

Mig Dann

*The Intimacy of Scrutiny*



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Edited by Josephine Mead

# Home

Essay by  
Josephine Mead

*Home* is a concept that has re-emerged in many guises throughout the context of Mig Dann's deeply considered artistic oeuvre and extended lived experience. An adverb definition for *home* states, *deep; to the heart*. This is an apt definition for Mig; for the unapologetic and courageous life she has lived and the vulnerable work she has created in the process—work that does not shy away from experiences of pain, childhood trauma, the discomfort of memory, and the multifariousness of queer experience.

Mig has fashioned many *homes* throughout her life, weaving poetic threads across continents. Her efforts towards experimental thought and deep curiosity and consideration have demanded a brave and non-linear approach to life, and so it is with a thematic approach, and not a chronological one, that I will examine her story. Mig left her childhood *home* of Perth as soon as she was able and found a spiritual *home* in the avant-garde counterculture of 1960s-70s New York—a place that she still recounts as *home*.

Her astute understandings of language and text led her to find *homes* in France, where she worked on research projects and as a translator for David Bowie at the Château d'Hérouville. Several years working in the popular music industry were followed by some years as assistant to Billy Klüver, co-founder and director of Experiments in Art & Technology. Mig worked on seminal projects with Billy, including *Laser Concert* by David Tudor for Xenon Nightclub, Trisha Brown's dance performance *Opal Loop* and the 1989 publication *Kiki's Paris*, documenting the life of Kiki de Montparnasse and the vibrant artists' community of Montparnasse from 1900-1930. At 48 years old she found the love of her life, actor Betty Bobbitt, who became her *home*—a *home* that will always be there, despite



Mig Dann, *Cigarette Girl*, 1974, New York.  
From the artist's personal archive.



Mig with daughter Sarah Bird, 1970, Honfleur, Normandy, France.  
From the artist's personal archive.

Betty's death in 2020. Together, Betty and Mig carved out many *homes*, in Orvieto in Italy, in Rome, with a piano in prime position for Betty, and in the Blue Mountains in New South Wales, running a gift shop and craft gallery. As *home* would always be situated where Betty's beloved sons lived, they settled back in Australia, in the then derelict north-eastern section of Richmond in 1990—a far cry from Mig's beloved *home* of New York. I met Mig in 2010 in the *home* that is art school.

Mig was in the first year of the Bachelor of Fine Art (Sculpture) degree and I was across the road in the Fine Art

(Expanded Studio Practice) degree. Mig has often referred to feeling at *home* when arriving at art school as a mature-aged student. It was in Mig and Betty's Richmond *home*, surrounded by artworks and warmth, that I shared dinners, listened to Betty play the piano and got to know snippets of Mig's life story. My mother visited their *home* recently and commented that it 'was a house where two people had created a real *home*, finding just the right spot for everything.' This is an apt summation of M and B—two people, together, finding just the right spot.



*Sehnsucht*, 2016, Mig Dann. Photograph by Jacqui Henshaw.

Melbourne and shipped over to Germany. *Sehnsucht* is a work made of three boats that speaks of belonging, place and *home*—themes to be carried throughout much of Mig’s work. The installation of *Sehnsucht* in 2016 was followed by a six-week residency at the park. In the late 1970s, Mig worked as a photo researcher, spending countless hours in the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Musée Carnavalet in Paris, locating images of artists working in Montparnasse in the 1920s. This practice in identifying others placed her well to identify herself in an archival image, based on a small photograph that she found amidst her mother’s belongings after her death in 2005. The photograph shows a group of children, with a nurse, huddled under a table during air raid practice at the Presbyterian Babies Home in Camberwell, Melbourne in 1942. One of the children is Mig. The unknown nurse, with kind and deep-set eyes, has a startling likeness to Betty. As Betty supported Mig through the journey of understanding, shock and questioning that accompanies the revelation of adoption, the symbolism of this

To think of ideas of *home*, we must think of notions of place. I’ll begin with a place that Mig found herself in 2016, far from the *home* that she had created in Australia with Betty, surrounded by beech, spruce and pine trees in the forests of Wesenberg Sculpture Park, Mecklenburg, Germany—a site that was a former orphanage with a dark history. Mig finished the Fine Art Honours degree at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in 2015. Shortly after, she was commissioned to produce a sculpture for the park, and thus *Sehnsucht* was fabricated in



*Nurse entertaining babies in Air Raid Practice*, Presbyterian Babies Home, Camberwell, 1942, ‘The Herald’, photographer unknown (Australian War Memorial Archives, public domain).



