

A photograph of a woman standing in a forest. She is wearing a dark, patterned dress and a necklace. The forest has many trees with autumn-colored leaves (yellow, orange, and red) and some green foliage. A large, thick tree branch is visible in the upper left foreground. The text "Kate McMillan" is overlaid in the center of the image.

Kate McMillan

The Past is Singing in our Teeth



Kate McMillan

The Past is Singing in our Teeth

Sound composed in collaboration with Cat Hope, performed by Louise Devenish

At MOMENTUM Berlin

9–22 December 2017


MOMENTUM
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Contents

<i>A Call to Arms – Kate McMillan's recent work</i> by David Elliott	6
<i>The Past is Singing in our Teeth</i> by Kate McMillan	10
<i>Stories for Lost Sculptures</i> by Kate McMillan	13
<i>20 Responses to The Past is Singing in Our Teeth</i> by Richard Martin	22
<i>Epilogue</i> by Rachel Rits-Volloch	26
Endmatter	
Contributors	28
Acknowledgements	32
List of Works	33
Colophon	34

A Call to Arms ***Kate McMillan's Recent Work***

By David Elliott

Whether they have taken the form of videos, installations or objects, Kate McMillan's carefully constructed environments have been distinguished by a poetics of fragmentation that has allowed the impulses of historical and psychological displacement they represent to reverberate beyond the personal into a wider moral field. Having lived in Britain and Australia, and bridging the gap between them, she has been acutely aware of the impacts of colonisation and of how the land, and the nature that animates it, have both reflected and absorbed them. Her vision of the world is fertile, accumulative, full of ghosts. In this respect, her newest work is no different, yet a sense of urgency has replaced previous melancholy as patriarchy has risen to protest its power.

For McMillan, both politics (in the form of the accession of Donald Trump to the US Presidency) and the emotional transformations of her maturing young family were a trigger. 'Shock, outrage' and fear in a world that glorified sexual predation has mobilised her into constructing new work with a powerful, magical dimension that could outface malign force. The 5 *Spell Blankets* were the first of these, embellished with 28 'hag stones' as embodiments of protection, protest and anger. Aware that they were thought to provide magical portals into another dimension, she has been collecting stones with holes naturally occurring through them for a number of years. Randomly throwing them over blankets and sewing them tight where they fell, she 'fixated on thoughts of strength for my [9 year old] daughter... [with] a strong sense of urgency to throw the blankets over her to keep her safe.'



Touching on the most primordial emotions, McMillan embarked on threading a necklace with 19 milk teeth, collected from her 3 children, in a rite of passage that encapsulates loss, age, poverty and the need to mark out and remember life's transitions from child to adult. The necklace appears, worn by her daughter, in the final scene of *The Past is Singing in Our Teeth*, a 2-channel video installation, in which she climbs One Tree Hill, the place from where, in legend, the Celtic warrior-queen Boudicca surveyed London in her successful uprising against the Romans before her eventual defeat at an unknown place. A woman leader in an age of men, according to Tacitus, Boudicca fought to avenge '...lost freedom, my scourged body and the chastity of my daughters.' [Annals 14:35]

In McMillan's video, across four locations in different parts of the English countryside, the child bridges with her mother's childhood memories, wearing many pocketed 'spell dresses' filled with talismanic sculptures. The colours of the dresses echo the three seasons of winter, summer and autumn, the omission of spring reprises the title of a previous work with the harsh warning of its Latin motto: *Ver non semper viret – Spring does not always flourish*.

The sculptures that appear in the film are also used to create an aural landscape for both the videos and the exhibition. As objects, sound artist Louise Devenish improvised with them in a live performance, working to a score written by Cat Hope that was, in turn, based on 'shorthand poems'

written by McMillan in tribute to her mother's cryptic talent as a shorthand secretary. This sororal and matriarchal network of co-operation, action and influence is embodied throughout the tissue and structure of the exhibition and the works out of which it is comprised.

The secret knowledge of a shorthand poem is enlarged like a spell onto one of three tall white silk 'shrouds' that punctuate the exhibition, another, like the blankets, is adorned by hag stones. The third, greeting visitors as they enter as if it were some archaeological discovery, is an enlarged transparent printed X-Ray of the symmetrical images of a small child's jaw bone.

