

THE ART OF
FIONA HALL



QUEENSLAND ART GALLERY
19 MARCH - 5 JUNE 2005

ART GALLERY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA
8 JULY - 11 SEPTEMBER 2005

ORGANISED BY THE QUEENSLAND ART GALLERY

EDUCATION RESOURCE



QUEENSLAND ART GALLERY

INTRODUCTION

Leaf litter (detail)
1999–2003



Coca-Cola cans, sardine cans, bits of paper and discarded objects have been used frequently in my work over the years. You can make something look very delicate and extremely rich out of what otherwise would be a discarded item.¹

Through her transformations of everyday materials into complex objects, Fiona Hall explores a wide range of complex issues. These include the histories of language and colonisation, and the current state of the environment. Hall creates art works that are metaphors for the messages she explores. Many of her works have the ability to transform our views of everyday items. She does this by drawing on the history of the object, the language we use to describe them, or their place in the contemporary world.

This link between materials and messages is compelling in many of Hall's works. Her large-scale Polaroid photographs of the mid 1990s reflect consumer products and the desire people have for them. The artist has also used the Polaroid photograph to explore, in visual form, the stories of the 'great books' of literature.

Fiona Hall's background in photography and painting is closely connected to developments in her sculpture since the 1990s. The artist's photographs are actually images of three-dimensional scenes she has intricately crafted from materials including tin, plastic, paint, and found objects. These tabletop 'sets' are then photographed using a large-scale Polaroid camera.

The complexity of Fiona Hall's works comes from her exploration of many fields of interest. However, curator Julie Ewington suggests that:

... despite her excursions into a great variety of materials, and her wide-ranging travels, throughout three decades Fiona Hall has continued to pursue one overarching theme: the intricate and necessarily unfinished project of humanity's relationship with nature.²

Representing a cross-section of the artist's work from 1988 to the present, the Queensland Art Gallery exhibition 'The Art of Fiona Hall' is the first survey of the work of this leading Australian artist from this period.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Fiona Hall, in Max Pam (ed.) *Visual Instincts: Contemporary Australian Photography*, AGPS Press, Canberra, 1989, p.13.
- 2 Julie Ewington, *Fiona Hall*, Piper Press, Sydney, 2005, p.23.

'THE PRICE IS RIGHT' SERIES



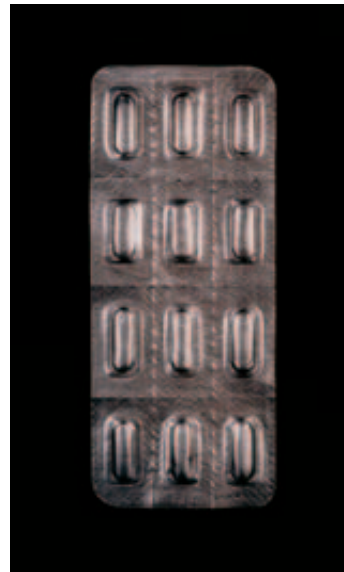
The real thing

(*Pills and Mobile telephone*)



Untitled (Y-fronts and mop)

(from 'The price is right' series) 1994



The large Polaroid photographs of the series 'The price is right' 1994 depict everyday consumer goods, such as mobile telephones, pills and Coca-Cola cans. Other familiar 'symbols', such as the figure of the Lohan (**Buddhist** holy man), also appear in the series. *The real thing*, for example, shows a pressed can sculpture of the Lohan created out of a Coke can. In combining these symbols, the artist is commenting on our increasing devotion to items of convenience.

The title of the series comes from the popular television game show *The Price is Right*, where contestants are rewarded for their knowledge of the cost of consumer goods. The technique of Polaroid photography is crucial to the works in 'The price is right' series; the glossy, flat surfaces mimic advertising images and mail-order catalogues. The size of the works also contributes to this effect, making the detail of the objects seductive and enticing.

In 'The price is right' series, Fiona Hall encourages us to consider our roles as consumers. Values in modern society are questioned with the artist's use of advertising slogans and common consumer products. The quick gratification epitomised by slogans such as 'Coke is life' or 'It's the real thing' is questioned by the artist's ironic use of these symbols.

