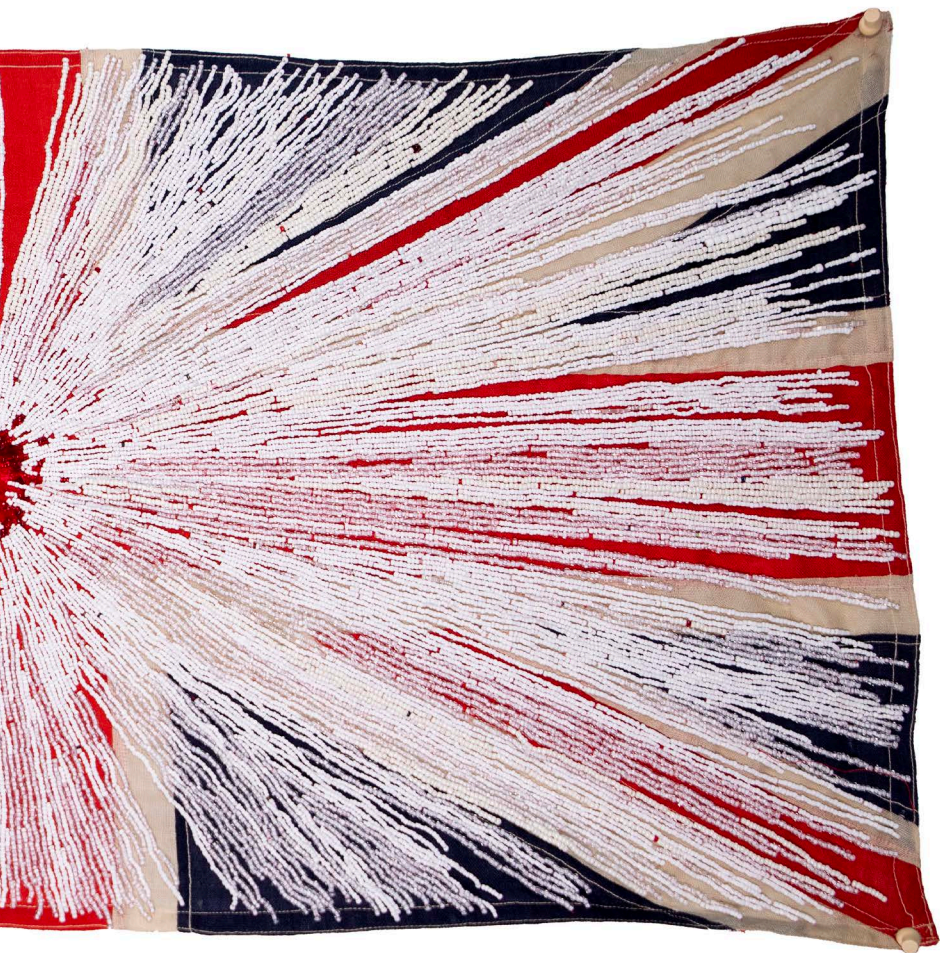


# Colonial Confusion

*megan evans*









# COLONIAL CONFUSION

megan evans

In the 21st century, we are all being challenged to reconsider old tropes and understandings of the past, as well as our relationships to identity, sexuality and patriarchy, all of which could be considered under one heading: colonisation. With the passing of Queen Elizabeth II, we were reminded of just how close Australian identity is to the British Empire. Do we still think of Australia as a colony? *Colonial Confusion* poses this question.

Leaving the intellectual bubble of inner cities, one regularly finds hotels and motels proudly announcing their colonial identity through signage. Across the country there are colonial labels on everything from beer to timber products, and so with the increasing representation of First Nations' perspectives, through the work of artists, writers, academics and intellectuals, it seems timely to recontextualise this. How do we confront the actions of the past in a way that casts a different light on all that signage? For some, the signage may indicate a 'proud pioneer heritage'; for others, it is a reminder of a painful, destructive past that brought an end to a peaceful, sustainable lifestyle that had existed for thousands of generations.