In this voyage between life, death and what lies between, McMillan has been successful in evoking an uncanny telescoping of time and history that, although recognisable, is partly beyond conscious reach. Other intuitions have to be brought into play. In almost every room the floor has been covered with rock salt; preserving and purifying, its culinary and metaphysical properties in unison. What we are experiencing here are not the cheap tricks of arty shamanism, nor is it fake witchcraft, or a bland reheating of well-worn feminist theory, but a sincere and strident call to arms. Celebrating a righteous and creative anger, McMillan casts a cold eye on the vagaries of power in a view of our time engendered by a humane, all-embracing, female principle.



The Past is Singing in our Teeth

By Kate McMillan

The Past is Singing in our Teeth extends the notion that artworks, objects and even smells can serve as an umbilical cord back in time, thus functioning as an intermediary into the past—in this case, a fictional past reinvented in the absence of women's histories. A mixed-media collage, *The Past is Singing in our Teeth* reconstructs a labyrinth of lost things through a film-based installation incorporating projected films, photography, sound, performance and sculpture. Like a conjuring or a haunting, it seeks to draw a line around the things that sit at the periphery of our vision. In particular, it imagines a lost archive of women's knowledges, a remembrance of which is triggered through the recovery of sacred objects and landscapes.

Filmed in four UK locations—the Welsh Borders, the Kent coast, a Hampshire lake, and One Tree Hill in London, as well as film sets (memory rooms) constructed in my studio, the exhibition traces the journey of a young girl as she rediscovers a heritage of knowledge and power. The work stitches together recreations of memories, combined with their physical remainders in the present day—objects, ephemera, locations and sounds. The films are inter-dispersed with photographs, spoken word and poetry, attempting to articulate the way memory inflects and informs the present, not as a series of linear and knowable narratives, but as constantly changing, ambiguous, beautiful and haunting residue.

These filmic spaces become points of access into a world that is somewhat disjointed from language, a world that is felt and internalized, carried in the body, played out and recreated in present day events. A central mechanism in this work is the creation of a series of sculptural objects that slip in and

out of roles—functioning at once as props, as sculptures, and as musical instruments that form the basis for the film score: a 'spell making' dress befit with numerous pockets, that house sculptures/percussion objects/relics; a silver necklace decorated with children's teeth; percussion stands for various sculptures and percussion objects; shorthand poems; silk fabrics with film stills printed on them which act as veils and barriers throughout the installation. Many of these objects are 'performed' as the score is restaged with percussionists in a live performance during the opening.

The Past is Singing in our Teeth plays with ideas including the repeating of history, the presence of linked signs, archetypes, place and the objects we carry alongside us throughout our lives. The interplay between what is lost and what remains, the repetition of certain behaviours, the seeking out of certain systems and themes become the visual language of the work. So, whilst the impetus for the work begins with my own biographical engagement with time and memory, the concepts expand outwards, inviting viewers to connect to the work through their own experiences and ideas. The work is quiet, refusing monumentality—instead framing a precarious and fragile movement through the world. Like a psychoanalytic investigation, the construction of the work becomes a tenuous relationship between the real and the unreal, what is known and what is not.



Stories for Lost Sculptures

By Kate McMillan

Hagstones

I must have been five or six when she died. My nanny. I remember going to sleep in her arms, all but falling off the side of her narrow single bed. I can smell her now, hear the tick of her bedside clock. That blanket of forgiveness and love that I only remember from her.

After she died we were clearing out her flat. The emptiness felt heavy in my stomach. I remember the top drawer of her bureau. A sea of sparkling gems—gold, sequins, brightly coloured and marbled plastics, silver chains, brooches, large and small ear-rings. A lifetime of glitter, a treasure trove to a small child, but nothing of real value. It was arranged so simply—so you could see it all at a glance—find the matching ear-rings at a dash.

As my small hand reached to the back, avoiding the sharp spikes of upturned brooches; the tips of my fingers found a wooden box. It was pushed hard up against the back of the drawer. Ducking down, I navigated the boxes route back to me, out over the treasures.

Inside the box was a curious stockpile of chalky stones—once white but now yellowing. As I observed each one individually in my hand—I realized that each one had a perfect hole right through its centre. Underneath the stones (there were seven) at the bottom of the box, was a little note. In neat handwriting that I didn't recognize, it said 'spells to keep her safe'.



Shorthand Poems

In my dream, I was wandering around my childhood home—the way it might have looked when I was nine or so. I could feel the cold of the bumpy apricot tiles rising up through my feet. I was in my nightdress. A white cotton thing that was just about too cold for that time of year. The house was empty, perhaps an hour or so away from sunset. I knew this as I could see the sun drawing down over the Indian Ocean in my peripheral vision. The whole house was a series of windows that captured the view outwards.

