

# CAMILLE SERISIER | LADIES OF OZ

CATHERINE HELEN SPENCE (1825 - 1910)



NINA EVA VIDA JONES (1882 - 1966)



LEILA PERRY (1868 - 1920)



ALICE NICKLIN AND THE QUETTA (1890)



# LADIES OF OZ: UNBRIDLING THE STORIES OF AUSTRALIAN WOMEN

*History is written by the victors.*<sup>1</sup>

As the infamous quote asserts, the victorious suppress the narratives of their defeated adversaries. With this model the stories of their opponents often go untold and holes form in the lineage of our past. This is a problematic outcome – but what happens when half of any aggregation triumphant or vanquished are suppressed? Do their stories go unwritten and can we uncover them?

The victors will always have a bias - but so do historians. We must question both the people who record the facts and those who write them into history. With our past rooted firmly in patriarchy we need to consider how these dispositions have affected the accessibility of female narratives. Edward Hallett Carr (assuming the historian is male) discusses which facts become included and excluded in the writing of history; 'the facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides which facts to give to the floor, and in what order or context'.<sup>2</sup> Carr points out that the accessible narratives have been 'preselected and determined for us' not in an obscure coincidence but by people 'who were consciously or unconsciously imbued with a particular view and thought the facts which supported that view worth preserving'.<sup>2</sup>

Half of any story is not a full story, 'Women have always lived in history, acted in it and made history'.<sup>3</sup> Yet until recent times patriarchal values have overlooked or distorted the recording of it. The historian decides what facts make it into the books, but what about the rest of the information? Fragmented facts still exist but finding this information becomes exponentially harder as time moves further away from the people and events.

Delving into the archives in search of this discarded information Camille Serisier simultaneously plays the roles of artist and historian. Her exhibition and ongoing series of work *Ladies of Oz* uncovers the lives and stories of Australian women from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Building sets and costuming from paper, she uses her body to enact their lives. Serisier's background as a scenic painter for Opera Australia has informed the series. Adopting language from theatre *Ladies of Oz* constructs portraits in an intersection of art and women's history.

*Ladies of Oz* catalogues the key events and lives of Nina Eva Vida Jones 1882 - 1966, Alice Nicklin 1870-1951, Leila Perry 1868 - 1920, and Catherine Helen Spence 1825 – 1910. Jones pursued a love for speed on the Australian motor circuit. At a time when most women were not taught to swim Nicklin was one of the five female survivors of the RMS Quetta shipwrecked off the Queensland coast; 153 men survived. Within the series Perry comes to represent your average woman in this era, a socialite and stay at home mum she was known for her beautiful house, lively parties, and the woodcarvings she made under her home. Most historically renowned of the four, Spence was a journalist, novelist, suffrage activist, and the first female political candidate in Australia.

Born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century these women experienced outcomes of the industrial revolution, the emergence of first wave feminism and the peak of the women's suffrage movement. Perry, Jones, Nicklin, and Spence even lived to cast their first vote. In her autobiography Spence gives rise to the marginalisation of women's voices in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, stating 'law and custom have put a bridle on the tongue of women, and of the innumerable proverbs relating to the sex, the most cynical are those relating to her use of language'.<sup>4</sup> Rebutting this through her advocacy and parliamentary involvement Spence worked tirelessly to 'unbridle the tongues of women'.<sup>5</sup> Working against patriarchal forces Jones, Nicklin, and Spence found their own agency and voice.