I was brought up with a family story of pioneer ancestors that was presented to me as a source of pride. My mother's family was a product of the Highland Clearances in Scotland and transportation of Irish convicts - Scottish Presbyterian and Irish Catholic, the orange and the green. My great-grandfather established a large property on Wiradjuri Country between Nyngan and Cobar in western New South Wales in the late 19th century. I travelled there as a young girl and fell for the idyllic narrative of the frontier. The huge house had a veranda which, I was told, my grandmother walked around each morning, one circumference lending a mile to her exercise.

In my early adult life, I desperately wanted to hold onto that vision of my heritage. Then one day I went to see a film titled *Wrong Side of the Road*, directed by Ned Lander. I was introduced to a vibrant band of Aboriginal musicians, blatant racism, poverty and the other side of the road - or frontier.

It was the early 1980s and I had just woken up.

Later, through my marriage to Gunditjmara artist and activist, Les Griggs, in 1987, I was faced with the impact of my culture's policies and practices on his life and the lives of his people. We had several years of artistic practice together, with 1988 particularly memorable, as we dedicated ourselves to protesting the bicentennial through both legal and illegal means. It wasn't until after his death, by his own hand in 1993, the International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples, that I turned the lens onto my own heritage.

My early attempts were brutal and didactic. Commissioned by the City of Melbourne, they were part of a series of 'anti-monuments' around the CBD titled *The Another View Walking Trail*. One of these works was placed at the foot of the statue of Matthew Flinders on Swanston Street. Embedded in the earth, it was a box in the shape of a cross that held bullet shells and ceramic replicas of human bones. Words were engraved on the glass lid and they cast shadows onto the interior: 'IN THE NAME OF - England, Civilisation, His Majesty, Justice, Righteousness'. It was an attempt to critique the justification for colonisation, but its bluntness was both too early for the general public to accept and too deliberate, leaving no place for questioning or nuance. As a result, the bulletproof glass was smashed more than once with a sledgehammer. The relic remains, no longer on show, in the City of Melbourne collection. While I had insights into the impact colonisation through being inducted into a community and family through my marriage, I understand, with hindsight, that the broader public was still largely unaware and that my approach was not subtle.

My husband's life was tragic. He died before the term Stolen Generations came into common use in the public domain, but he was known for speaking out about the practice. When we met, he was in Pentridge Prison; I was there to invite him to work on the Northcote Koorie Mural when he was released. I was told he had spent 21 years in institutions, so I expected to meet an old man. He was, in fact, six months younger than me. Taken away from his family at two years of age, he had spent his life in children's homes, youth detention centres and prisons, only once, as an adult, being out of prison for more than six months. His trauma was writ large over his body in the form of jail tattoos.

Fiercely intelligent and extremely talented, he was deeply scarred by what had happened to him, and he knew who to blame. He left me with a large family of uncles, aunties, nieces and nephews, grand-nieces and grand-nephews, and they continue to enrich my life today.

*Colonial Confusion* reflects on this personal history and is best understood through this window into my own life story. In 2004, while working on a collaborative project with Wemba Wemba, Wertigikia, Nari Nari artist, Gayle Maddigan, I began to realise how little I knew about the specifics of my family history. In an artist talk that was a part of the project, Gayle introduced herself by her family and Country. I introduced myself through my career highlights – what I had done rather than who I was or where I had come from. I now see I had been too ashamed to look at this.

I remembered snippets from my childhood trip to 'Booroomugga', the property of my great-grandmother. I also knew a few family anecdotes about her, as well as about the life of my grandmother as she grew up there. But I had never considered the Traditional Owners of the land, who they were and what had happened to them. This was an uncomfortable realisation, as the ramifications of that dispossession resonated (and still do) through my family on both sides of what I now see as the continuing frontier: a frontier of privilege.