*Absence*, 2013, Mig Dann. Photograph by Lauren Dunn.

likeness has not been lost. Upon further investigation, Mig discovered that the first year of her life had been spent within the orphanage. She had been adopted. It was this heavy realisation that accompanied Mig to Germany, and it was during the residency under those trees, next to a lake, that she realised the need to unravel the painful and complex experiences of her childhood through her art practice. It was there that she found the catalyst that led



her to undertake a trauma-informed and practice-led PhD in Fine Art at RMIT, which, at this time of writing, she is soon to complete. In Germany Mig proactively chose to *remember, in order to transform a fractured identity*. [1]



*The Colour of Time (Forever Jung)*, 2017, Mig Dann. Image by the artist.

by typed words from C.J. Jung’s *Theory of the Personal Unconscious* (1933). Long before Mig undertook the residency, the house that she was to work within was an orphanage—a *home* for children without *homes* of their own. This history, accompanied by Mig’s personal realisations, and the time and space that a residency allows, enabled reflections on how displaced she had felt for much of her life. *The Colour of Time* became an allegory for this sense of displacement and the need to reassemble memories to counteract this and find a sense of place and *home*. It was time to practice through the words of Jung, stepping into *Everything of which [she] was once conscious but [had] now forgotten*. [2]

It wasn’t until Mig started researching and unravelling the effects of her traumatic memories that the full impact caused by the separation between infant and mother became clear. The difficulty of delving into memory is symbolised through the process of working with the blue tulle – it is not easy to sew. It is a stiff fabric and doesn’t have the fluidity of softer weaves. It is difficult. The work of memory, particularly when related to trauma, is never easy. It makes sense that there is friction within the making.

*Absence* and *The Colour of Time* act as precursors to *The Colour of Time (Sous Entendu)* (2017), where Mig embroidered a poem directly onto another tulle dress. The act of sewing has become important: perforating fabric to perforate shields of memory within the self, or to immortalise lines of history. The poem for this work by Anne Stevenson (1933-2020) cites

In her suitcase, bound for Germany, Mig carried one artwork: a dress that she had sewn from pale blue tulle—a material that was to become integral to later installations—for a work created in 2013 titled *Absence*. *Absence* functioned as a type of dream sequence. It consisted of the tulle dress, suspended in space; a projected image of the dress with a photograph of her mother’s face cast above it; and Mig, standing in the gallery wearing a blue tulle dress—a representation of three matrilineal generations, the empty suspended dress symbolising her daughter who was living in New York at the time. Acts of considered looking are central to Mig’s practice. Whether temporally—looking forward and back through memory and history; or visually, looking to images of clouds for expanses of weightless possibility. Mig has fashioned a life around curious acts of looking. Mig suspended and photographed the dress so it appeared to be floating in the sky, with the assistance of fellow resident and photographer Jacqui Henshaw, within the grounds of the park, to create *The Colour of Time (Forever Jung)* (2016), a work that consists of an image of the dress, encircled



*The Colour of Time*, 2017, Mig Dann. Image by the artist.

subtle eroticism, welcoming and enveloping the reader: *Don't think / that I don't know / that as you talk to me / the hand of your mind / is inconspicuously taking off my stocking, / moving in resourceful / blindness / up along my thigh. / Don't think / that I don't know / that you know / everything I say / is a garment.* [3] It is through a relationship with cloth that Mig continues to unravel her lived experience, often drawing on intersectional research methodologies of creative practice, feminist art history and queer autoethnography in the process. The repetition that comes with the act of sewing has similarities to the repetition that exists in many body-oriented, trauma-based therapies. In her room, within that old orphanage in Germany, living in those buildings that had housed so many displaced children, Mig was *filled with a sense of anxiety and weight, an embodied response to the imaginary. The past entered the present as a trespasser, not as an invited guest.* [4] The need to repeatedly investigate these past traumas through her art practice quickly came to the fore. Memory became a garment that needed to be sewn, stretched, folded, worn and made anew. Mig has since continued to reflect upon her past trauma, compounded by infant institutionalization, adoption and sexual abuse, all events that occurred between the ages of six weeks and twelve years.

The image of dress against sky moved through the medium of video for *The Colour of Time* (2017). Collaborating with artist Curtis Moulton, who fashioned an ambient sound score for the film, creating a mournful reflection on absence, weight and freedom. This work acts as a tender meditation on the possibility for hope amidst memories of loss.