USEFUL DEFINITIONS

Buddhism: A world religion founded in the fifth century BC, which teaches followers about life, suffering, desires and feelings in relation to the attainment of Nirvana (peace).

ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION

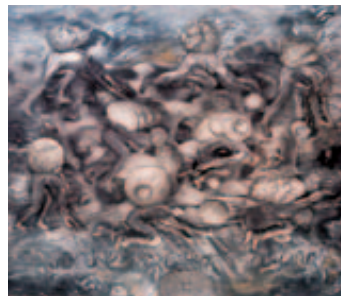
- In what ways do we use brands as a way of expressing ourselves? What are the connections between the artist's use of religious symbols and brands such as Coca-Cola?
- Describe an everyday object as if you were promoting it for sale. Think, for example, about the material, how it feels, how it is constructed. What kind of language would you use to make the object appealing to buyers? Draw on your knowledge of advertising slogans.

SEE ALSO

'Divine Comedy' series | Medicine bundle for the non-born child



'DIVINE COMEDY' SERIES



Clockwise from top left: *Inferno, Canto XIX: The Simoniacs*; *Inferno, Canto III: The Gates of Hell*; *Inferno, Canto XIII: The Forest of the Suicides*; *Purgatory, Canto XI: The Proud* (from 'Divine Comedy' series) 1988

Written between 1308 and 1321, *The Divine Comedy* by Florentine poet **Dante Alighieri** tells the story of his journey through Inferno (hell), Purgatorio (purgatory) and Paradiso (paradise). A source of inspiration for many artists, Fiona Hall has combined visual elements from this narrative with Polaroid photography. In these works, she questions the idea of the photograph as a recorder of reality by setting up constructed **tableaux** using **repoussé**.

As well as Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, Hall has explored **Pliny the Elder's** encyclopedia of natural science *Historia Naturalis* of AD 77; the Book of Genesis in the **Old Testament**; and the traditional Christian moral classification of the seven deadly sins. These texts allow Hall to explore systems of classification and the moral codes of the Western world. In the 'Divine Comedy' series, Hall shows that science and religion are learned, not predetermined.

Dante's exploration of moral oppositions is echoed in Hall's contrast of glinting aluminium figures against dark backgrounds. *Inferno, Canto XIX: The Simoniacs* depicts three Simoniacs (those who profit from their positions in the Church) as idealised and classically proportioned figures. The **repoussé** technique of shaping, scoring and beating the figures from the simple material of aluminium soft drink cans focuses attention on these three wretched figures.

As well as its moral lessons, Dante's epic played a great part in establishing a national linguistic identity for Italy; it was published in native Florentine vernacular, and helped form the Italian national language.

Fiona Hall's examination of the texts that inform moral codes and knowledge allows us to consider another truth that lies behind these 'great books' — that knowledge is powerful, and has been held in the hands of only a few.

USEFUL DEFINITIONS

Dante Alighieri: A Florentine poet (AD 1265–1321)

Old Testament: The first of the two main divisions of the Christian Bible, which corresponds with the Hebrew Scriptures.

Pliny the Elder: A Roman scientist (AD 23–79)

Repoussé: A process of creating an image or pattern in relief, usually in metal. The relief image is formed by hammering on the reverse side of the material. From the French pousser, meaning 'to push back'.

Tableau: (plural: tableaux) a still scene arranged and represented through specific means, such as theatre and painting.

ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION

- Why would the artist photograph these scenes instead of presenting them as three-dimensional objects? What is the role of photography in her work?
- How do you think the photographs explore the idea of an 'objective' view of the world?

SEE ALSO

Materials and methods

REFERENCES

Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1867, section 19, lines 69–72. The Institute for Learning Technologies at Columbia University <<http://dante.ilt.columbia.edu/comedy/index.html>>, accessed 12 Nov. 2004.
Alighieri, section 19, line 114.

'PARADISUS TERRESTRIS' SERIES

Plumeria acutifolia;
araliya (Sinhala);
maliya poo (Tamil);
frangipani/temple
tree
'Paradisus terrestris'
(Sri Lankan series)
1999



The theme of paradise on earth is explored in a number of Fiona Hall's works. As part of 'Paradisus terrestris', the artist has produced three distinct series since the late 1980s, each consisting of botanical specimens. These botanical specimens are intricately **filigreed** from tin, sprouting atop recycled sardine cans. Each partially opened can exposes an embossed, naked body part, or a scene of erotic play.