My work began to reflect that conundrum. I used portraits of family members, and later of myself, pinning eucalyptus leaves onto the faces. The subjects peered out from behind leaves that hid the viewer from the viewed. I dressed as Isabella Kelly, nee Robertson, placing myself in the frame. She and Patrick John Kelly were the first generation of my family born in Australia. They were married in 1880, in Melbourne. I made sculptures with the objects of her era, those objects acting as witnesses to that time. The late 19th-century aesthetic was one of excess.

On land claimed by Batman and Fawkner in 1835, Melbourne was rapidly established as a European town. Dates carved into the facades of many remaining Victorian buildings show just how quickly occupation became

entrenched, with major banks and businesses establishing themselves in a city that would be, for a time, the nation's capital. These buildings and the lifestyle they enabled were occupied by objects of the era – silverware, glassware, furniture, books and other accoutrements of the wealthy – on land that belonged to the Wurundjeri and Bunurong peoples.

Those who occupied the rapidly growing colony were called 'The Explorers' and 'Early Colonists'. They were considered heroes, and statues were erected in their honour. Some of them ran government, sat in parliament, administered the colony and, after Federation in 1901, their descendants built a fledgling nation. A constitutional monarchy and representative democracy, Australia's system of government was born from the imperial power that claimed and invaded the continent, dispossessing the original people who had occupied it for more 65,000 years.

In the beginning, democracy was not for everyone in Australia. White women were eventually granted the right to vote in 1902, but Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were not given this same right for six decades, until 1962. My husband was nine years old when his mother could assert her democratic right. My mother took that for granted all of her life.

To re-evaluate and deconstruct the foundation of Australian identity, it must be understood as a white identity born out of a colonial past. Chinese people arrived with the early colonists and came in large number with the gold rush, but they did not figure in what we know as Australian identity. In 1901, the Immigration Restriction Act was passed into law and became known as the White Australia policy. It was a set of racist policies designed to stop non-European migration to Australia, with the aim of creating an Anglo Celtic ideal, and it existed until the passing of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*, which made racially based selection criteria for immigration purposes unlawful. We now proudly boast being a 'multicultural society'; however, non-white residents regularly report being asked, by white Australians, where they come from, the assumption being that they are not Australian.



It could be said that Australia is in a state of colonial confusion. In this exhibition I have attempted to highlight the confusion, which is a confusion of identity. Who are we as Australians? And how do we deal with our past? How do we reclaim our heritage in a way that includes all of it, not just the idealised parts, which are under uncomfortable scrutiny by members of the marginalised non-white culture?

The central wall displays an important signifier of what to deconstruct: an image found in a rare book titled, *The Old Pioneer's Memorial History of Melbourne* (1942), by Isaac Selby. Inside the shield shape are portraits of the men of colonial Victoria, arranged in a hierarchy related to their importance at the time. Next to it is another shield, which is a legend for the faces that can be traced to a leger of names. This places specific individuals at the centre of the question of who we are, who we have come from and how we ended up where we are today.

I didn't know my personal history in this country, and I propose that I'm not alone. *Colonial Confusion* places the visitor in the frame - of the past - in the present.

The objects chosen from the City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection fall into several categories: chairs, cutlery, glassware, books. They are holders of memory, witnesses to moments in time and silent participants in history: chairs that were sat on, *in time*, books that were opened, *in time*, cutlery that was laid on tables, *in time*, glassware and silverware that was polished, *in time*. These objects engaged the individuals using them at a specific place and time. In this new context, these objects create a circularity of time; used in the past, viewed in the present and kept for the future. They have a history that allows us to see that era in our peripheral vision - and perhaps be more open to what we might see.