When Mig first arrived in Paris in 1970, her two children, aged 5 and 7 in tow, she made her way to Communauté d'Emmaus, run by a religious order on an island in the Seine, to purchase



*The Language of Dreams*, 2017, Mig Dann. Photograph by Lucy Foster.

some secondhand furniture and set up a new *home*. Here she fell in love with an old iron bed, a three-quarter size fold-up former campaign bed, most likely carried by poor soldiers during the Napoleonic wars. This heavy bed travelled the world with Mig—from Paris it was carried atop her car to friends in London, was dragged for a year to a house Mig was renovating in Dorset, UK, accompanied Mig and Betty to Mig's house in Orvieto, Italy—a house

that she had fixed up, dividing her time for some years between Italy and New York, and was finally shipped across the ocean to Australia. It was in Mig's Richmond studio in Butler Street in 2017 that it was fashioned into an artwork: *The Language of Dreams*. Mig sewed a clear mattress for the bed and filled it with white feathers. Feathers and bird song have made many an appearance within Mig's work. As Mig slowly found her *home* with Betty, so did the bed. Mig mused that *the feathers were a logical outcome in a way from the nests* [5] that would appear in other works that explored ideas of *home*. *Often there were little tiny feathers in the nests. I liked the idea of having a transparent cover and being able to see the feathers. In a way the bed came to represent the trauma of the abuse.* [6] The use of feathers allows for two separate associations: that of a mythologised spirituality that we associate with feathers through thoughts of birds, angels and freedom; and darker tales of birds slaughtered young,

just for their feathers. They became an ideal material for symbolising trauma and an apt structure to house the pain of childhood sexual abuse that had marked Mig's earlier years.

Delving deeper into these painful childhood memories, Mig created *Hush Money* in 2019. An image-based work consisting of two enlarged and suspended digital images of ten shilling notes. The notes have been manipulated with the addition of the title *Hush Money* and the inclusion of photographs of Mig as a child, aged eight and twelve.

*When the 'uncle', a navy friend of my father, who managed a sheep station in the far north of W.A., visited my family two or three times a year, he was always sent to sleep in the spare bed in my room. My younger brother had a bunk bed in his room, and whether it was thought the uncle couldn't climb up to the top bunk, or my mother wanted to hide the fact that my brother wet his bed, I don't know. As he left, he always put a ten-shilling note on the fridge for me, it was a lot of money. This was excruciating; I remember viscerally the mixture of emotions that flooded through me – shame, dread, fear, anxiety.*



Mig Dann, 1973, New York City.  
From the artist's personal archive.

*I always accepted the money. [7]*



*Hush Money*, 2019, Mig Dann. Photograph by Lucy Foster.

*The American psychoanalyst and scientist Peter Levine reiterates French philosopher Henri Bergson's theory that there are two fundamentally different types of memory: conscious and unconscious. Similar observations and extensive experiments have confirmed that the two distinctly different forms of memory are explicit and conscious, and implicit and unconscious. 'Trauma is a form of implicit memory that is profoundly unconscious and forms the basis for the imprint trauma leaves on the body/mind'. [8]*

It is the slippages between consciousness and unconsciousness, between memory, repression, absence and realisation, that Mig has straddled through her work and life—a liminal zone echoed by her insomniac tendencies and insatiable curiosity for making.

The complexities and nuances of these processes of remembering are drawn out in *Everything of which I was once conscious but have now forgotten* (2019). The first iteration of this work was created when Mig was seventy-seven years old. Returning to her bolt of difficult pale blue tulle, she sewed the same number of infant-sized garments, to be suspended from the ceiling. The most recent iteration of the work in the survey exhibition,





*Everything of which I was once conscious but have now forgotten*, 2019, Mig Dann.  
Photo by Lucy Foster.

*Mig Dann: The Intimacy of Scrutiny*, at Counihan Gallery (2022), required an additional three garments to be made—a garment for each year of Mig’s life. Their cloud-like form, suspended en masse, recalls feelings of hope and freedom—a sentiment that is carried through Mig’s continual use of cloud imagery and horizons in works such as *The Blue of Distance* (2015), *Horizon II/III* (2014), *Horizon III* (2014), *Horizon IV* (2014), *Looking down looking up* (2017), and *swift-flow+depth* (2020). Yet the ghostliness of the garments, the sheerness of the small bodies, considers the missing within her childhood— representations of the lack of a *home* of safety within the self, an experience that occurs when one is subjected to trauma. Nancy Verrier suggests that:

*any injury to the “ideal state of the self” results in the “primal wound”. This wound occurs before the infant has separated her identity from that of her mother, leaving the infant feeling a lack of completeness, or fracturing. The inability of the infant to mourn the loss of her mother and the need to guard against further loss may lead to the adoption of a ‘false self’.* [9]

Mig has carved her own name in the sky, working to make sense of the self.

