was' is a sculptural and audio installation that reflects on the relationship between fact and fiction in ongoing, stereotypical representations of Australia. Referencing some of the strange souvenirs perpetuating such representations, the installation investigates how national and transnational, specific and generic narratives of place in Australia are often complexly intertwined. As a point of departure, the installation draws on a potentially fictional wooden mask found in a Melbourne souvenir shop and the ambiguous explanations about its origins. Tracing the path of these explanations, the installation uses the mask as a prop to investigate different possibilities of place, collecting stories and souvenirs along the way. Reconstructing these fragments into ambiguous sculptural and sound propositions that slip between fact, fiction and fantasy, the installation draws on some of the confusions surrounding Australian cultural representations.

Carly Fischer is a sculptural installation artist from Melbourne. Her practice explores some of the problems involved in working site-specifically with place in a contemporary context, reflecting on the complex relationship between stereotypical representations of places and their local realities. Based on the various locations she has travelled to, her installations are sculptural reflections on how facts and fictions of these places are often complexly intertwined. Remixing, revising and reconstructing the cultural detritus collected from place to place, Fischer creates sculptural propositions and environments that suggest a more ambiguous contemporary place.

Carly Fischer recently completed an MFA at Monash University, studying under Professor Callum Morton, having previously graduated with a BFA (Hons) from RMIT University in 2000. Since 2000, she has exhibited widely in Australia, Germany, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, the US, the UK and Japan, including at Craft Victoria, Helen Gory Galerie, Linden Centre for Contemporary Art, Gippsland Art Gallery, Australia, KWADRAT and REH Kunst, Germany and MU Artspace, the Netherlands. Fischer has also been the recipient of several grants and awards, recently including an Australia Council Grant and Australian Postgraduate Award for work in response to Australia.

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