We are familiar with the aesthetic of the colonial era. Melbourne is richly endowed with architecture and traditions that continue to connect us to imperial Britain. While acknowledging that the City of Melbourne has one of the largest local-government collections of artworks by First Nations artists,

**Opposite**  
megan evans  
*Rabbit Suppression*  
*to Wrongs*,  
2019  
19th-century Victorian  
statute book, gouache  
Collection of the artist  
Photography: Tobias Titz

#### Opposite

megan evans  
*White House*, 2023  
Georgian doll house,  
red glass objects,  
LED lighting  
music and audio  
by Biddy Connor  
and Lizzy Welsh,  
using Council centenary  
recording, 1942,  
interactive audio design  
by Steph O'Hara  
City of Melbourne  
Art and Heritage Collection,  
and collection of the artist  
Photography: megan evans

1  
World of Birds, 'Feather  
symbolism and meaning',  
worldbirds.com/feather-  
symbolism/#celtic.

I focus on the part of its vast collection that relates to its history as a colonial city. Our conflicted 21st-century relationship with this past requires reframing our perspective through the present. Commenting on various periods of 'colonial nostalgia', *Colonial Confusion*'s faux museological display of material from the collection sits alongside my own artworks: Victorian objects reframed by my interventions. By creating a confusion between art and historical objects, I aim to unsettle typical readings of this historical collection. You might wonder if I have painted on these historical documents from the collection, or bolted together, embroidered upon, cut and beaded these precious mementoes of our history. I have, but don't despair. By confusing the viewer, I am asking them to consider what we hold sacred. Consider the precious cultural belongings and sacred sites of First Nations people that have been desecrated and destroyed. What is this history that we are preserving?

Inside *White House* is a collection of objects, made of ruby glass or filled with red beads. This work represents the excess of Victoriana and the blood spilt as a result of the excess. There are antique sugar shakers that symbolise the history of the Kanaks brought to Australia as slaves to cut sugarcane. There are glasses, salt cellars, perfume bottles and all the trappings of a Victorian domestic home that were polished, laid out and cared for by unpaid domestic help, First Nations girls removed from their families under the pretence of 'training'. 19th-century books that contain records of Victorian statutes and papers presented to Parliament have feathers painted on specific pages. The feather in Celtic symbolism 'stands for truth, that which must rise'.<sup>1</sup> These books in the City of Melbourne Collection remain untouched. Which are artworks and which are history? Significant silverware, such as the Hunt Cup from the collection, sit alongside refashioned teapots and jugs upended in a tumble of disorder, an unstable aesthetic. The rewritten poem 'My Country', by Dorothea McKellar and first published in 1908, is burnt into a child's seat just as it is burnt into my memory, such that I can still recite it today. *Edge (of Empire)* sits above a sea of Melbourne City Council cutlery; its feet have become knives, an uncomfortable reference to the unthinking empire's destruction of the carefully balanced natural environment and food sources.





#### Opposite

Victorian Legislative Council  
*The Victorian Statutes:  
The Public and Private Acts  
of Victoria, 1866, 1890*  
leather-bound books  
City of Melbourne  
Art and Heritage Collection  
Photography: Tobias Titz

#### Pages 14 and 15

megan evans  
*Papers Presented - Votes  
and Proceedings of the  
Legislative Assembly  
Session 1890 #2,*  
2023  
19th-century votes and  
proceedings of the Victorian  
Legislative Assembly,  
gouache  
Collection of the artist  
Photography: Tobias Titz

#### Pages 16 and 17

megan evans  
*Harbour Trust to Lunacy,*  
2019  
19th-century Victorian  
statute book, gouache  
Collection of the artist  
Photography: megan evans

My artworks aim to unsettle, playing with the tropes we're so familiar with that we no longer see. They ask viewers to look beyond the familiar to the stories embedded in the objects and the aesthetic of an era foundational to our city, an era that was exclusive and that ignored the pain and dislocation of people who had a right to maintain their land, language, culture and way of life.

Questioning our history and the common narrow view is not a call for guilt or shame but for understanding. Acknowledgement can be more than acknowledging the Country on which we stand. We can acknowledge the painful truth of our past alongside taking pride in parts of it. These realities can coexist. There is no black history and white history; there is just history – what happened – and denying the discomfort of that keeps the shame alive.