Clouds, blue skies, horizon lines and the expansive hope that a body of water can evoke, are visual motifs that have repeatedly come up in Mig’s work. They are indicative of the way Mig has lived her life – searching for freedom, creativity and poeticism, searching for boundarylessness. Under the sparkling New York sky, aside the waters of the Seine, under the clouds of Orvieto, in the expanse of Betty’s love, amidst birdsong within their backyard in Richmond, and in the murky depths of the Hudson River, Mig has found the solitude and space necessary to find modes of safety, allowing her to move towards a sense of *home*. It is the stillness within the making that enables an artist to realise this sort of vulnerable work. She has recreated these horizons, depths and possibilities for the viewer.



L-R Erik Boer, son Andrew Bird, Mig Dann, daughter Sarah Bird, 1975, Fire Island, New York. From the artist’s personal archive.

Through spending time with the sky and the ocean she has unraveled memories, illustrated through the artist book, *swift-flow+depth* (2020), a concertina made of images of the Southern Ocean, joined to create an expanse of blue that feels like it will go on forever. Where the water meets the sky, Mig has written her memories by hand:

*As a child I lived / between the river and the ocean, / water was my medium. / Splashing in the shallows, / swimming in the river, / looking for tadpoles in the swamp / and then having*



*to pull off the leeches. Swimming way out, / floating on my back gazing at the sky and / seeing pictures in the clouds, wondering what lay / beyond the horizon. [10]*

Mig often recounts that the happiest time of her childhood was with her father on their boat.

Of the many waters Mig has waded between and within, it was between two rivers, *deep water / in New York City / seeking comfort in swift-flow and depth, returning to the familiarity of water, / a remembered feeling of identity and place* [11], that many of Mig's most influential memories were formed. As illustrated in the essay by Cherry Vanilla in the centre of this publication, the heady mix of art, partying and free love that 1970s New York epitomised, allowed



*swift-flow + depth*, 2020, Mig Dann.  
Photograph by Jacqui Henshaw.

revelations and opportunities to abound for the young Mig. Wrapped up in this new world and through the ever-veracious Cherry, Mig met her partner for the next thirteen years. It was within the hedonistic bubble of Fire Island, with Cherry by her side, that Mig created



*The blue of distance (part I)*, 2015, Mig Dann.  
Photograph by the artist.

the memories that were to inform *Survival* (2020). This work celebrates and pays tribute to the brave gay men that descended upon Fire Island during the Summer at the time – an enclave of free-love that allowed an escape from conservative, heterocentric pressures and a chance to rejoice before the devastation of the AIDS Crisis hit the city. From extrapolating singular memories to diving into multiple ones, Mig created *I remember...* (2018); a sculptural installation consisting of an old chair, with the title of the work carved into its timber frame, a small wooden table and a typewriter that sits atop, from which is threaded an extensively long

roll of paper, imprinted with typed memories from Mig's life. She recounts:

*I remember my first crush on a girl at school. [...]*

*I remember my mother with a full mouth of straight pins. [...]*

*I remember going to the Metropolitan Opera in Lincoln Centre for the first time and imagining I saw Gertrude Stein staring down at me from an upper balcony. [...]*

*I remember being eight months pregnant and hearing on the car radio that JFK had been shot. I was wearing a pink and white checked dress. [...]*

*I remember visiting Cherry and her friend Richard at the Hotel George V to bring them some hash. They were in this enormous bed and wanted me to join them, but I fled. [...]*

*I remember the first time I went to Max's Kansas City with Dory Weiner. She was a friend of Mickey Ruskin so we went to the back room and I always did after that. [...]*

*I remember my father catching crayfish in pots around Rotto, then lighting a fire on the beach to boil seawater in old kerosene tins. We just threw the live crays into the boiling water. [...]*

[12]

This work was to evolve into a spoken-word piece titled *Night Sky / I remember...* (2019). In this filmic work, Mig recounts memories of the past, while three monitors show images of the night sky—the moon slowly oscillating. Mig explains that:

*Video and film allow a focus on ideas behind fundamental human experiences and aspects of consciousness. Time is video's basic material; it can be stretched, condensed, accelerated or decelerated to reveal a subject*

*more precisely, to get closer to grasping the ungraspable. It can encourage us, perhaps, to address the world beyond appearances. It is an expression of inner metaphysical experience*

*with no conclusion or resolution. This intuitive work can evoke emotions in a viewer through the dynamism of subjective experience [...] Each paragraph, mostly short, starts with the words, 'I remember', with memories allowed to rise to the surface of consciousness and, like memory itself, conjuring ideas, objects, people and events across time and space, with no attempt at a chronology... Like my use of everyday materials, these recollections are both mundane and deeply personal, ranging from my earliest memories to relatively recent events. The encounter with the cloudy, moon-filled night sky, as a backdrop for self-reflection and my lived experience, is a*



*Night Sky / I remember...*, 2019, Mig Dann.  
Photograph by Josephine Mead.