The first in this series, 'Paradisus terrestris' 1989–90, features an array of plants that make reference to paradise, such as the grapefruit (*Citrus paradise*) and the bird of paradise (*Strelitzia reginae*). The story of the Garden of Eden and its inhabitant's original, naked innocence corrupted by sin is alluded to in this series. In 'Paradisus terrestris', Hall uses analogies of the sexual parts of plants and people to contemplate the characteristics we share. The artist has noted:

There are more genetic similarities between us and the plant world than there are differences. These are mind blowing concepts that should make us take notice, because if we can't coexist with and maintain the plant world then human life is doomed.¹

A later series, 'Paradisus terrestris entitled' 1996, focused on Australian native flora, with the title of each work acknowledging each plant's botanical name, common name and Aboriginal name. This series was produced in response to the **Mabo/Wik Native Title Claims**, as Hall affirms:

... that this land and the plants that grow in it and the people whose land it originally was, have together a very long history of coexistence that must be acknowledged and respected.²

In 1999 Fiona Hall was an artist in residence at Lunuganga in Sri Lanka, a country estate with magnificent gardens. The third series of 'Paradisus terrestris', the Sri Lankan series, and a reprise of 'Paradisus terrestris entitled', was the result of this residency. The artist used golden sardine cans for sacred or significant plants such as the temple flower (sometimes known as frangipani), or lotus. In this case, 'Paradisus terrestris' refers to the colonial histories of both Australia and Sri Lanka; histories of invasion that have exerted a 'superior' knowledge over that of the local society. In other words, indigenous cultures and customs have been replaced by those belonging to the colonising power.

'Paradisus terrestris' is about systems of order, language and knowledge. The viewers' attention is drawn to these references to classification and, in doing so, they acknowledge the systems and codes at work in language, as well as the visual signs that enable the 'reading' of the label and the art work. Hall interweaves political, social and environmental issues with playful puns and cheeky innuendos. This series can be enjoyed for the beauty and skill of each intricate piece, however, further contemplation reveals many issues and questions.

USEFUL DEFINITIONS

Filigree: A form of ornamentation, usually formed by gold or silver twisted wire.

Mabo/Wik Native Title Claims: The Mabo decision in 1992 found that Indigenous land rights (or 'native title') debunk the claim that Australia was not inhabited by peoples prior to colonisation. The Wik decision in 1996 extended the Mabo claim and stated that native title rights could coexist with land rights held under pastoral leases.

ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION

- How does the artist's use of materials comment on the environment? How do these materials also comment on history and language?
- What are the continuing effects of colonisation on countries such as Australia and Sri Lanka? How does colonisation affect a country's language?

SEE ALSO

Materials and methods

ENDNOTES

- 1 Fiona Hall quoted in Deborah Hart, 'Fertile interactions', *Art in Australia*, vol.36, no.2, 1998, p.206.
- 2 Fiona Hall quoted in Suhanya Raffel, *Fiona Hall: A Transit Through Paradise*, The Asialink Centre, Melbourne, 1999, p.6.

MEDICINE BUNDLE FOR THE NON-BORN CHILD

Medicine bundle for the non-born child
1993–94



Medicine bundle for the non-born child is a **layette**, consisting of a matinee jacket, bootees, bonnet, rattle and a sixpack of baby bottles, made from recycled aluminium Coca-Cola cans. This work explores the botanical, cultural, economic, spiritual, social, and medicinal meanings and histories of plants.

Hall, who made this work after researching the history of the coca and cola plants, has said:

It's well enough known that the name *Coca-Cola* derives from the names of two narcotic plants (which originally were ingredients) . . . Both plants have a long history as stimulants in their original habitats of Africa and South America respectively, but they were also venerated and regarded as sacred. Coca leaves were carried in medicine bundles for use in religious ritual. *Coca-Cola* also has a number of uses. In parts of the 'developing' world it is used widely as a spermicidal douche and investigations by the Harvard Medical School found that *Classic Coke* is 91% effective in that role.¹

Like most of Hall's works, *Medicine bundle for the non-born child* contains many references and layers of meaning. The Coca-Cola can is a very loaded symbol in consumer culture. It is often used as an example of the effects of multinational companies and consumerism on economies and communities, both global and local. Hall's interest in the complex implications of international trade networks is also explored through later works such as *Cash crop* 1998–99 and *Leaf litter* 2000–02.

