

Donald Fortescue: New World(s)

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1. *On the edge*

At the end of the 1998 film *Shakespeare in Love*, the English heroine, her ship wrecked off the coast of North America, crawls up on a broad and deserted beach. The virgin forest beyond is endless and green—a striking contrast to the gray and claustrophobic streets of London, where much of the rest of the film has taken place. The camera pulls back into a final, panoramic, God’s-eye shot that seemingly revels in the vast emptiness of the New World, circa 1600. For the audience, it’s a poignant moment. After all, we know what came next. Over the following century and a half, England exploited America’s *tabula rasa* in a number of ways, including using the Colonies as a dumping ground for inmates that its overflowing penal system could no longer accommodate. Alas, when the United States of America declared independence from the mother country in 1776, that came to a halt. So it was that in 1788, the first of many ships of British convicts arrived in Australia.

As Donald Fortescue knows, his native land (he grew up south of Sydney) and the United States (where he has lived for more than a decade) have much in common, beginning with a vibrantly diverse population descended from the above-mentioned unwilling emigrants and, in far greater numbers, those who came dreaming of making their fortunes. Both nations have the brashness and can-do spirit of young cultures, not to mention wide-open spaces and an affection for beer. During Fortescue’s 2001 residency in Hobart, Tasmania, these similarities were on his mind. But so, too, were his experiences since moving to the United States in 1997 to teach at California College of the Arts. Much of his childhood had been spent on an empty beach, listening to the ocean and picking up whatever had been left behind by the receding waves. In Oakland, Fortescue still lives near the edge of a continent, but in a neighborhood that is a mixture of urban decay and renovation: neat Victorian houses next to boarded-up buildings. He often finds interesting junk on the streets. The soundtrack for his perambulations is the nearby freeway’s perpetual dull roar. In 2001 in

Hobart (the capital of Tasmania, but a small city nevertheless) he looked for similar junk, but the streets were too clean. On nearby beaches, though, he began to find an interesting mix of fragments, both human-made and natural, much as he had once upon a time on the beaches of his boyhood. Still, as they say, you can't go home again. Fortescue knew that he'd soon return to California. In a way, he had become a kind of outsider everywhere: an observer in a liminal no-man's-land.



Correspondence (2001) reads as a kind of love letter, written from that observer's distance, addressed to his childhood habit of creating collections of shells and shards. Celery-top pine and Tasmanian blackwood have been crafted into an exquisite collector's cabinet. Its five drawers are filled with neat groupings of some of the objects Fortescue found on Hobart's beaches as well as careful technical drawings on translucent drafting film of these bits of flotsam and jetsam. (After studying scientific illustration in college, he worked for some time at Sydney's famous Royal Botanic Gardens as a staff illustrator, polishing his drawing skills.) These images are stacked in one of the drawers so that none but the uppermost can be seen clearly, yet all are visible at once, ghosts half-hidden in the layers of

film. On the walls nearby, four immense digital prints—the largest is 30 feet long—turn out to be blown-up details of these illustrations. Like Chuck Close’s paintings, they are decipherable only from a distance. The tripod shape and careful brasswork of the cabinet’s legs, suggesting an old camera or surveying device, extends this visual metaphor. Sometimes, we long to come close to the past, but we can never see it except from a distance that lengthens inexorably with the passage of time.

2. *(Water) under the bridge*

Still, however far away San Francisco and Sydney are from each other, they overlook the same ocean. *Under the Bridge* (2005) embodies this fluid-yet-immutable relationship in images hidden within two long-legged collector’s cabinets. When the top of each is opened, a video loop of the ocean’s surface can be seen on a small rectangular screen recessed inside. Though these three-minute sequences of shifting waves were shot in very different spots—looking down from the bridges that span, respectively, Sydney Harbour and the Golden Gate—little difference between them can be detected. Each is a glowing jewel of blue or green, set into a deep, polished frame.



The precious quality of these images, not to mention the exquisite craftsmanship of the cabinets in which they are presented, invokes the tradition of the *Wunderkammer*. This extraordinary type of collector's cabinet first appeared in the 17th century, in the form of elaborate pieces of furniture used by collectors to house and display diverse collections of curiosities, from exotic shells, bits of coral, and supposed unicorn horns (from antelopes, rhinoceroses, or narwhals) to gems, instruments, and even works of art. But the collections in Fortescue's cabinets are as much *ideas* as they are *things*: observations and experiences, scaled and modulated in ways that remind us of the vast breadth of geological, natural time and space. The cabinets themselves reveal a fascination with hidden worlds secreted inside drawers, beneath water, or even among trees.