*limitless escapist fantasy. [13]*

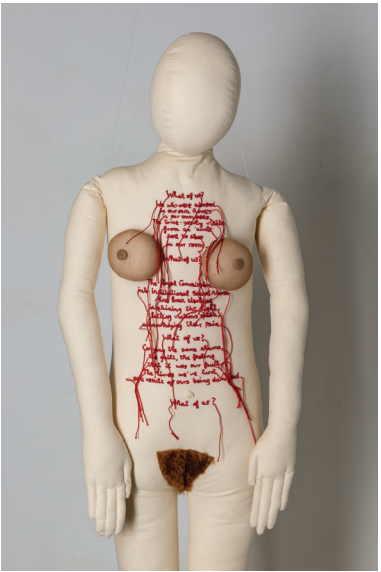
Memory is a tricky thing. As Mig wove adventures across multiple continents, creating new memories, the memories of her past, the painful ones, were always waiting in the wings. In *Hung out to Dry* (2018), *Dopplegangster* (2020) and *Under this roof* (2019) she bravely brings them to the fore. The works create space and a platform for future survivors of abuse to find understanding and voice. *Hung out to Dry* consists of a naked figure, sewn from calico. Across her chest, in blood-red thread, words are sewn:

*What of us? / We who were abused in our homes, / in our own beds. / The twice-yearly visits from an 'uncle' / sent to sleep in our room. / What of us? / The Royal Commission / has been sterling in shining the light / letting victims speak / acknowledging their pain. / What of us? / Carrying the same shame, / the guilt, the feeling that it was our fault. / The lives we've hurt / as a result of ours being damaged. / What of us? [14]*

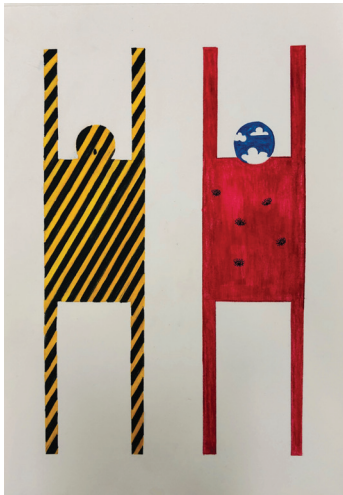
The poem—beginning and ending *What of us?*—is a call to raise the voices of survivors. That's the thing about



*I remember...*, 2018, Mig Dann.  
Photograph by Lucy Foster.



*Hung Out to Dry*, 2018, Mig Dann. Photograph by Lucy Foster.



creating work around trauma—you speak, and you give voice to the voiceless. We are more powerful when we can collectively bare our pain, when we listen to one another.

When examining trauma one is encouraged to consider ideas of dissociation as a consequence of, and a reaction to, traumatic events. *Dopplegangster* (2020) examines this. The sculpture consists of two child-size figures, made from painted timber and forever hung on a frame that is reminiscent of childhood monkey bars. The violence of the figures being hung where their hands should be and being kept within this hanging position—a durational physical exercise that would quickly become excruciating—speaks to the violence of childhood abuse. The viewer is invited to swing the sculptures, becoming implicated in the handling of the figures. We are reminded of the power that adults can have upon children:

*Dopplegangster* (working drawing), 2020, Mig Dann. Work by the artist.

*I must have been a naughty child. There was always an*

*internal*  
*struggle*

*between good girl/bad girl, and I think the bad girl usually got the upper hand. My mother often told me that I would be sent to a reform school for juvenile delinquents, that I was a brazen hussy, that 'just wait until your father comes home, he'll give you the strap'. Which he did on a few occasions, but I could tell his heart wasn't in it. [15]*

*Under this roof* (2019) is an accordion-style artist book that reconstructs Mig's family album—a response to her initial years being expunged from the official family archive, only appearing as a *primped and polished toddler*. [16]



*Under this roof*, 2019, Mig Dann.  
Photograph by Lucy Foster.