I don't know what my ancestors did. I know whose land they occupied, but stories of racism and cruelty haven't been passed down to me, nor written in journals or otherwise recorded. But I continue my journey of discovery, reading between the lines to find out. They were there at a time of colonial racism and ignorance; armed with that knowledge I am able to acknowledge the past and thereby own my culture. Strangely, this allows for a sense of the possibility of belonging – fallible but honest – to an Australia that is real. With an understanding and acceptance of the truth, I can see, perhaps far in the future, a country that values coexistence with the oldest living culture on the planet, a country that is led by and respectfully honours First Nations people, land, language and culture as the source of who we all are.







48 Victoria,  
No. 812.

Penalty for  
unauthorized  
occupation or  
deposition on  
lands not  
commutable.  
Sec. 92 No. 300.

Penalty for other  
trespasses on  
Crown lands.  
Sec. 94 No. 300.

Obtiteration of  
boundary marks  
a misdemeanor.  
Sec. 95 No. 300.

Survey officers  
may enter upon  
private lands.  
Sec. 97 No. 300.

it shall nevertheless be lawful to appoint some other person to be the person to perform such act or with regard to whom such act shall be performed.

109. If any person be found in unauthorized occupation of any Crown lands or knowingly and wilfully depasture without authority in that behalf any cattle or swine on any such land not being in common, he shall be liable on conviction thereof to the penalties following (that is to say)—for the first offence a sum not exceeding Five pounds, for the second offence after an interval of fourteen days from the date of the previous conviction a sum not exceeding Twenty pounds, and for any subsequent offence after a like interval a sum not exceeding Fifty pounds; but no proceedings to recover any such penalty may be taken except by some person authorized in that behalf by the Board.

110. If any person not licensed or otherwise authorized under this Act search upon any Crown land for any metal or mineral (except gold or cut dig or take from any Crown lands any live or dead timber gravel stone limestone salt guano shell sand loam or brick-earth or strip or remove bark from any tree on any Crown lands, every such person shall in addition to any punishment or penalty provided by any law now in force for such offence on conviction of any of the several offences forfeit and pay any sum not exceeding ten pounds. Provided however that it shall be lawful for any municipality with the consent of the Minister to authorize any officer or other person to enter on Crown lands or remove therefrom without fee or licence any live or dead timber gravel stone limestone sand loam or other soil for the purpose of forming or maintaining any public road or bridge within the municipal district of such municipality.

111. If any person wilfully obliterate remove or deface any boundary mark which has been made or erected by or under the direction of any authorized officer of the Board he shall be guilty of a misdemeanor.

112. Any surveyor or officer acting under the authority of the Board and any other person acting in aid or under the orders of such surveyor or officer, may from time to time without making compensation enter into and upon any land not being a garden orchard or ornamental plantation of any person or persons whomsoever for the purpose of making and carrying on any survey authorized by any law heretofore in force or by this Act, or by the orders of the Board, and for the purpose of fixing any object to be used in the survey, and any post stone or boundary mark whatsoever, and may fix and place any such object post stone or boundary mark whatsoever in the land or upon any wall tree or post in the land of any person whomsoever, and may dig up any ground for the purpose of fixing any such object post stone or boundary mark, and may cut down and remove any scrub or timber which may obstruct any survey line. Provided always that such surveyor and his assistants and workmen shall do as little damage as may be in the execution of the several powers so them granted by the said Act or orders.

48 Victoria,  
No. 812.

Penalties under  
No. 145 or No. 227  
now enforced.  
Sec. 96 No. 300.

113. Whenever a penalty has been incurred by any person under section one hundred and twenty-six of "The Land Act 1862" or section seven of "The Amending Land Act 1865," it shall be lawful for the Governor to demand and receive the amount of such penalty in addition to the purchase-money before issuing a Crown grant of any allotment in respect of which such penalty has accrued to such person or his assignee. Provided that no Crown grant of any such allotment shall be issued until such person applying for such grant have proved to the satisfaction of the Governor to be certified under its seal that the provisions of section seven of "The Land Act 1862" or section seven of "The Amending Land Act 1865" as the case may be have been fully complied with in respect of such allotment, or in default of such certificate he shall pay a penalty at the rate of Five shillings for every acre of such allotment.

