

Fiona Hall Fern Garden, 1998, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra



Some 80 works of art by Fiona Hall in the National Gallery of Australia's collection include ceramics, prints, photographs and sculptures. She is an artist who explores the boundary between the ordering of nature and the natural order. Much of her work, such as *North/South Water Flow*, 1981, *The Genesis Series*, 1984, *Paradisus Terrestris*, 1989-90, and *Historia Non-naturalis*, 1991, refers to human involvement with the physical world.

Fiona Hall has said that she would prefer the *Fern Garden* to be viewed more in the context of landscape architecture than sculpture. She cites a number of historical influences, including Japanese temple gardens and Islamic gardens, both of which are formal in design and positioned in semi-enclosed spaces.

The tree fern species in the garden is *Dicksonia antarctica*, Soft Tree Fern. Fossil records show that it is one of Australia's most ancient plants. It grows as an understorey species from southern Queensland to Tasmania; its growth rate is slow, at around 30 cm every ten years. The family Dicksoniaceae, to which *Dicksonia antarctica* belongs, was named for the English botanist James Dickson (1737?-1822). Both the *Dicksonia* and *Cyathea* tree fern species provided a food source for Aboriginal people, who harvested the starchy pith from the top of the fern stem and ate it raw or roasted.

The pebbled path through *Fern Garden* was laid by the artist and two assistants, using a dry mortar technique. The quartz and silica river pebbles come from an area near Collector in



New South Wales. Inscribed on granite pavers in the pathway are some Aboriginal names for *Dicksonia antarctica*, together with the names of the languages /language groups from which they originate:

larnerrallar	PALAWA	Tasmania
karak	KRAUATUNGALUNG	Lake Tyers
kakaura	TATUNGALUNG	Gippsland lakes
kurok mukkin	GUNDITJMARA	Western Victoria
kombadik	WOIWORUNG	Melbourne
iumbugun	WANDANDIAN	Jervis Bay
jer-rung-a-ra	DARUK	Blue Mountains
yumbolong	AWABAKAL	Newcastle
mumgir	MINJUNGBAL	Tweed Heads

Inscribed in the pebble paving at the entrance to the garden is the name Penny, for Penelope Magee, a friend of the artist who was diagnosed with cancer and died during the month in which the garden was installed.

There are three benches in the garden: inscribed on two facing each other are the names Deuchar and Tamsin - twins of the Davy family who died tragically in a light plane accident at Turalla, Bungendore, near Canberra. In their memory, friends of Deuchar and Tamsin have assisted in the funding of the garden. The third bench is inscribed Destiny. This is the name of the Koori artist, Destiny Deacon, a friend of Fiona Hall's who requested her own seat in the garden during its early planning. The bench tops are of Verde Austral granite from Western

Australia.

Fiona Hall designed all aspects of *Fern Garden*, including its layout, seating, gate and water features.

It may be viewed from the foyer of the exhibition galleries and the observatory platform at the end of the galleries of Australian Art.

Access to *Fern Garden* is through the National Gallery's Sculpture Garden, via the ramp alongside the Mirrabook Restaurant.

Contact

Helen Power, Promotions Officer, Public Affairs, National Gallery of Australia, GPO Box 1150, CANBERRA ACT 2601

Reference

Ward, Peter, 1998, *Almost Earthly Delights: Architecture and Design*. The Weekend Australian, Review Arts, July 11-12, p. 22.