The book consists of sixteen drawings, a title page and a cover page between board covers, the front one cut out to reflect the images underneath. The photographs within the icon-like frame are images of Mig's family members and her, between the ages of six months and twelve years. Inside are sixteen drawings made with an old portable typewriter. In each drawing a single word is repeated in black ink, with one word in red:

*The text is dense, there is no breathing space within the form. They are feelings or emotional states or desires. They are memory / absence / loss / dislocation / silence / sorrow / flight / belonging / appetite / desire / identity / politics / poetics / insomnia / time / love. Not knowing my history growing up but marked by the same sense of loss, absence and outsider-ness as other adoptees. Struggling with feelings of anger, disconnectedness, and unable to express any negative emotions as a child to my mother. Being slapped across the face for answering back or expressing anger. Wanting to please, to seek approval and also being afraid of her— the icy distancing. I was always running away; from the age of five when I caught a tram to my grandparents' flat in the city to multiple occasions as an adolescent. [17]*

*Alternate Reality* (2014) also brings the past to the present, drawing forth a memory that was created long before the realisation of adoption dawned. A large vinyl print adhered to the wall shows a photograph of Mig's maternal grandfather's work bench. Before it stands a





*Alternate Reality*, 2014, Mig Dann.  
Photograph by the artist.

trapezoid-form plywood sculpture — a hollow structure with a glass lid. Inside, a wooden log is suspended, able to be turned by a brass handle on the side: a device for looking and feeling. As a child, Mig has fond memories of being propped up on a log, watching her grandfather work. One day, the log’s function shifted into a mode of brutality. A white chalk line was drawn on the log’s face by her grandfather. The line was to indicate the location for him to hypnotise a chicken, shortly chopping off its head. This act of brutality, intended to feed the family, stayed with Mig, leading her to create this work many moons later. Perhaps this was to indicate the trauma-informed severing of identity that was to come.

Part of the strength of Mig’s wider oeuvre is her dedication to revisiting visual motifs and themes in order to unravel and challenge personal experience —such as the somewhat devotional symbols of boats and nests, used to challenge what *home* means, that consistently appear throughout her work. The copper and metal flywire boats of *Here and Now* (2014), stand as symbols for the feeling of *home* that was to

be found within fluvial possibility, while playing on the boat with her father as a child. The ply dinghy of *Dis/location* (2010), cast in an impenetrable sea of barbed wire, speaks of the erasure and withholding of a safe *home* for displaced refugees at the hands of the Australian Government. On the seat of this boat sits a small photograph of Mig’s ex-partner as a child with her brother—two children who came to New York from Berlin with their parents in 1950 as displaced persons seeking a safe *home*.

Nests as visual representations of *home* have been a motif that Mig has often returned to. A safe structure found when exploring the waterways of her childhood after a storm and subsequently gifted to her by friends for artworks in her mature years. Mig was taken by the *material qualities, extraordinary weaving with spit or saliva used to bind them together, the form... the idea of the egg*. [18] For Mig, these notions represent so strongly ideas of *home*. In Richmond, with Betty, in the most stable *home* either of them had ever known, Mig began carving nests into old encyclopedias.

In 2018 Mig was commissioned to produce a sculpture for a private estate that had been ravaged by the 2009 Marysville bushfires. *Lothlorien (reclaimed)* was constructed from a mangled gate, found on the property. The gate was refashioned to stand as sculptural form, bearing the weight of a fallen log from the property, with the addition of a bird bath. From the horror of the bushfire, an artwork was created that allowed for new life. This is an apt allegory for the way Mig has transformed her trauma into creative expression—carving out space for survivors to



*Dis/location*, 2010, Mig Dann.  
Photograph by the artist.



*Untitled (Belonging)*, 2012, Mig Dann.  
Photograph by the artist.



experience new modes of understanding and connection.

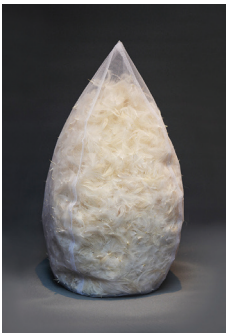
The presentation of sculpture in situ within the physical world brings forth the importance of site and space. In *The past comes back to haunt* (2020) Mig hung a collection of soft sculptures—machine and hand-sewn white, tulle teardrop forms of varying scale—in the trees on the bank of the Birrarung in Alphington. The teardrops represent the ghosts of adoption.

*In this work I am making the ghosts visible; they are both absent and present. Much of my textile work is lightweight and/or suspended, 'utilising architectural form and space as a medium for exploring contemporary anxieties about trauma and its continued effect on both our political and personal lives and experience of past events'. Shadows and ghosts are metaphors for inchoate feelings and memories—I am making them visible by coaxing them from a bolt of fabric, the actions of cutting and sewing bring them close enough to be examined. [...] The branches could be reached by ladder, each act of suspension a gesture to expel these ghosts from my unconscious to another environment, distancing them from myself. [19]*

In *The weight of being* (2020), one of the teardrops is filled with feathers, a reference to the violence attached to the mass slaughter of ducks for the purpose of human consumer desires, and perhaps an allegory for the heaviness that comes with a complex life.