I couldn't hear anything. No cars, no birds. Just silence. As always, the house was meticulous—as if it could record your movements, simply by mapping the way you disturbed its internal order—a fingerprint, an upturned tassel on one of the carpets. The house was listening to me—watching me. Up until this point I hadn't realized I was dreaming—I had instead been existing in that familiar feeling of home and dis-ease.

But then the wind picked up and was violently whipping around the house, fighting its way in through the cracks. Sheets of note paper were flying around, disrupting the order of everything. I panicked, feeling instantly responsible for the chaos. But then as I grabbed one of the notes, and could see that it was not my writing, but my Mother's, written in her secret shorthand writing, I felt an instant release. It was her that had caused this – this chaos, even though she was absent.



Tooth Necklace

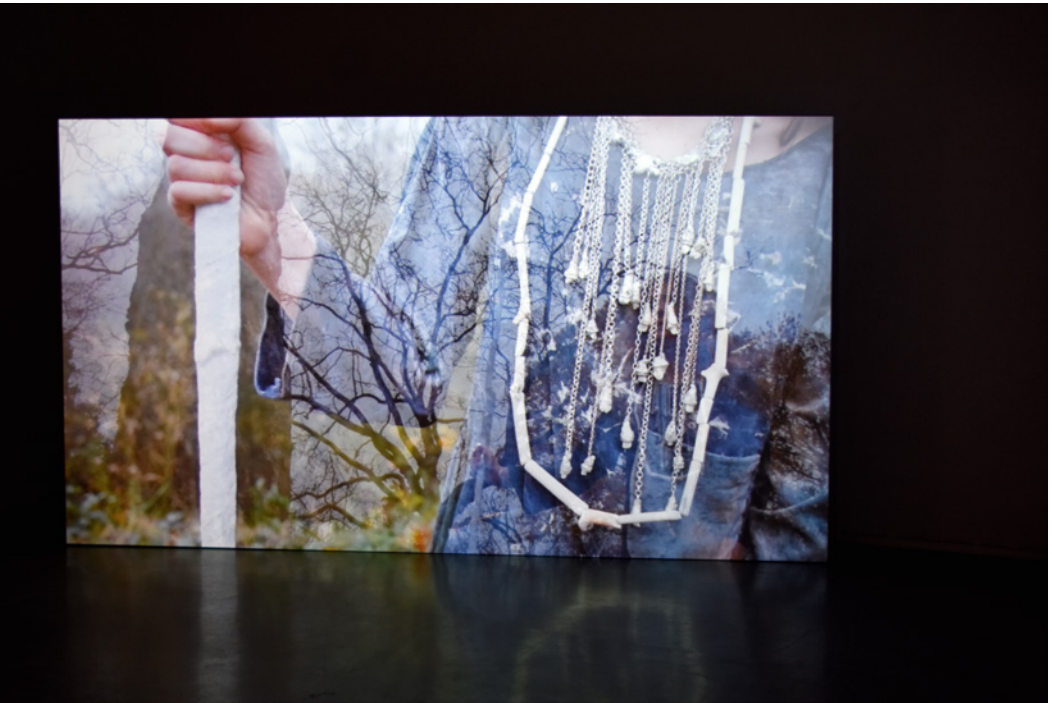
I'd been playing, well sitting really, in this field not far from where I used to holiday as a much smaller child. It was the smells that I was trying to get close to—really sticking my face down into the grass, the soil.

Smells can connect you in that way, can't they? They can be like an umbilical cord back in time—back to the dark and light of things. Where the heaviness began. Where you are grounded, but also where the losing started. The loss. But also, that precarious feeling that you have no past. That nothing is real. That as a woman you can just float through history. Like a smell. Not in-sight. Invisible.

There is a freedom I guess with that. That you can write your own past. Be a fiction. Be inventive.

It was at this time, when I was contemplating all these things, laying on my side—watching the horizon line, the sky, the faraway. The close and the near. The grass was touching my face. I was sort of in a comfortable place. In my mother's arms, well at least what I imagine that might feel like. It was then that I saw this shining glint of a thing. Poking through the soil. A little gift revealing itself to me. I started digging with my finger. I sat up, focused, and really began pulling away at the soil and the weeds.

It is hard to believe really, looking back, but there it was. This crudely made necklace, each tentacle clutching a child's tooth.