While each of these women should be celebrated for their achievements, they occupy common ground as both white and middle class. These shared societal backgrounds prompt us to consider the historians' biases beyond patriarchy – how has





class and race distorted the records? And how does Serisier's background as white and middle class impact the series? When reflecting on the accessibility and inaccessibility of information Serisier states:

Representing women's history is harder than I could have imagined. It is challenging to find records on women to start with, and the women I can find information about are often the beneficiaries of distinct privilege. Add my own bias and privilege as a middle class white woman and you have a set of calamitous circumstances that make it difficult to create any sense of 'clean history' that doesn't simply perpetuate the mistakes of the past. That complex conundrum is the true subject of this body of work.<sup>6</sup>

In acknowledging her socioeconomic background Serisier recognises the limitations in her own construction of history. The use of her body further perpetuates this conundrum while simultaneously reflecting the nature of the available records. Adorned in paper she re-enacts rather than re-distributes the records. Through this process she builds a sort of 'naive history' - one that constructs artefacts from artifice. In the prime position of artist masquerading as historian Serisier's *Ladies of Oz* both promotes and questions the records.

With these ingrained problems why is it so important to distribute these women's histories? Narratives of history do not always align with our experiences. Renowned women's historian Professor Gerda Lerner states 'what traditional history teaches us denies our own experience of reality [...] we live in a world where nothing happens without the active participation of men and women'.<sup>3</sup> The removal of the female voice through history denies women's contributions and access to strong female role models. With *Ladies of Oz* Serisier has taken her first step of many to promote a more rounded picture of Australian history.

With accessibility of information at the heart of the project, an edition of posters feature biographies on each woman. Portrayal of women's experiences and activism through poster culture aligns with Australia's feminist landscape from suffragette campaigns to the women's print collectives of the 60s and 70s. Harridan Screenprinters cooperative produced a series of posters featuring portraits and biographies of inspirational women for display in schools - one featured Dagmar Berne, Australia's first female medical student.<sup>7</sup> Speaking to these histories Serisier uses her posters to promote and disperse information. By adapting this format information becomes rudimentary - yet quickly learned.

*Ladies of Oz* celebrates the lives and accomplishments of four Australian women while flagging the gaps in our nations historical lineages. History is filled with gaps, we must question the facts and those who write them into history. It is important that we take steps now to recover this information; as time moves further away from the people and events, the facts become harder and harder to restore. *Ladies of Oz* unbridles the histories of Australian women - connecting their voice to an audience to whom it would otherwise go unheard.

By Jenna Baldock

1. Attributed to Winston Churchill, but of unknown origin

2. Carr, E.H. 1987. What is history?. 2nd ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin

3. Lerner, G. 1997. Why history matters: life and thought. New York: Oxford University Press

4. Spence, C. H. 1910. An Autobiography. Adelaide: W.K.Thomas & Co

5. Margarey, S. Unbridling the Tongues of Women. 2nd ed. Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press

6. Serisier, C. 2016. Email correspondence.

7. Mayhew, L. (n.d.). "Jill Posters Will Be Prosecuted: Australia's women-only print collectives from the 1970s and 1980s."

Accessed September 4, 2016. <http://bit.ly/2bQzwjj>



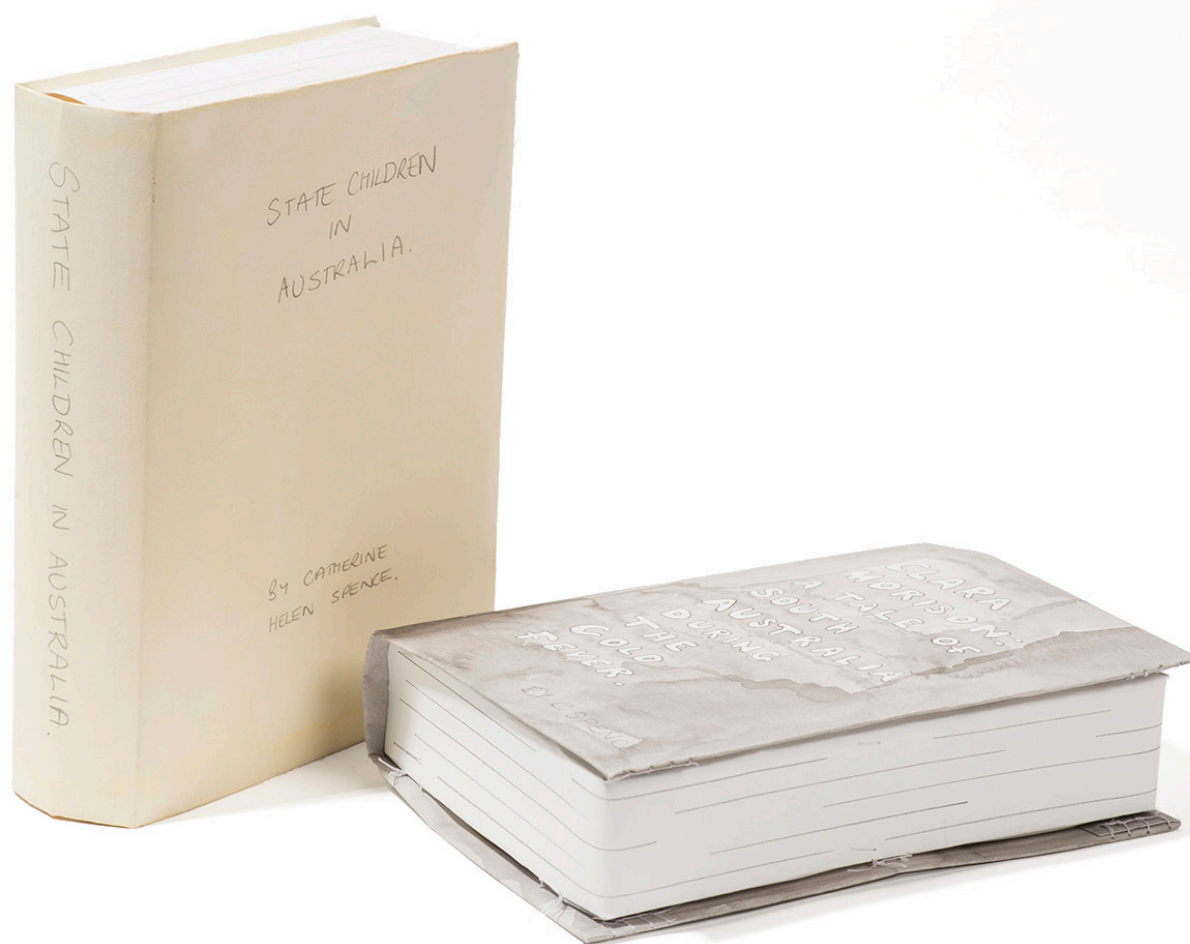
## LADIES OF OZ RE-ENACTS THE LIVES OF FOUR AUSTRALIAN WOMEN FROM THE 19TH CENTURY

CATHERINE HELEN SPENCE arrived in Australia in 1839 at the age of 14. She campaigned for fairness throughout her life using the written and spoken word. In 1897 Catherine stood as a political candidate. Her political texts and speaking tours traversed Australia, Europe and America.

NINA EVA VIDA JONES (a.k.a Mrs J.) was born in 1882 on Harris Street in Ultimo, Sydney. A keen motorcar enthusiast, she frequently competed in events at the Maroubra Speedway where she won the *Weekender Trophy* and gold in a 24 hour endurance race.

LEILA PERRY lived in Brisbane from 1868 to 1920. She was a well known socialite and hostess. Leila lived, raised her family, and undertook her woodcarving in Miegunyah House. It is now home to the Queensland Women's Historical Association. Visitors today can still see where she engraved her name in the french windows at the front of the house.

In 1890 ALICE NICKLIN fell in love – her parents did not approve. They decided to take Alice to Europe aboard the RMS Quetta. The 292 people on board were at their ease, until the ship hit an uncharted rock and sank to the ocean floor. Alice was one of five female survivors.



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Back cover : *State Children in Australia, Clara Morison*, 2016