



Off the Pages, Between the Lines

PAMELA SEE

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Redland Art Gallery acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands, waters and seas where we live and work. We pay our respects to Elders, past, present and future.

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REDLAND ART GALLERY,
CLEVELAND



Pamela See uses papercutting to engage with natural histories, historical events and cultural symbols. Gatherings of these delicate forms create spaces of wonder and enlightening narratives. *Off the Pages, Between the Lines* applies this practice to the history of the Redlands and, specifically, to recognising the contribution of Chinese immigrants to the area and its agricultural past.

Inspired by a photograph from 1906 depicting workers huts at Mount Cotton, where Chinese farmers used to reside, See has undertaken further research into the social and natural history of the region. Paper silhouettes memorialise these workers and sit alongside elaborate papercuts depicting both introduced agricultural produce and local and migratory flora and fauna. The intricate, time-consuming process of creating these paper forms imbues them with symbolic significance, emphasising both the fragility of this environment and the labour that has transformed it.

The exhibition includes *Cropped*, an installation based on woodblock prints and drawings that were produced by local

participants in workshops facilitated by See. This work, and its process, further expands the visibility of Chinese migration and labour in the region and intertwines this historical narrative with a celebration of the present-day local community.

Off the Pages, Between the Lines continues See's articulation of papercutting, inspired by techniques specific to her ancestry in the Guangdong Province, as a method for recording stories that connect the past and present.

Off the Pages, Between the Lines

By Pamela See (Xue Mei-Ling)

A photograph of Chinese residences on the Hozapfel farm at Mt Cotton, taken by Joyce Krause in 1906, is the inspiration for this exhibition. Throughout my lifetime, I have frequented Redlands without knowledge of the former residents who shared my heritage. The artworks in this exhibition reflect my investigations into the agrarian and social history of the region.

The Market Gardeners

Newspaper articles, court records and a post office directory provide an indication of who the residents of the depicted cottages were, how they worked, and why they left. I have responded through a wall-based installation titled *Driven Out* (2024), paper effigies called *Non-binary Squash* (2024) and *Fat Choy* (2024) and a participatory artwork titled *Cropped* (2024).

Cropped is informed by students from Wellington Point State High School and the volunteers from Redland Art Gallery. Both groups generously made prints and drawings from which I have created a set of papercuts. Together we have imagined how the Chinese farmers during the

late 19th and early 20th centuries contributed to the community through their agrarian skills.

Fat Choy (2024) illustrates a patch of cabbages, one of the principal crops grown in the Redlands from the early 20th century. *Non-binary Squash* (2024) depicts a pumpkin plant, which is amongst the vegetables Chinese farmers cultivated for their European customers during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in South-East Queensland. *Driven Out* (2024) denotes the departure of farmers like Ah Luh, Ah Young and Ah Yow.¹ It would appear that a majority of Chinese market gardeners left Mount Cotton after their produce was banned from the Brisbane Markets in 1909.²

In 19th century Queensland, it was common for British subjects to lease land to Chinese settlers.³ This was often offered at an economic rate because the immigrants were known for their capacity to clear and cultivate the soil. Across Eastern Australia, their skills in irrigation have been captured in newspaper articles. *Drawing Water* (2024) is an installation that pays homage to these ingenious techniques.⁴