Spell Blankets

I had been working for almost a year in the museum. There was a lot of time to just 'get lost', since everything happened so slowly. The burden of history weighing down on us all. One afternoon I was fossicking away in my favourite part of the stores—the craft drawers. No-one cared about the craft—it was all about the 'big paintings' for the curators—and as much as possible, paintings by dead white guys. In contrast, most of the craft objects were small and delicate, lightly placed on sheets of plastic, arranged by artist, material or era. Even though there must have been so much history, unseen history, stored away in these drawers, the provenance of each object was skeletal. Sometimes not even the artist's name had been noted—'unknown craftsperson c.1820'—that kind of thing. I always had the feeling that some of these drawers hadn't been opened for decades.

On this particular day, I was trying to find drawers I hadn't looked through before. The fluorescent lighting was flickering at one end of the store—attracting and repelling me towards the last stack on the right-hand side. I definitely hadn't looked through that set before as the depth of the drawers were thicker than the others, and I would have remembered that.

As I pulled the drawer open, I could see and feel fabric—a blanket, made of felt perhaps. It was slightly abrasive to the touch and worn. It was larger than I would have expected so I walked to the other end of the store where the store manager was sitting watching something mindless on his phone (thankfully it wasn't porn). He reluctantly accompanied me back to the blankets and helped me set them out onto the large table in the middle of the isle.

They must have been almost two metres wide and three metres in length. Across the dark green surface were 28 tiny chalky rocks embroidered onto it. On the back, in the left-hand corner, was a little cotton tag stitched carefully onto it. It said, 'Spell Blanket'.



20 Responses to
The Past is Singing in Our Teeth

By Richard Martin

The Prison and the Crowbar: Unread Poems

1 Stories save your life. And stories are your life. We are our stories, stories that can be both prison and the crowbar to break open the door of that prison; we make stories to save ourselves or others, stories that lift us up or smash us against the stone wall of our own limits and fears. Liberation is always in part a storytelling process: breaking stories, breaking silences, making new stories. A free person tells her own story. A valued person lives in a society in which her story has a place.¹

2 We tell ourselves stories in order to live.²

3 When we cannot find a way of telling our story, our story tells us – we dream these stories, we develop symptoms, or we find ourselves acting in ways we don't understand.³

4 Every family has a story that it tells itself – that it passes on to the children and grandchildren. The story grows over the years, mutates; some parts are sharpened, others dropped, and there is often debate about what really happened. But even with these different sides of the same story, there is still agreement that this is the family story.⁴

5 When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else.⁵

Objects and Affections: Tooth Necklace

6 Objects are our other selves; the better we understand them, the closer we come to self-knowledge.⁶

7 Teach your children that a house is only habitable when it is full of light and air, and when the floors and walls are clear.⁷

8 Artificial memory machines litter history. Human beings seem to be persistently seduced by the idea that a theatre, a palace or a machine might be constructed that would hold the sum of knowledge in a way that would permit total recall. All we would need to do in order to attain absolute knowledge would be to enter the theatre or machine and commit to memory everything therein.⁸

9 A collection to which there are no new additions is really dead.⁹

10 On the screen, objects that were a few moments ago sticks of furniture or books of cloakroom tickets are transformed to the point where they take on menacing or enigmatic meanings.¹⁰

Contributors

David Elliott is an English born curator, writer and teacher . He was Director of the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford (1976 – 1996); Director of Moderna Museet [The National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art] in Stockholm, Sweden (1996-2001); Founding Director of the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo (2001-2006); the first Director of the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art [Istanbul Modern] (2007); Artistic Director of *The Beauty of Distance, Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age*, the 17th Biennale of Sydney (2008–2010); Artistic Director of *The Best of Times, The Worst of Times, Rebirth and Apocalypse in Contemporary Art*, the 1st International Kyiv Biennale of Contemporary Art (2010-2012); Artistic Director of *A Time for Dreams*, the IV International Moscow Biennale of Young Art (2012-2014); Artistic Director of *The Pleasure of Love, Transient Emotion in Contemporary Art*, the 56th October Salon Biennale in Belgrade (2014-2016). At present he is Vice-Director and Senior Curator at the Redtory Museum of Contemporary Art, Guangzhou, China. He is also currently chair of Judges of the Sovereign Asian Art Prize; chair of the Advisory Board of MOMENTUM, Berlin, and a member of the Advisory Arts Board of Asia House, London. A specialist in Soviet and Russian avant-garde, as well as in modern and contemporary European and Asian art, he has published widely in these fields as well as on many other aspects of contemporary art. In 2018 his next book, *ART & TROUSERS: Tradition and modernity in contemporary Asian Art*, will be published by the artasiapacific foundation, Hong Kong.