3. *If a tree falls in the forest, how will we see it?*

The trees in question are a grove of aspens in the Colorado Rockies, not far from the Continental Divide. Aspen communities grow outward from a single individual. All of the trees in such groups are genetic clones, connected by underground roots. One such grove is in the running for the title of the largest living organism on the planet. In 2007, during a short residency at the Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Fortescue photographed an aspen forest under snow. After much patient manipulation, this image became a continuous, panoramic circle of black trees and white snow, housed inside a 12-sided cabinet—again, on a tall tripod—which can be viewed through multiple peepholes. The holes in a second, slightly shorter cabinet reveal something different: the circumference of a single aspen tree. Which tree? It doesn't matter. The forest *is* the tree, and the tree a whole forest. Fortescue calls this piece *Panopticon*, a word that sounds like *panorama* but has its origin in a less benign idea. Coined by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham (only a few years after those first convicts arrived in Australia), the word refers to a prison in which a circle of cells are arranged around a central guard post, making it possible to observe all the inmates at all times.

During the same residency, Fortescue took another picture of the snow-laden trees, but had it printed at such an enlarged scale that it is difficult to “read” it as anything other than a mass of abstract marks. We literally can’t see the trees for the forest. After a few moments of contemplation, fantastic forms may begin to appear out of the claustrophobic mass of light and dark, like the figures in Richard Dadd’s strange picture *The Fairy Feller’s Master-Stroke* (1855–64). Fortescue’s title for this photographic print, *First Fall*, refers both to the first snowfall recorded in the picture and to humanity’s acquisition of the knowledge of good and evil and subsequent ejection from paradise. Like Dadd’s weird trolls, the Victorian predilection for naming natural features after demons or their works (the Devil’s Paint Pots, the Witch’s Cauldron) suggests the effects that that fateful descent has had on our relationship with wilderness. It isn’t an accident that the only way to really decode this image is to stand far away from it.

4. *These boots are made for walking*

Viewed as a group, these cabinets look almost peripatetic. Their long legs seem to be made for traveling—like, perhaps, those of their maker. The deeply traditional nature of their construction and materials—beautiful wood, gleaming brass and glass, delicate inlays of shell—contrasts fascinatingly with the digitally manipulated elements and images that identify them as objects of the 21st century. Their three feet are in two places: tradition and innovation, craft and art, micro and macro, innocence and knowledge. These binary pairs are not opposites. They are relationships, embodied through Fortescue’s imagination.

These pieces also evoke another, special kind of cabinetmaking: one common to the two worlds inhabited by the artist, both metaphorically and physically. Once upon a time, in order to assert the high level of craft of which they were capable, New World artisans created cunning and exquisite objects as gifts for important visitors, using local materials. Later, such works made appearances at international expositions and world’s fairs. Like the contents of a collector’s cabinet, they were meant to inspire wonder and admiration in the thousands of spectators who attended such events. Another feature of these fairs was interesting

inventions, wondrous mechanical devices. *Soundings* (2008), made in collaboration with Lawrence LaBianca, is both *wonder* and *cabinet*, all in one. A table with elegant cabriolet legs serves as the pedestal for an enormous horn, something like the old-fashioned Victrola horn from the early days of sound reproduction. But the table is a lattice of welded steel rods, filled with rocks. The artists submerged this structure in the ocean for a couple of months, during which time it acquired a mesmerizing patina of rust and sea creatures. Standing close to it, a murmur of sea sounds is audible coming out of the enormous horn, like the sound of the surf we listened to as children, shells to our ears, longing for the beach.



Soundings, 2008

These days, the instant communication made possible by electronic media has obviated the need for the kind of show-and-tell that expositions once offered. Or has it? These pieces and their maker remind us that we are not only a pair of eyes, but a body as well. To appreciate Fortescue's work, we must engage in an intimate, almost voyeuristic relationship with each piece, savoring its details and secrets. At the same time, only a distant view reveals the whole picture. We must step forward and back, look (and listen) closely and from far away, as he has.

Maria Porges
Oakland, 2009

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