#### PART XI.—MISCELLANEOUS.

114. There shall be inserted in every lease of a pastoral allotment and in every lease of a grazing area a covenant that the lands demised under such leases are granted and held subject to a condition that the holder of a miner's right or of a mining lease shall have the right and shall be allowed by such lessee to enter upon such pastoral allotment or grazing area as such case may be and search for gold and to mine thereon and to erect and occupy mining plant or machinery without making compensation to the lessee thereof for surface or other damage.

115. There shall be inserted in every Crown grant of lands alienated in fee simple, and in every lease or lease of land demised with the right of acquiring the fee thereof under this Act a condition or covenant that such lands granted or demised subject to the right of any person being a miner or holder of a mining lease to erect and occupy mining plant or machinery thereon in the same manner and under the same conditions as those to which such person has now the right to erect and occupy mining plant or machinery upon Crown lands provided that the owner thereof for surface damage sustained by such lands by reason of mining thereon, such compensation shall be determined as hereinafter provided, and the payment of such compensation shall be a condition precedent to such right of entry.

116. The holder of a miner's right or of a mining lease is hereby authorized to enter in or upon such lands as aforesaid, and the portions of such lands so entered in or upon shall for the purpose of regulating and controlling mining thereon or therein be deemed to be Crown lands subject to the provisions of the "Mining Statute 1865" and of any Act amending the same.

117. Every warden appointed under the provisions of the said Acts shall sitting as a warden without assessors have jurisdiction to hear and determine and enforce any claim made for surface damage.

(a) 29 Vict. No. 291, "Miners 1865," post.  
2 N 2





Pages 18 and 19

Left  
megan evans  
*UNstable Aesthetic #1*,  
2020  
Victorian silverware,  
brass nuts and bolts  
Collection of the artist  
Photography: megan evans

Centre  
megan evans  
*Victoria's Secret #1*,  
2020  
Victorian silverware,  
brass nuts and bolts, cotton  
Collection of the artist  
Photography: megan evans

Right  
megan evans  
*UNstable Aesthetic #6*,  
2020  
Victorian silverware,  
brass nuts and bolts  
Collection of the artist  
Photography: megan evans

This Page  
Left  
megan evans  
*Mother Country #2*,  
2019  
children's chair with engraving  
Collection of the artist  
Photography: Tobias Titz

Right  
megan evans  
*Treaty*, 2021  
facsimile of Batman treaty,  
gouache  
Collection of Maree Clarke  
(Mutti Mutti, Yorta Yorta,  
Boon Wurrung, Wemba  
Wemba)  
Photography: Tobias Titz



**Left**

Maker unknown  
*Union Jack*, c. 1930s  
linen  
City of Melbourne  
Art and Heritage Collection  
Photography: Tobias Titz

**Right**

Thomas Webb & Sons  
(Stourbridge, England)  
Goblet, 1889  
crystal  
City of Melbourne  
Art and Heritage Collection  
Photography: Tobias Titz

**Overleaf****Left**

megan evans  
*Edge (of Empire)*, 2020  
children's upholstered  
chaise lounge, ebony,  
silver Victorian knives  
Collection of the artist  
Photography: megan evans

**Right**

megan evans  
*Isabella's Helmet*, 2019  
digital print on rag paper  
Collection of the artist  
Photography: megan evans









#### Left

"Garryowen"  
(Edmund Finn)

*The Chronicles of Early  
Melbourne, 1835 to 1852:  
Historical, Anecdotal and  
Personal, Volume 1, 1888*

Printed and Published by  
Fergusson and Mitchell,  
Melbourne

leather-bound book  
City of Melbourne  
Art and Heritage Collection  
Photography: Tobias Titz

