

Brigita Ozolins



Narryna Heritage Museum, Battery Point, Hobart
9-21 June 2017
Presented by
Narryna and the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery
in association with
DARK MOFO

DEATH MASK

by
Toby Juliff

Any of us lucky enough to travel through US Customs and Immigration in the past decade will have no doubt suffered the indignity of first-world travel. The biometric passports, the full body X-Ray, the retina scan. They each serve to compile a digital data portrait to be shared instantaneously with numerous national and international security agencies. Such profiles, we are told, are blind to conditions of ethnicity and race and are in our own best interests. Some advocates argue that such gleaning of physiognomic details has the capacity to be used to enforce racial profiling that singles out undesirables based solely on their physical likeness to known terrorist forms.

Profiling to identify potential criminal agents is neither new nor a specific paranoia of the war on terror. Though few security agencies will admit to the practice of racial profiling based on the shape and forms of our human anatomy, there is little doubt that the data gathered from digital scans has been used to isolate and condemn individuals passing from state to state.

We have used such technologies of identity before. Prior to retina and body scans, we used and abused phrenology to analyse criminal anatomies. Phrenology is a now long-since disreputed pseudo-science in which the cranial and facial characteristics were analysed for signs of deviant behaviours. Prominent in the early criminal and psychological sciences of the 19th century, attributes were surveyed and catalogued through photographs, drawings and, of course, death masks. The lumps and bumps of your skull, the width of your brow, the formation of your ears; each would contribute to our understanding of criminal behaviours. Emergent first in the last years of the 18th century, the German physicians Franz Joseph Gall and Johann Kaspar Spurzheim mapped the skulls and what they determined as 25 specific 'organs' that controlled physical, mental and moral behaviours. (The number of these organs increased to 42 as phrenology became more sophisticated over time.) Gall and Spurzheim compared irregularities and prominent features with that of other species to map recessive and aggressive personality types.

Phrenology and its cruel partner in analysis, eugenics, was largely discounted by the middle of the twentieth century in favour of more sophisticated social and psychological sciences. And yet, we seem to be as concerned as ever in recording and determining behaviours based on long-since challenged perceptions of criminality. Though the technologies are now highly sophisticated, penetrating clothing and accessories, such machines of profiling are increasingly ubiquitous with 21st-century paranoias.

Brigita Ozolins reminds us of the power, pertinence and absurdity of earlier methods and modes of profiling. Utilising photographs of death masks found in local collections, Ozolins advances the twin seriousness and ludicrousness of these early pseudo-sciences. In the Tasmanian context, this cruel medicine – and it was considered so – was of interest to the colonial overlords here and elsewhere. The high concentration of criminals led to social, psychological and physiological experimentation and analysis that formed powerful archives of plaster masks, photographs, and anatomical annotations that are unusually thorough and concentrated.

Hobartian photographer and antiquarian James Watt Beattie collected such masks for his own private museum on Davey Street, the best examples of which are now scattered and settled at the Queen Victorian Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston and the Port Arthur Museum. All but one of the masks Ozolins has drawn from are anonymous, fragments of a

once meticulously recorded collection. They are, we can speculate, local and non-local alike, the identifying notes long since lost. The named mask is of Frank Butler, a criminal from New South Wales hung in 1897. Beattie's collection, which forms the spine of this exhibition, included copies of the historical death masks of Frederick the Great, King of Prussia (d.1786) and Lord Brougham (d.1868) a celebrated British statesman, orator, jurist and scientist. For Beattie, the study of the great was tempered with the study of the greatly deviant.

Though many death masks were destroyed in the wake of the destructive apotheosis of eugenics that was the Holocaust, some survived in basements and archives not usually publicly accessible. Ozolins draws on those archives to unearth an unpleasant and largely forgotten science of violence and degradation. The cold analysis of photography – a technology similarly used to advance policies of racial purity – presents unnamed and long since deceased faces. Criminal, or saint? Ripped from their context of colonial transportation, are these the offending generation or their gaolers?