Kate McMillan's work incorporates a range of media including sculpture, film, sound, installation and photography. McMillan is interested in the linking narratives of forgetting and place, often focusing on the residue of the past. Her artworks thus act as haunting memory-triggers for histories and ideas that are over-looked. Prior to this exhibition *The Past is Singing in Our Teeth* previous solo exhibitions include *Songs for Dancing, Songs for Dying* at Castor Projects in London in 2016.

In October 2017 her work will be on exhibition during Frieze Week in London as a finalist in the Celeste Prize curated by Fatos Üstek. In July 2016 she was invited to undertake a residency in St Petersburg as part of the National Centre for Contemporary Art (NCCA) where she developed new film works which were shown at the State Museum of Peter & Paul Fortress in Russia in July 2017. In early 2017 she was selected to be in the permanent collection at *The Ned*, for *Vault 100*, a new Soho House project which reversed the gender ratio of the FTSE 100 by showing the work of 93 women and 7 men, curated by Kate Bryan, British art historian and global head of collections at Soho House.

In April 2016 McMillan took part in *Acentered: Reterritorised Network of European and Chinese Moving Image* during Art Basel Hong Kong, presented by MOMENTUM with Videotage Hong Kong. In June 2015 McMillan was included in *StructuralObject HouseProject27* curated by Linda Persson at a site in Greenwich, London, alongside other artists such as Bridget Currie and Laure Provoust. In April 2015 McMillan presented an exhibition of small sculptures and experimental films at Moana Project Space in Perth, Australia entitled *Anxious Objects*. In November 2014 Kate staged a project three years in development with Performance Space in Sydney that was presented at Carriageworks, entitled *The Moment of Disappearance*, curated by Bec Dean. The five channel film and installation included a new sound work composed by Cat Hope and recorded with the London Improvisers Orchestra. Previous solo exhibitions include *The Potter's Field*, 2014, ACME Project Space, London; *In the shadow of the past, this world knots tight*, 2013 Venn Gallery; *Paradise Falls*, 2012, Venn Gallery; *Lost* at the John Curtin Gallery in 2008, *Broken Ground* in 2006 at Margaret Moore Contemporary Art and *Disaster Narratives* at the Perth Institute

of Contemporary Arts for the 2004 Perth International Arts Festival. Her work has been featured in various museums and biennales, including the 17th Biennale of Sydney; the Trafo Centre for Contemporary Art, Poland; Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai; Art Gallery of Western Australia; Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne; Perth Institute for Contemporary Art; John Curtin Gallery, Perth; Govett Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth and the Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney.

Since 2002 she has undertaken residencies in Russia, London, Tokyo, Switzerland, Berlin, Sydney, China and Hong Kong. McMillan has been the recipient of numerous grants including more recently an International Development Grant from the British Council and Arts Council England; and in 2015 a New Work Grant from the Australia Council, which she also received in 2011 and 2009. In 2013 McMillan was awarded a Fellowship from the Department of Culture and the Arts (Western Australia) and a Mid-Career Fellowship in 2008. She has resided on the Board of the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA), National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA) based in Sydney and has worked as a Peer and an Advisor for the Australia Council for the Arts. Her PhD (2014) explored the capacity for Contemporary Art to unforget colonial histories. McMillan is a part-time Teaching Fellow at King's College, London where she lectures on the Masters Program in the Department for Culture, Media and Creative Industries.

She is also an External Examiner for Brighton University, UK and has guest lectured at The Ruskin, Oxford University. McMillan has taught at Open University via Curtin University, Australia; Coventry University and the University of Creative Arts, Farnham. Her PhD is currently being developed into a book called *Contemporary Art & Unforgetting: Methodologies of Making in Post-settler Landscapes*, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2018. She is also undertaking research into gender equality in the contemporary art world, which will also be published in 2018. Her work is held in private collections around the world, as well as in the Christoph Merian Collection, Basel; Soho House Collection, London; Art Gallery of Western Australia; Wesfarmers Arts Collection; KPMG; Murdoch University, Australia; University of Western Australia and Curtin University, Australia.