The Colonial Pioneers

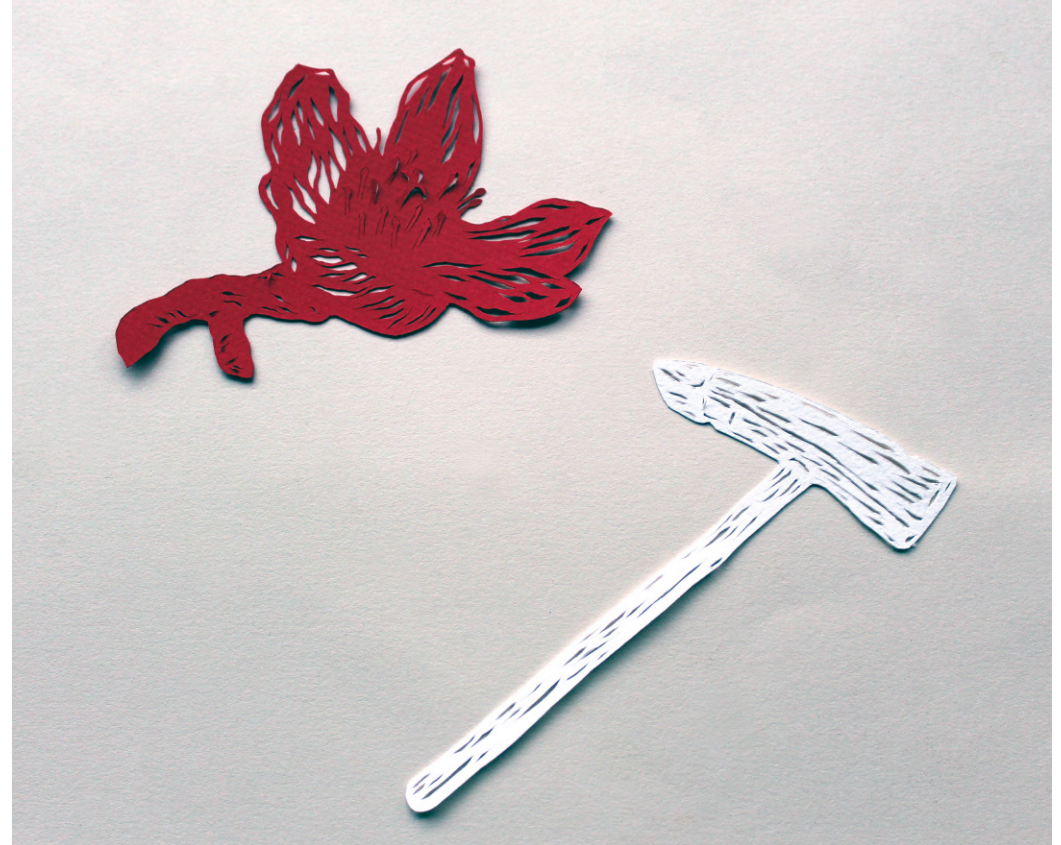
A search of burial records has led me to the Dunwich Benevolent Asylum. Modelled on the Victorian-era poorhouses of England, the institution was established on the grounds of a vacated quarantine station on Minjerribah in 1865.⁵ Aliens were housed separately in Ward 12, purportedly to prevent interracial promiscuity.⁶ Designed to address pauperism in Queensland, admission was granted to the infirmed and “crippled”.⁷

The admission records provide an invaluable insight into the movements of Chinese migrants in Australia during the 19th century. Whilst the ratio of Chinese to British settlers in some parts of Australia was 10:1, few of the immigrants from this country were female.⁸ Women of the Qing Dynasty were required to stay in China, rear children and accommodate their parents-in-law.⁹ Some Chinese men in 19th century Australia married British subjects. However, it was purportedly difficult for single men to find support within their respective Chinese communities.¹⁰ Many of the Chinese migrants admitted to the asylum had significantly exceeded the life

expectancy of the time, which at the turn of the century was 51.1 years for men.¹¹

Out of the admission records that specify a region within China, approximately half state Amoy as the port of origin.¹² It is represented in this series by the floral emblem for Fujian province, the Jasmine flower. *For the Amoy Shepherds* (2024) depicts one of the ships, The Duke of Roxburgh, which ferried Chinese pastoral workers between Amoy and Moreton Bay in 1851.¹³ *For Ah Chong* (2023), pays homage to one of the shepherds who retained his profession at the completion of his contract. Ah Chong was received by the asylum after having a fall in Clermont, at the age of 73.¹⁴ Others took different occupations, as acknowledged by the abacus in *For Jimmy Tim* (2024). Arriving at the asylum at the age of 84 years, Jimmy Tim was a storekeeper in Warwick.¹⁵ *For July Davidson* (2023) depicts a wok for the cook, July Davidson, from Western Queensland, who was admitted to the asylum for senility at the age of 65 years, despite having had five children with a British wife, Ellen.¹⁶