*The past comes back to haunt*, 2020, Mig Dann.  
Photograph by the artist.



*The weight of being*, 2020, Mig Dann.  
Photograph by the artist.



*Withholding*, 2022, Mig Dann.  
Photograph by Lucy Foster.

Continuing with textile-based work and returning to the motif of the dress, Mig created *Withholding* (2022). Installed for the first time in *Mig Dann: The Intimacy of Scrutiny* (2022) at Counihan Gallery, the work consists of five long black semi-translucent fabric panels, three of which contain photographs of a found, hand-sewn Victorian-era christening gown, documented by photographer Jacqui Henshaw. The work evokes the different ghosts that have encircled Mig's life as a by-product of adoption: personal ghosts carrying the unanswered questions that accompany her trauma, the ghosts of memories undocumented from the first year of her life, and the ghosts of secrets untold, carried by her mother.

In March 2021 Mig was to bravely push her practice into a much wider historical and social realm, moving outside of her own lived experience and looking to the past, to create one of her most ambitious works to date: *Just Breathe*. Shot in the Old Melbourne Gaol, *Just Breathe* references nineteenth-century women prisoners who wore masked to prevent communication. This experience mirrors the ways in which women have been silenced throughout history and echoes the mid-pandemic situation occurring at the time of production - where one must breathe under a protective mask, invoking the injunction to allay anxiety in extraordinary times. The black-and-white performative film, shot by cinematographer Jordan Kaye, and choreographed by Zoë Bastin, consists of five women moving in unison and disharmony within the space of the gaol. The women, of varying

ages and experiences are Tricia Page, Lesley Turnbull, Jude Worters, Zoë Bastin and myself. I also created a dissonant sound score to accompany the film. Through inviting me to perform and construct the score, Mig allowed me to position myself within the world of these past incarcerated women, imagining the complex layers of anxiety that they would have experienced. Standing in the Old Melbourne Gaol—wearing a black sack-like garment, my arms encased and a hessian mask across my face, I couldn't see properly. My peripheral vision was gone. The hessian scratched my face, and I could only see small fragments of the outside—glimmers of light, similar to when you open your eyes and stare into bright lights, or the sun, and your vision becomes spotty and impaired momentarily. A confetti-like vision that can often be beautiful. Although, I was aware that the joy of that feeling would not have been prevalent for women incarcerated in that space, who had walked those halls and heard the same sounds I was hearing. Their peripheral vision of a future and past would have been hindered—with the transformation and dysmorphia of the time they were incarcerated—time that would have stretched and melted and felt never-ending. When you are no longer in control of the timing of your body and life, the structure of time changes, as does the structure of sight. Their vision and their body clocks were no longer their own. *Just Breathe* embodies feelings of rage, powerlessness, anguish and submission.

The making of *Just Breathe*, while a creative triumph, was bittersweet. As Mig received the email from City of Melbourne congratulating her on receiving the grant to develop the film,



*Just Breathe*, 2011, Mig Dann.  
Photograph by Lucille Bone.



*gone*, 2021, Mig Dann.  
Photograph by the artist.

for poetry as political, poetry as feminist practice, poetry as social research and autoethnography, poetry as the personal that becomes the universal, and poetry as visionary activism. [20] On the six-month anniversary of Betty's death, Mig created *gone* (2021), a small, hand-sized book, printed on heavy rag paper with torn edges. Within it are photographs of Betty's hand, sometimes entwined with Mig's, taken while keeping vigil at Betty's bedside. *The embodied actions*

she was holding the hand of her beloved, Betty, as she slipped from this world, within a room in the Royal Melbourne Hospital. With Betty's death on 30th November 2020, Mig's most stable *home* slipped away. It has been within the non-linear stages of grief that Mig has found herself completing her PhD studies. Solace has been found within acts of writing and reading. The use of text, in particular poetry, has always been integral to Mig's practice. She utilized poetry as a tool, summed up in Sandra Faulkner's *Poetry Manifesto*, where she makes the case



Betty Bobbitt, McCarrs Creek, Sydney, New South Wales, 1989.  
From the artist's personal archive.



Mig Dann & Betty Bobbitt, Weissensee, Germany, 2016.  
Photograph by Liddy Clark.

*employed in handling the heavy, tactile rag paper, the folding and tearing, provided solace and reinforcement of the importance of touch as a means of addressing the pain and trauma of loss:*

*As B's hand appears and disappears between the folds I yield to grief—those hands that I know so well, that I can feel, that I can see on the piano keys without even closing my eyes.*

*Interspersed among the images are poems that I wrote in the months following B's death—cries from the heart. They always came with tears—*

*words and feelings that could not be contained—they were a one-sided conversation, a distillation of loss as the gradual acknowledgement of her physical absence from my life slowly emerged. [21]*

We started with ideas of *home* and will return to ideas of *home* and hope to conclude this essay. In 2013 Mig created *Hope*, an installation made of thirteen white polystyrene house-forms, arranged in a circle on the floor. The boxes represent notions of containment – an experience that Mig has grappled with in different guises throughout her life. Containers can be onerous and suffocating but can also be the things that hold us together, that keep us still and safe, that provide us with a *home*. Betty and artmaking have been the two containers that have kept Mig most safe. Above the houses of *Hope* are strung lights, gesturing down to the forms, as if in conversation with these blocks of *home*. A sound score, made of the fluttering of bird's wings, encircles the work. On the wall behind the sculpture is a poem by Emily Dickinson:

*Hope is the thing with feathers / That perches in the soul, And sings the tune without the words / And never stops at all ...[22]*

This poem is a perfect thought to ruminate upon while reflecting on an artistic career that will continue to unfold far beyond when this book goes to print. Through facing trauma, love, literature, freedom, art and opportunity with unbridled courage, Mig has found, for herself and for others, *hope, the thing of feathers...*



*Hope*, 2013, Mig Dann. Photograph by Lucy Foster.



- [1] Dann, M. (22/11/2021). *The Elusive Encounter: An exploration of memory and trauma through expanded spatial practice* (Unpublished PhD dissertation), RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, p. 5.
- [2] *Everything of which I was once conscious but have now forgotten*, 2019, Mig Dann, fabric, thread, wood, dimensions variable.
- [3] Stevenson, A. (1969) 'Sous-Entendu', in *Poems 1955-2005*, Bloodaxe Books, 2005.  
(For poem cited in artwork by Mig Dann: *Sous Entendu*, Anne Stevenson, *Poems 1955-2005* (Bloodaxe Books, 2005). Reproduced with permission of Bloodaxe Books. [www.bloodaxebooks.com](http://www.bloodaxebooks.com).)
- [4] Dann, M. (22/11/2021). *The Elusive Encounter: An exploration of memory and trauma through expanded spatial practice* (Unpublished PhD dissertation), RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, p. 9.
- [5] Mig Dann speaking during interview with Josephine Mead, Mig's home in Richmond, Victoria, Australia, 21st February 2022.
- [6] Ibid.
- [7] Dann, M. (22/11/2021). *The Elusive Encounter: An exploration of memory and trauma through expanded spatial practice* (Unpublished PhD dissertation), RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, p. 29.
- [8] Dann, M. (22/11/2021). *The Elusive Encounter: An exploration of memory and trauma through expanded spatial practice* (Unpublished PhD dissertation), RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, p. 52.
- [9] Dann, M. (22/11/2021). *The Elusive Encounter: An exploration of memory and trauma through expanded spatial practice* (Unpublished PhD dissertation), RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, p. 34.
- [10] *swift-flow + depth*, 2020, Mig Dann, accordion artist book, digital images, photographique rag paper, handwritten text, ink, board, tracing paper, 22 x 28 x 2 cm (closed).
- [11] Ibid.
- [12] *I remember ...*, 2018, Mig Dann, found wooden chair, carved text, bond paper, typewritten text, typewriter, glass vitrine, dimensions variable.
- [13] Dann, M. (22/11/2021). *The Elusive Encounter: An exploration of memory and trauma through expanded spatial practice* (Unpublished PhD dissertation), RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, p. 74.
- [14] *Hung out to dry*, 2018, Mig Dann, fabric, thread, embroidered text, polyester, fake fur, nylon, 159.5 x 43 x 23 cm.
- [15] Dann, M. (22/11/2021). *The Elusive Encounter: An exploration of memory and trauma through expanded spatial practice* (Unpublished PhD dissertation), RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, p. 73.
- [16] Ibid., 24.
- [17] Ibid., 25.
- [18] Mig Dann speaking during interview with Josephine Mead, Mig's home in Richmond, Victoria, Australia, 21st February 2022.
- [19] Dann, M. (22/11/2021). *The Elusive Encounter: An exploration of memory and trauma through expanded spatial practice* (Unpublished PhD dissertation), RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, p. 56.
- [20] Ibid., 59.
- [21] Ibid., 60.



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