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OPINION

Game on: artist loose in the State Library concocting wild fantasies



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Art critic

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Art can never be ‘fake news’ – it is by definition a work of the imagination, but that doesn’t mean it can’t imitate reality, can’t indulge in forms of masquerade and impersonation. It’s this twilight zone between truth and fiction that fascinates Hadyn Wilson, the 2020 artist-in-residence at the State Library of NSW.

The fruit of that residency is the exhibition, *Fake Truths: An Historical Novel* in the Amaze Gallery. To get there one must walk through the library’s brilliant, jam-packed salon hang of its extensive collection of paintings, a pleasure in its own right.



Artist Hadyn Wilson at the exhibition *Fake Truths: An Historical Novel* at the State Library of NSW. STATE LIBRARY OF NSW

Wilson promises us both paintings and stories but there's much more to this compact, tricky show. The artist has made good use of his residency, scouring the permanent collection for images, documents and items of "realia" that give us a tantalising glimpse into the lives of historical figures. His subjects are a mix of the well known and the unknown. In 22 small "stories" arranged in vitrines he combines real historical data with his own imaginary additions.

Some of these additions seem completely plausible, others are fantastic. Wilson records meetings that never happened and conversations that never took place. He has written letters that throw new light on famous figures – if only they were genuine. Literary historians would love to have evidence that Henry Lawson's passionate praise of mateship was really sublimated homosexuality (as Manning Clark argued). And wouldn't it be great to find a letter that threw a spotlight on the relationship between artists George Lambert and Thea Proctor?

Wilson does the detective work and, if necessary, manufactures his own evidence. His bogus letters and small paintings are supplemented by diverse items that add credibility to his stories. He is well aware that a successful lie always contains a kernel of truth.

Wilson's most extravagant flight of fancy takes off from an early photo of a little girl named Ada Windle, who died in 1849, at the age of six. He imagines Ada living an impossibly long life, becoming a major advocate for women's rights, acting as a friend and facilitator for every female high achiever. It's the same order of fantasy as Bernard Smith's claim that the potential Picasso of Australian art may have perished on the battlefields of the Somme. Such things are always possible, though hardly likely. Picasso fought all his battles in the studio.

Fake Truths is not an exhibition for those who expect works of art to stimulate an immediate, emotional reaction. It's based on intensive research in the library's archives undertaken by

Wilson and his assistant, Pru Smith. Each object has been subject to much thought and discussion, backed up by supplementary reading.

Some of these associations are included in the 'stories' that accompany each display. A small painting by World War 1 artist, George Colville, inspired Wilson to quote Isaac Rosenberg's brutal poem, *Dead Man's Dump* (1917). A piece of a clerical collar retrieved from a beach links to Henry David Thoreau's description of a shipwreck of 1849. Other items have prompted responses drawn from science or natural history. Story 5 includes a list of 132 endangered marine or aquatic species.

Some objects have prompted Wilson to write a lengthy narrative, reconstructing events and dialogues that *might* have taken place. These texts, which may be read in the room brochure, appear in the cases in the form of books, suggesting they are only extracts of much longer works. These *faux* publications are as convincing – or misleading – as a series of handwritten letters, folded and discoloured. There are also short films that may be accessed online.

A brief, unusually saucy story of 1933 called *The Bath*, ties author Henry Handel Richardson to the fashionable illustrator, Dora Jarrett, and the firebrand publisher, P.R. Stephensen. This connection had only to be found, not invented. By contrast, Hans Heysen's love of trees joins him to present-day German naturalist, Peter Wohlleben, and the spiritualist, Alfred William Eustace (1820-1907), who painted landscapes on gum leaves: three men of different eras, united by a shared passion.

An even more bizarre story links Hanna and Rudolf Lemberg, German Jews who became Quakers; painter Gladys Owen; and Rupert the Bear, who gets embroiled in a philosophical discussion with his companions. Here one sees Wilson indulging in what Goethe called "elective affinities".