#### Right

Charles Reilly and George  
Storer (London, England)  
Hunt Cup, 1833

metal, silver gilt  
City of Melbourne  
Art and Heritage Collection  
Photography: Tobias Titz

#### Overleaf

##### Left

megan evans

*Cash Book*, 2020

19th-century cash book,  
gouache

Collection of the artist  
Photography: megan evans

##### Right

megan evans

Artwork from Site 15  
(Matthew Flinders Statue),  
part of the 'Another View'  
Walking Trail, Melbourne,  
1995

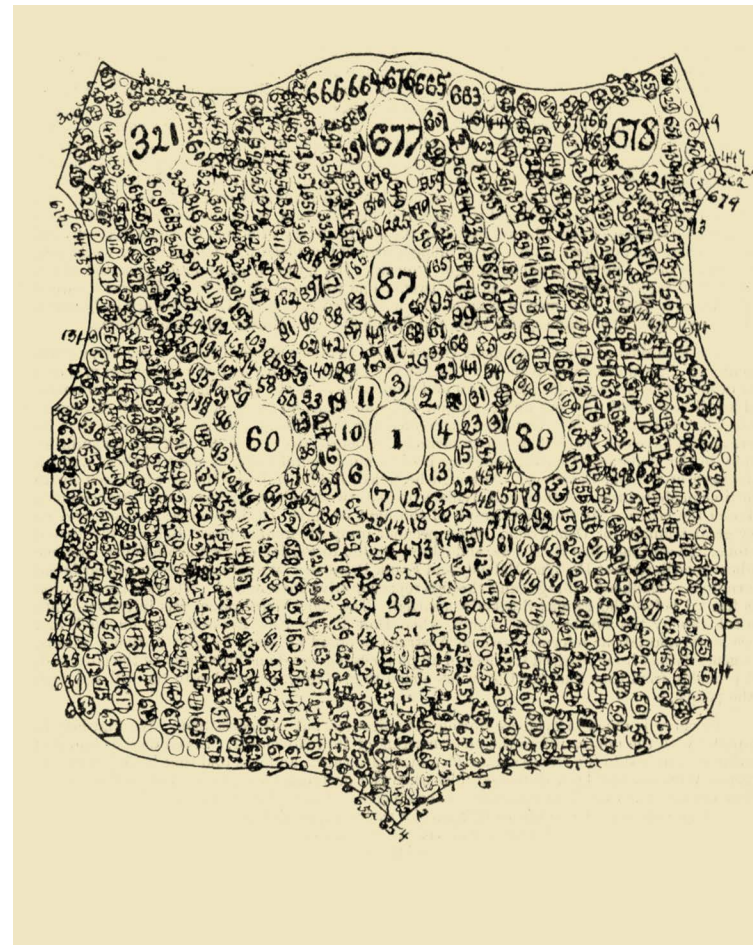
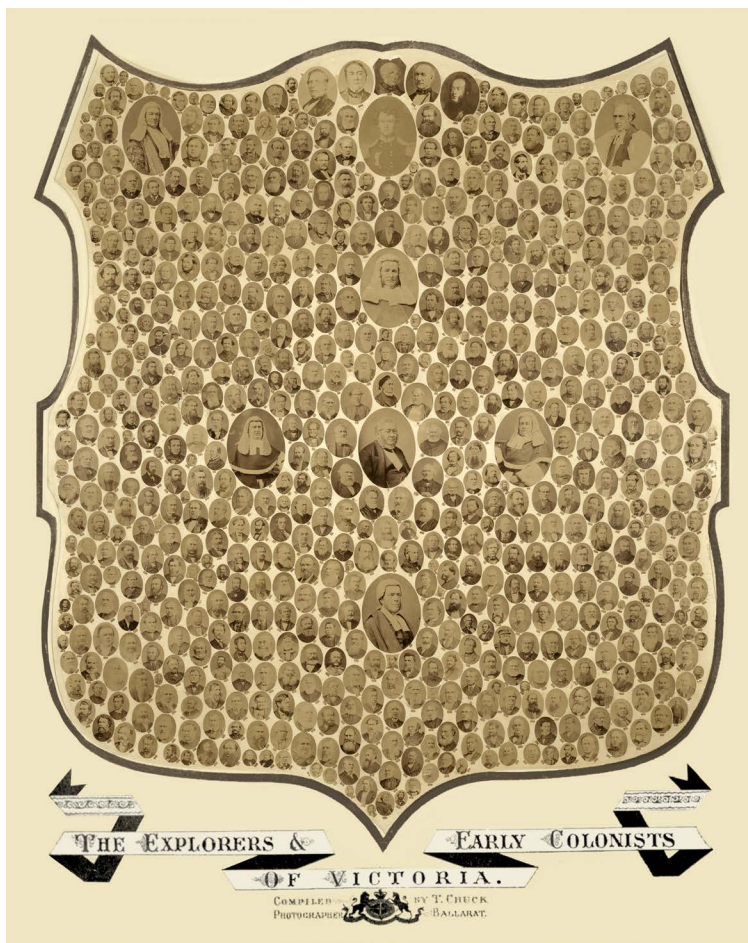
wood, metal, glass