Although Ah Chong was released from the Dunwich Benevolent



Asylum at the age of 75 in 1902, the relative commonality of this name makes his subsequent movements impossible to verify. Rarer still is photographic documentation of former residents of the Aliens' Ward. An exception might be found in a photograph of an Ah You, a gardener from Geraldton. He was admitted for having "bad legs" in 1902, a decade after he was intentionally wounded by a Javanese migrant, and after two years of residing in Geraldton Hospital.¹⁷ Ah You was 51 years old at the time. A Certificate Exempting from Dictation Test (CEDT) for a 56-year-old Hong Kong-born Ah You was approved in Brisbane in 1909.¹⁸ From the accompanying photograph, the artist made *A Portrait of an Ah You* (2024). The subject is depicted with a Bauhinia flower, symbolic of his birthplace, and a style of knife used for farming in North Queensland.

For Ah Sam (2023) depicts a lotus flower to symbolize the birthplace of the miner, Macao. The remainder of homages are made for migrants from Guangdong Province.¹⁹ Their floral emblem is the Red Silk Cotton Tree flower. Additionally, *For Ah Sing* (2023) honours the Brisbane-based fruit hawker with a basket,

For Ah Foo (2023) features a tin to denote his contribution to its mining in South-West Queensland, and *For Ah See* (2024) depicts a wooden tool for the Mackay-based gardener.²⁰

One of the most well-known of the former residents of the Dunwich Benevolent Asylum is Ah Lipp. The former labourer was admitted in 1881 at the age of 65, and would live in the Aliens Ward for a further 22 years.²¹ *For Ah Lipp* (2023) includes a wood saw, to symbolise a former workplace in Newcastle.²² The tragic circumstances surrounding the death of the 87-year-old attracted media attention and a subsequent inquiry into the asylum's administration in 1906.²³ Testimonies from residents and staff indicated that the doctors were discretionary in the care they offered. This led to the neglect of selected wards, as has been documented in relation to the death of Ah Lipp.²⁴

Finally, *For Hungry Ghosts* (2024), is a paper effigy depicting a headstone engraved with the Chinese characters "born in China, departed in Australia." The gesture reflects the efforts of the staff of the North Stradbroke Island Historical Museum on Minjerribah

to locate the unmarked graves of these former residents. X-raying the ground has proved unsuccessful. Ancestral worship is an important aspect of the indigenous Chinese religions of Taoism and Confucianism. The burning of paper effigies has been purportedly practiced since the Tang Dynasty. A paper orange slice is depicted on a plate before the improvised grave. The installation is intended as a place for more offerings to be made, in acknowledgement of the Chinese migrants from the late 19th and early 20th centuries who were buried in this region. Visitors are welcome to add to the artwork.

Endnotes

- 1 Queensland Post Office Directories 1845 - 1948. (c. 2010); Queensland State Archives. (n.d.). *Deposition and Minute Books – Court of Petty Sessions, Beenleigh, 01/01/1894 – 31/01/1899*. QSA ITM373.
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 - 15 Queensland State Archives. (n.d.). *Admission book, males - Dunwich Benevolent Asylum 28 Aug 1894 – 6 Mar 1900*. QSA ITM298714.
 - 16 Queensland State Archives. (n.d.). *Registers of Personal Details Relating to Persons Admitted - Males -*

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 - 24 Queensland Government. (1906). *Inquiry into the General Administration of Dunwich Benevolent Asylum*. QSA ITM18130.

List of Images

Cover: Pamela See, *Richmond Birdwing* 2024. Cansons Mi-Teintes and acid free glue, 12.5 x 22cm.

p.2: Pamela See, *For the Amoy Shepherds* 2024. Cotton Rag, 150 x 150cm. Work in Progress Image.

p.4: Pamela See, *Fat Choy* 2024. Cotton rag and acid free glue, dimensions variable. Detail.

p.5: Pamela See, *For Ah See* 2024, Cotton Rag, 18 x 20cm.

p.12: Pamela See, *Eastern Bearded Dragon* 2024. Cansons Mi-Teintes and acid free glue, 15 x 25cm.

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**REDLAND ART
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*Redland Art Gallery is an initiative of
Redland City Council, dedicated to the
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