Phrenology has the rather dubious honour of being forever associated with Australia's early history. And though it emerged prior to transportation, its uses in the early history of these places to categorise and condemn transported peoples alike remains a powerful rejoinder to contemporary cruelties and divisions. In 1880, as the myth and power of Ned Kelly was still fresh, the Melbourne phrenologist A.S. Hamilton recorded the bushranger's shaved autopsied head as symptomatic of the criminal class:

Kelly's over-developed features included combativeness and destructiveness, while those under-developed features included cautiousness and conscientiousness. (Melbourne Sun, 18 November 1880)

Ozolins attention to the early settlers is deliberate but no less powerful. It serves a powerful allegory of cruelty that, in the context of Narryna, is especially potent. Narryna, an early colonial Georgian 'big house' richly presents the bounty and trauma of early settler experience. Ozolins examines the archives and practices of the sciences that promoted colonial domination alongside the narratives of its contemporary subjects.

Ozolins accompanies the photographs and texts of phrenology with a soundtrack of readings from notable 'scientific' studies of this now defunct area of anatomical survey. Devastating and darkly humorous when listened to today, such texts were read with scientific objectivity and practised with ruthless trust in this absurd amateur science.

Phrenology is of the past. Profiling continues however. As we look on with reassurance that the 'science' of lumps and bumps of the human head has long been discounted, so we might question the basis on which we value and understand people today. Ozolins' 'Death Mask' tells a story of a technology long-since thought obsolete. But as with so many technologies of classification and identification, the quality of the exhibition is the power it offers a contemporary telling.

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Toby Juliff is an artist and writer based in Tasmania. Formerly coordinator of the Visual Arts Honours program at the University of Melbourne, he has written essays for Heide Museum of Modern Art, Neon Parc & the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao.