City of Melbourne  
Art and Heritage Collection  
Photography: megan evans









**Opposite and Right**  
 megan evans  
*The Explorers and Early Colonists of Victoria*, 2023  
 reproduction on rag paper, satin ribbon, cotton, pins  
 Source: 'The Explorers and Early Colonists of Victoria', 1872, by Thomas Foster Chuck in Isaac Selby, *The Old Pioneers' Memorial History of Melbourne: From the Discovery of Port Phillip Down to the World War*, 1924  
 Image courtesy of State Library Victoria

**Overleaf**  
 megan evans  
 Isabella Kelly nee Robertson (younger), 2012  
 digital print on rag, eucalyptus leaves, pins  
 Collection of the artist  
 Photography: megan evans







**Colonial Confusion**  
*megan evans*

26 October 2023  
to 26 February 2024

City Gallery  
Melbourne Town Hall  
[melbourne.vic.gov.au/citygallery](http://melbourne.vic.gov.au/citygallery)



ISBN 978-1-74250-922-8

**Curator** | megan evans is a multidisciplinary artist, who works in video, photography, sculpture and installation. Her work is informed by social issues, and she examines the nature of belonging and the impact of colonisation on identity, both personal and national. She began her creative life making large political murals in the 1980s, at which time she met and later married Indigenous artist and activist the late Les Griggs, who informed her perspective on colonisation.

megan's current work considers how colonisation has shaped the identity of the coloniser, and it approaches the task of decolonisation through dismantling the aesthetic of the colonial era. megan positions herself as the colonial body in contemporary Australia and examines how to take responsibility for a past she has inherited. She has exhibited widely, both nationally and internationally, and her work is held in state and regional gallery collections.

**Thanks** | Artist-curator megan evans would like to thank the following people for contributing to this exhibition: Eddie Butler-Bowdon for his vision and courage in allowing the collection to be used in this way; Amelia Dowling and Savannah Smith for their support, careful management and eye for detail in bringing it to fruition; Stephen Banham for his clever and thoughtful design; Hilary Ericksen for her careful editing; Biddy Connor and Lizzy Welsh for their masterful composition and production of the amazing soundtrack using the Council Centenary recording from 1942, found by Amelia, to produce a powerful sound environment for White House; Steph OHara for arranging the sensor device to trigger the soundtrack; Paul Gary for the lighting of White House; Maree Clarke for lending my artwork from her collection; the Art and Heritage Collection team for helping polish the silver; and my friend Jill McCalman, who came to my aid with the last knives and forks. Lastly, thanks to the City of Melbourne for the opportunity to pose such questions, controversial to some, in the heart of the CBD.