

An exhibition exploring crime, the city, surveillance, language and the subterranean world of women. Featuring an online version of the *Registry of Flash Men* — a journal documenting underworld life in 1840s Sydney by William Augustus Miles, Superintendent, then Commissioner, of Sydney Police, 1840-48

SYDNEY | *resort of Thieves*

Including artworks by
Denis Beaubois
Barbara Campbell
Leon Cmielewski/Josephine Starrs
Chloë Fitzjames
Jenny Panangka Fraser

Registry of Flash Men available
online from 9 August 2002
www.records.nsw.gov.au

As part of the early exhibition development process for *Sydney: Resort of Thieves*, Creative Producer Susan Charlton and Exhibition Designer Kylie Legge took part in a round table reading of the *Registry of Flash Men* with other State Records staff with an interest in the journal's online and exhibition projects. It was clear from responses around the table that the characters, observations and storylines in William Augustus Miles' journal trigger vivid images and humorous language play in the reader.

Perhaps the strongest sense of rapport with the text comes from a recognition that the Sydney of today is truly a descendent of the city of Miles' time. The resemblance between Miles and a more recent police commissioner is also quite marked: two Englishmen, handpicked to reform the force, whose time in the colony was marked by newspaper rumblings and an awkward departure before their time.

The digital version of Miles' *Registry of Flash Men* is the first in a series of manuscripts, photographs and maps from the State archives collection being prepared for online access by Rhonda Campbell, Project Officer, Copying & Digitisation (see story page 20) and Senior Technology Officer, Ninh Phan. Their work on the *Flash Men* site has been enhanced by the contributions of design company velvet onion. The colourful, visceral qualities of the text and the obvious connections between now and then have inspired and fuelled the exhibition, which emanates from the original and online versions of the registry, which will also be on display.

Sydney: Resort of Thieves captures the essence of the document. The material of the exhibition has been extruded directly from Miles' text in a highly graphic, three-dimensional way, as though words were artefacts themselves. As well, Kylie Legge has developed an exhibition structure which echoes and accentuates the text's labyrinthine, voyeuristic and surveillance-like qualities. And, in keeping with the direction established in State Records' previous exhibition, [art meets archive], a number of key artworks have been included in the installation to conjure up and respond to the images and storylines of the journal.

In his *Registry of Flash Men*, Miles meticulously recorded the intricate histories, movements and relationships of Sydney's underworld, centred around The Rocks. If he had lived later in the 19th century, he might have used a camera instead to commit the details of these criminals to his memory. If he were alive today he might be making use of video or DNA testing in his repertoire of surveillance and identification devices. Surveillance is a major theme of *Sydney: Resort of Thieves* and it permeates the exhibition's content and structure.

PHOTO: PENELOPE CLAY; STYLING CHLOË FITZJAMES

The work of several artists who take up this theme has been positioned within the exhibition narrative.

New media artists Leon Cmielewski and Josephine Starrs have been commissioned to develop a series of technological devices, which help establish the surveillance theme and also provide the exhibition's punch-line. As well, their video *AKA* will screen with Denis Beaubois' work *In the Event of Amnesia the City will Recall*. Beaubois' video records his attempt to engage in a dialogue with a video surveillance camera in the CBD — an absorbing encounter with an 'electronic eye' which is quite farcical, yet utterly sobering. Jenny Panangka Fraser's potent digital image *It's All About Control* (see page 25) comments upon identity as it is expressed in Indigenous culture (through language and skin) and via the culture of surveillance (through fingerprints and DNA). And the photographic elements from Barbara Campbell's performance work *The Diamond Necklace Affair*, reconfigured in this new installation context, suggest the historical and contemporary; ruling class and underworld; exquisite and banal.

This issue's front cover, photographed by Penelope Clay, attempts to capture the link between the strumpets and vagabonds of Miles' world and the hipster rogues and rascals of Sydney's contemporary underworld. Such insolence and swaggering is now more likely to be located in the inner city streets of Darlinghurst and Newtown than those of The Rocks, which is now better known as a tourist precinct. Our photoshoot has been orchestrated by emerging fashion designer Chloë Fitzjames, who contributed her latest range, her edgy visual eye and the enthusiasm of her cohorts to help set the scene.

One of the joys of reading the journal aloud is the pleasure of the language (see Susan Butler's commentary on page 6). Miles' observations are full of rogues, vagabonds, strumpets and dandies, even the odd 'leger de main, hocus pocus man' and 'sporting jockey sort of fellow'. Graphic designer Jason McDonald has been commissioned to produce logo designs in contemporary style for a limited edition series of t-shirts emblazoned with the flash language of Miles' journal.

Visit www.records.nsw.gov.au to see the t-shirt range, available for sale via online order form and at the *Sydney: Resort of Thieves* exhibition.

Sydney: Resort of Thieves exhibition
9 August – 30 November 2002
Sydney Records Centre
Globe Street (off George Street)
The Rocks
enquiries: (02) 8276 5624