QVM: 1994:H:0506



QVM: 1994:H:0504



Q16020: Frank Butler, 1897



QVM: 1994:H:0516

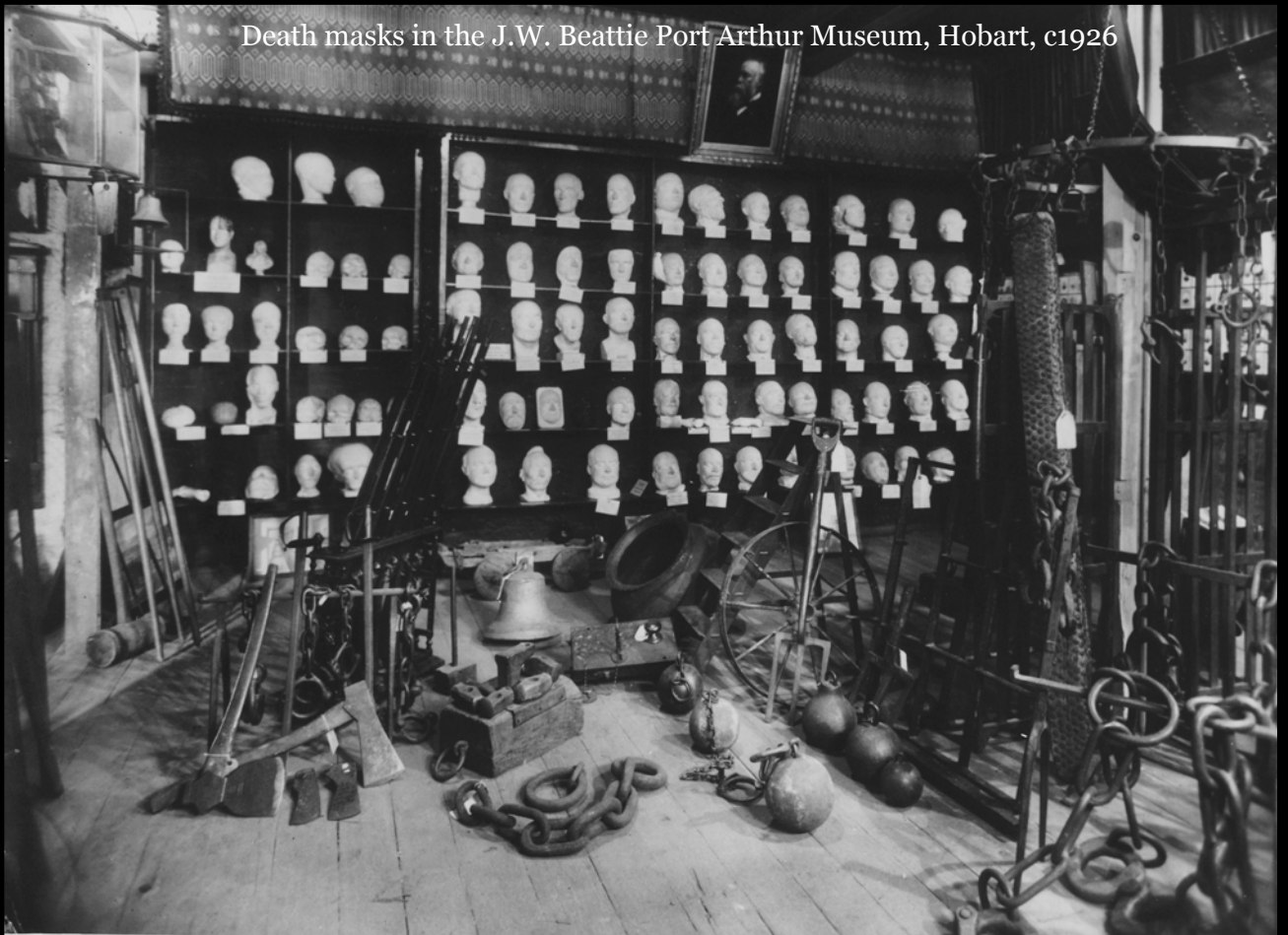


QVM: 1994:H:0507

With the exception of the death mask of Frank Butler, which is a photographic print in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, the masks featured in this exhibition are presumed to be from the J. W. Beattie Collection, originally on display in his Port Arthur Museum that operated in Hobart in the early 1900s. Butler was hanged for murder in 1897 in Darlinghurst Prison in Sydney, but the identity of other masks is unknown.

The Beattie Collection was purchased by the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in 1927; in 1978, most of the masks were found by the Director of QVMAG in a basement under the library. They were seriously damaged by moisture and the majority had lost their identification numbers. The masks are made from plaster of Paris and are currently undergoing conservation.

Death masks in the J.W. Beattie Port Arthur Museum, Hobart, c1926



Brigita Ozolins, Death Mask, 2017

Curator: Scott Carlin
Audio Production: Paul Roberts
Voice: Mark Cutler

5 x A3 light boxes framed in black stained wood; 1 x A1 light box framed in black stained wood; Victorian display cabinet with fabric curtain; Medical anatomy model of brain; Audio track: 7:29 minutes looped.

With special thanks to QVMAG, Gerard Willems,
John Addison, Julie Gough, Maria Kunda & Scot Cotterell.

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Brigita Ozolins is an artist and Senior Lecturer at the University of Tasmania's College of the Arts. She is best known for her large-scale installations that examine the links between language, history and identity such as *Kryptos* (2011) at MONA (Museum of Old and New Art), and *The Reading Room* (2012) at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. She exhibits widely and has received numerous artist grants, including the 2008 inaugural Qantas Contemporary Art Award, Australia Council residencies in New York (2013) and London (2002), the et+t residency in Riga (2008) and the Cite Internationale residency in Paris (2002). Ozolins is represented by Bett Gallery, North Hobart. To find out more visit:

brigitaozolins.com