Cat Hope's music is conceptually driven, using mostly graphic scores, acoustic/electronic combinations and new score-reading technologies. It often features aleatoric elements, drone, noise, glissandi and an ongoing fascination with low frequency sound. Her composed music ranges from works for laptop duet to orchestra, with a focus on chamber works, and in 2013 she was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to develop her work, as well as fellowships at the Civitella Ranieri (Italy) and the Visby International Composers Residency (Sweden). Her practice explores the physicality of sound in different media, and has been discussed in books such as *Loading the Silence* (Kouvaris, 2013), *Women of Note* (Appleby, 2012), *Sounding Postmodernism* (Bennett, 2011) as well as periodicals such as *The Wire*, *Limelight*, and *Neu Zeitschrift Fur Musik Shaft*. Her works have been recorded for Australian, German and Austrian national radio, and her work has been awarded a range of prizes including the APRA|AMC Award for Excellence in Experimental Music in 2011, and the Peggy Glanville Hicks composer residency in 2014. She has founded a number of groups, most recently the Decibel new music ensemble, the noise improv duo Candied Limbs, and the Abe Sada and Australian Bass Orchestra bass projects. She has also founded and written pop songs for Gata Negra (1999-2006). Cat Hope is currently Professor of Music at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia where she is Head of the Sir Zelman Cowen School of Music.

Richard Martin is Curator of Public Programmes at Tate, where he organises talks, panel discussions, courses, workshops and other events for a diverse range of audiences at both Tate Modern and Tate Britain. Recent projects include curating the Tate Intensive programme for international arts professionals, designing the public programme for the exhibition *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, and working with artists such as Simone Leigh, David Blandy, Larry Achiampong and *They Are Here* on Tate Exchange projects. Since 2014, Richard has taught in the Department

of Culture, Media and Creative Industries at King's College London, and he previously held teaching positions at Middlesex University and Birkbeck, University of London. He is the author of the book *The Architecture of David Lynch* (Bloomsbury, 2014), as well as catalogue essays for artists such as Jessie Brennan and Constantinos Taliotis. He completed his PhD at the London Consortium, a multi-disciplinary programme partnering Birkbeck with the Architectural Association, the Institute of Contemporary Arts, the Science Museum and Tate. He also holds a BA in English and American Studies from the University of Manchester, and an MA in English from University College London.

Rachel Rits-Volloch is the Founding Director of MOMENTUM, launched in 2010 in Sydney, Australia, as a parallel event to the 17th Biennale of Sydney. Since January 2011, MOMENTUM has been established in Berlin as a non-profit global platform for time-based art, with headquarters at the Kunstquartier Bethanien Art Center. Rachel Rits-Volloch has curated or produced over 65 international exhibitions, in addition to ancillary education programming, artist residencies, and related projects. As curator, major exhibitions include *MOMENTUM Sydney* (2010, Sydney Australia); the *Works On Paper* Performance Series (2013, 2014, 2015, MOMENTUM, Berlin); *Thresholds* (2013, Collegium Hungaricum, Berlin; 2014, TRAFO Center for Contemporary Art, Szczecin, Poland); *PANDAMONIUM: Media Art from Shanghai* (2014, MOMENTUM, Berlin); *Fragments of Empires* (2014-2015, MOMENTUM, Berlin); *Ganz Grosses Kino* (2016, Kino Internationale, Berlin); *HERO MOTHER: Contemporary Art by Post-Communist Women Re-thinking Heroism* (2016, MOMENTUM, Berlin); *The 1st Daojiao New New Media Festival, Facade Project* (2016, Guangzhou, China); *Landscapes of Loss* (2017, Ministry of Environment, Berlin); *Future Life Handbook* (2017-2018, Redtory Museum of Contemporary Art, Guangzhou, China).



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The Past is Singing in Our Teeth

Film 1
Projection
2.5 m × 4.44 m • 6.33'

Film 2
Projection onto cardboard
approximately 1.2 m × 50 cm • 3.38'

Spell Blankets
5 wool blankets embroidered with hag stones
and hung from plaster encased sticks

Ghost hands
two clutches of five air dried clay hand clenches

The Sound of a Groundless Place
Shell, shelf, oil paint, foam

Shrouds (poem, hagstone, xray)
silk chiffon drops 2.8m long × 2.6m each, aluminium rods

Transmittes of lost sounds
steel, jasmonite and painted percussion stands, various sculptures

List of Works

Published on the occasion of the exhibition
The Past is Singing in our Teeth by Kate McMillan
Sound composed in collaboration with Cat Hope

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