Hall often challenges the accepted nature of materials, and here she engages in an incredible process of knitting with blade-like strips cut from aluminium cans. She has taken the familiar, benign practice of knitting and transformed it into something extraordinary and dangerous by using such an incongruous material. The aluminium contrasts starkly with the traditional material of wool, but the sparkling metallic quality of the knitted garment makes a sharp and uninviting costume beautiful.

It is the disjunctions that Hall sets up in *Medicine bundle for the non-born child* that make this work so compelling: between the purpose of a layette (to provide comfort and warmth for a newborn child) and the material used to make it (sharp, cut aluminium); between the careful act of knitting babies'

clothes, and a layette that cannot be used (for a baby that will not be born); and between the rich local histories of the coca and cola plants, and what the Coca-Cola corporation has come to mean to a global population.

USEFUL DEFINITIONS

Layette: A collection of items for a newborn baby.

ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION

- Look at the sharp edges of the rings of the cans that have been used to make the rattle — could, or should, a baby play with this? Why do you think the artist has made these normally soft and safe items from a sharp and dangerous material?
- How would knitting with strips cut from Coke cans compare with knitting with wool?

SEE ALSO

'The price is right' series

ENDNOTE

- 1 Fiona Hall interviewed by Tim Morrell, 'Undermining the systems of a post-everything world', *Art Monthly Australia*, no.68, April 1994, p.10.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The route you take lies parallel to the words along these walls you slide along in search of that which might be said each step assured or bored or trembling to discover finally only that one foot has followed the other.

'PARADISUS TERRESTRIS' AND THE SARDINE TIN

The series 'Paradisus terrestris', initiated in 1989–90, presents an ordinary found object — in this case, a sardine tin — embellished with meticulous carving and engraving. The works illustrate the ways in which systems of classification — language and botanical classification — cross many boundaries between the natural and human worlds.

DOMESTIC ACTIVITIES

The domestic arts of knitting and beading are pivotal to many of Fiona Hall's recent works. The transformation of soft drink cans, soap and videotapes through traditional methods are features of the sculptural works *Medicine bundle for the non-born child* 1993–94 and *Cash crop* 1998–99, as well as series like 'Scar tissue' 2003–04. In *Cell culture* 2001–02, Hall pairs Tupperware containers with intricate beading extensions to create modified organisms. These works refer to the collections kept in **curiosity cabinets** in the homes of the wealthy during the nineteenth century, as well as genetic engineering in the fields of science and medicine today.

Bank notes and plant species are juxtaposed in *Leaf litter* 2000–02. In this work, Hall uses currency and plants from different countries, pasting together the notes and painting meticulous botanical drawings on their surfaces.

USEFUL DEFINITIONS

Curiosity cabinet: A precursor to museum collecting that became popular in the nineteenth century. Most collections included a variety of art objects, scientific instruments and specimens from nature.

Daguerreotype: The first widely used and affordable photographic process invented by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre in 1835 and made public in 1839. A copper plate was made light-sensitive by exposure to iodine and the image was developed by mercury vapour. The process produced only one sharp image on the copper plate, which was housed in a case. The technique was most popular for portrait photography.

Polaroid: A material which polarises light, by allowing only light polarised in a particular direction to pass through the material. A common use for the material is in sunglasses and microscope filters.

Polaroid camera: A type of camera that takes instant, self-developing pictures that was launched in 1947. The Polaroid camera produces unique images.

Repoussé: A process of creating an image or pattern in relief, usually in metal. The relief image is formed by hammering on the reverse side of the material. From the French, *pousser*, meaning 'to push back'.

ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION

- In many works, Fiona Hall uses common objects and goods such as Coca-Cola cans, bank notes, videotapes and food containers. Why do some artists use these everyday materials in their work? What are they saying about how we live?
- Investigate some of the materials used to create the works in the exhibition. To start, look at the works *Dead in the water*, *Medicine bundle for the non-born child* or *Leaf litter*. Why do you think the artist has chosen these specific materials to raise her concerns? Consider the environmental, social and economic issues involved.

ENDNOTE

- 1 Tim Morrell, 'Picturing the apocalypse: The art of Fiona Hall', *Art & Australia*, vol.25, no.2, Summer 1987, p.237.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Since the nineteenth-century invention of the **daguerreotype**, the technique and significance of photography has grown immeasurably. During the mid twentieth century, the expansion of photographic practices resulted from two important developments — the collection of 'fine art' photography by art museums, and the teaching of photography in art schools.

As an emerging artist in the mid 1970s, Fiona Hall explored photography using the large format 'view camera', an apparatus from the nineteenth century. This cumbersome technology, although producing very clear images, required immense patience. Hall took the camera into her surroundings in Sydney, photographing people at beaches, and also constructed her own landscapes and domestic images. Making the 'depicted look more realistic than the actual' was a common effect of the artist's photography from this time until the mid 1990s.¹

Polaroid photography

In 1985 Fiona Hall was one of seven Australian artists invited to work with a large-scale **Polaroid camera** in Sydney. She created and photographed tabletop 'sets' comprised of metal figures sculpted from soft drink cans, as well as other materials including textiles, linoleum, wire, painted images, drawings and photocopies. The size of the camera allowed for only a short distance between the apparatus and the image and, as a result, the works needed to employ maximum illusion to achieve the desired effect. Hall's use of the **Polaroid** technique played with the conventions of photography and the documentation of reality.

SCULPTURE AND FOUND OBJECTS

Repoussé

The **repoussé** technique features strongly in Fiona Hall's photographic and sculptural works. The technique of repoussé creates an effect somewhere between two- and three-dimensionality. Repoussé is created by pressing shapes and contours into a flat piece of metal. When shown in reverse, the technique creates the effect of being three-dimensional. In the 1980s Fiona Hall began making sculptural figures from aluminium to use in her Polaroid photographs. The collection of figures comprising the frieze *Words* 1990 spells out a text written by the artist:

SELECT BIOGRAPHY

- Born 1953 Sydney, New South Wales. Currently lives and works in Adelaide.
- 1972–75 National Art School (Diploma of Painting).
- 1978–82 Master of Fine Arts (Photography), Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, New York.
- 1983–2002 Lecturer, Photostudies, South Australian School of Art, University of South Australia, Adelaide.
- 1986 Solo exhibition, 'III III II: A Survey of Twelve Year Work', Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney.
- 1989 Solo exhibition, 'Illustrations to the Divine Comedy', Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney (touring exhibition).
- 1990 Group exhibition, Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art.
- 1994 Solo exhibition, 'Garden of Earthly Delights', National Gallery of Australia, Canberra (travelled to Melbourne, Sydney, Hobart, Perth and Brisbane).
Group exhibition, 'Biodata', Contemporary Art Centre, Adelaide (as part of the Adelaide Art Festival).
- 1996 Group exhibition, 'The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art', Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane.
- 1996–98 *Fern garden*, commission for the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
- 1997 Creative Arts Fellow, Canberra School of Art, Australian National University.
- 1998 Artist in residence, Mt Coot-tha Botanic Gardens, Brisbane; solo exhibition, 'Cash Crop', Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane.
- 1999 Artist in residence, Lunuganga, Sri Lanka; solo exhibition, 'A Transit through Paradise', Gallery 706, Colombo, Sri Lanka.
- 2000 *A folly for Mrs Macquarie*, public art commission for the City of Sydney.
Group exhibition, 'Biennale of Sydney'.
- 2002 Group exhibition, 'Converge: Where Art and Science Meet', Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, Art Gallery of South Australia.
- 2003–04 Group exhibition, 'Face Up: Contemporary Art from Australia', Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, Germany.
- 2004 Group exhibition, 'Living Together is Easy', Art Tower Mito, Japan, and National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
- 2005 Solo exhibition, 'The Art of Fiona Hall', Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