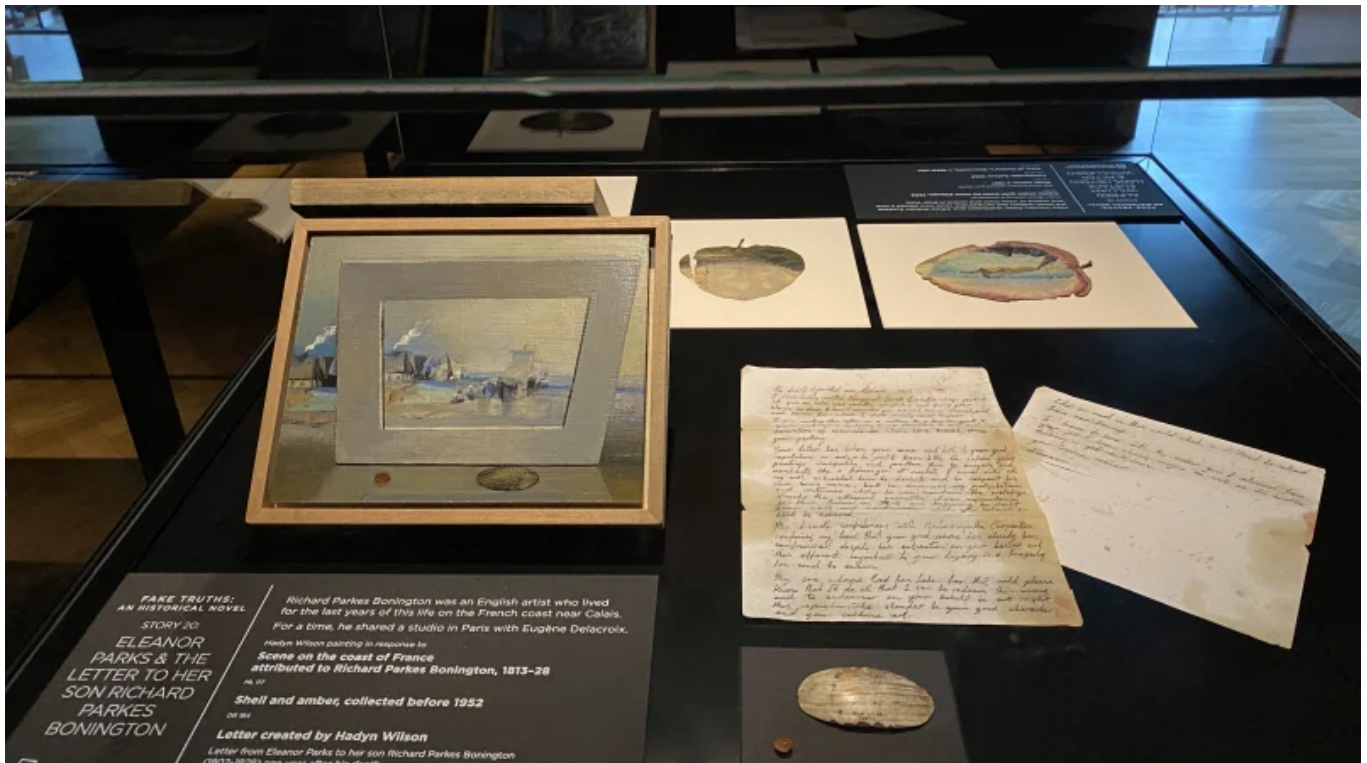


Haydn Wilson's Ada Windle HAYDN WILSON/STATE LIBRARY OF NSW

This game-playing will not be to everyone's taste, but as a sustained exercise of visual and verbal wit it's a remarkable achievement.

Those who have the patience to sample all the stories and puzzle out the associations will discover an encyclopaedic overview of Australian history. Yet Wilson is not content to merely

collect historical anecdotes. The greater ambition is to reveal the subjective nature of our understanding of the past: our tendency to read stories according to our own preoccupations and prejudices. He recognises we are less concerned with issues of proof and falsification than with the appeal of a really good, salacious yarn. We fall into the habit of treating historical figures as celebrities whose secrets are revealed by the gossip columns. People who have never read a poem by Henry Lawson would love to find out he was gay.



Haydn Wilson's story on Eleanor Parks and the letter to her son Richard Parkes Bonington. HAYDN WILSON/STATE LIBRARY OF NSW

In his own small paintings incorporated within these displays Wilson makes copies of works from the library's collection, adding significant details that change the emphasis of an image. He puts Norman Lindsay's nudes beneath a contemporaneous painting by Mondrian and poses Frank Hinder's mother, Enid Marguerite Pockley, in a lace-collared dress, in front of a modernist picture by her son. In many pictures we see a ghost-like reflection of Wilson's own face, signposting his dual roles as observer and creator.

This habitual game-playing will not be to everyone's taste, but as a sustained exercise of visual and verbal wit it's a remarkable achievement. *Fake Truths* is the kind of exhibition that should appeal to readers of Alberto Manguel, a writer who is both a literary archivist and a novelist. Or perhaps to fans of British artist, Tom Phillips, who made a 36-year-long art project from a single Victorian novel chosen at random. Such figures combine creativity with the passion of the antiquarian. Universally curious they find – or forge – connections in the most unlikely places.

It's a game with a serious intent: namely to stimulate our critical faculties, to ask us to become more aware of the highly motivated ways we look at works of art or interpret historical events. Wilson is implicitly challenging the aura of scientific objectivity attached to museums and libraries, showing that all displays come with a raft of cultural assumptions. As a pantomime that mingles historical research with pure fantasy, *Fake Truths* leaves us wondering just how much fiction lies undisclosed in the versions of history we accept as fact.

***Fake Truths: An Historical Novel,
Paintings & Stories* by Hadyn Wilson,
State Library of NSW, until July 11**



John McDonald

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Haydn Wilson's Winifred Redmond ENTERTAINMENT