- The Art of Inclusion: Recent Australian Photography*. Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1999.
- Ewington, Julie. *Fiona Hall*. Piper Press, Sydney, 2005.
- Hart, Deborah. 'Fertile interactions'. *Art in Australia*, vol.36, no.2, 1998, pp.202–11.
- Morrell, Tim. 'Picturing the apocalypse: The art of Fiona Hall'. *Art & Australia*, vol.25, no.2, Summer 1987, pp.235–39.
- Morrell, Tim. 'Undermining the systems of a post-everything world'. *Art Monthly Australia*, no.68, April 1994, pp.8–10.
- Pam, Max (ed.). *Visual Instincts: Contemporary Australian Photography*. AGPS Press, Canberra, 1989.
- Photography is Dead! Long Live Photography!* Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1996.
- Radok, Stephanie. 'Trade'. *Artlink*, vol.21, no.4, 2001, pp.48–53.
- Raffel, Suhanya. *Fiona Hall: A Transit Through Paradise*. The Asialink Centre, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, 1999.
- Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York. Reprint. Penguin Classics, London, 2002; first published 1977.

ONLINE RESOURCES

- Fiona Hall
http://www.roslynoxley9.com.au/artists/17/Fiona_Hall/
- Lunuganga, Sri Lanka
http://archnet.org/library/images/thumbnails.tcl?location_id=9001;
<http://www.deccanherald.com/deccanherald/aug012004/ac3.asp>
- Carl Linnaeus
<http://www.ucmp.berkeley.edu/history/linnaeus.html>
- Dante Alighieri.
http://www.everypoet.com/archive/poetry/dante/dante_contents.htm;
<http://dante.ilt.columbia.edu/comedy/index.html>

LIST OF WORKS ILLUSTRATED

- Leaf litter* (detail) 1999–2003
Bank notes, gouache (183 components)
Dimensions variable
Collection: National Gallery of Australia

- The real thing* (from 'The price is right' series) 1994
Polaroid photograph on paper
Diptych: a: 75 x 55cm (irreg.);
b: 70 x 55.5cm (irreg.)
Purchased 2000. Queensland Art Gallery Foundation Grant
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

- (Pills and Mobile telephone)* (from 'The price is right' series) 1994
Polaroid photograph on paper
Diptych: 71 x 53cm (each)
Purchased 1995 under the Contemporary Art Acquisition Program with funds from John Potter and Roz MacAllan through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

- Untitled (Y-fronts and mop)* (from 'The price is right' series) 1994
Polaroid photograph on paper
Diptych: a: 56 x 76cm (approx.);
b: 56 x 76cm (approx.)
Collection: The artist
Courtesy: Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

- Inferno, Canto XIX: The Simoniacs* (from 'Divine Comedy' series) 1988
Polaroid photograph on paper
70 x 56cm (irreg.)
Purchased 1989 under the Contemporary Art Acquisition Program with funds from Sharon Pie and Marie Watson Blake through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

- Inferno, Canto III: The Gates of Hell* (from 'Divine Comedy' series) 1988
Polaroid photograph on paper
75.4 x 56cm
Collection: The artist
Courtesy: Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

- Purgatory, Canto XI: The Proud* (from 'Divine Comedy' series) 1988
Polaroid photograph on paper
61 x 50.8cm
Collection: The artist
Courtesy: Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

- Inferno, Canto XIII: The Forest of the Suicides* (from 'Divine Comedy' series) 1988
Polaroid photograph on paper
56 x 75.9cm
Collection: The artist
Courtesy: Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

- Medicine bundle for the non-born child* 1993–94
Aluminium, rubber, plastic
Layette comprising matinee jacket:
27.5 x 47.5 x 10cm, bootees:
7 x 5 x 8.5cm and bonnet:
13 x 13 x 6cm; rattle: 32 x 8.5 x 6cm;
six pack of baby bottles: 17 x 20 x 13cm
Purchased 2000. Queensland Art Gallery Foundation Grant
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

- Plumeria acutifolia; araliya* (Sinhala); *malliya poo* (Tamil); frangipani/temple tree
'Paradisus terrestris' (Sri Lankan series) 1999
Aluminium and tin
26 x 18 x 4cm
Collection: The artist
Courtesy: Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney