



Helen Pollock

The Persistence of Memory

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Between the memory and the silence falls the shadow¹. Such is the experience of Helen Pollock. But the shadow can also be a profound source of inspiration. Such too is the experience of Helen Pollock. This experience has resulted in over two decades of creative output in three-dimensional form, a rich body of work in ceramic that has culminated in *Falls the Shadow*. This striking work was installed at the Pictorial Gallery of the Auckland War Memorial Museum from November 2008 to January 2009. It commemorates the 90th anniversary of the First World War armistice and in particular the New Zealand sacrifice at Passchendaele.

Falls the Shadow is Helen Pollock's most significant work to date and one that draws together the threads of her life. It comprises a large group of 18 arms, stretching upwards from a pool of water, as if searching, reaching for the unknown. Such arms have become a sustained motif in Pollock's work as she has grappled with issues that have beset her personal life.² Searching for an explanation, for understanding, for answers and a solution to current concerns, Helen Pollock has been driven to explore her own individual past.

The artist's father died when she was nine years old. Her family tucked a few mementoes into a bottom drawer and got on with their lives. The burying of loss and grief might have been a commonly used coping device but it ignored the need for a deeper exploration to reveal the detail of a history and to uncover its truth. Pollock constantly makes the parallel between her personal journey and that of the wider community. With the chronic

illness of her son shunting her into places that she might not otherwise have gone, Helen Pollock has found solace in unearthing and disinterring the life experience of others who have gone before. Her research into her father's life, in particular as a young man at the Western Front in the First World War, has led to a wider exploration of the New Zealand history of that time.³ She links the dire circumstances that beset those at the Front, the distress of the wives and families back home, consistent under-reporting and an artificial 'collective cheerfulness', with her own family experience. The lifting of the lid, the loosening of the soil, is the impetus behind her work.

The nation's journey, collectively and individually, to and from battlefields such as Passchendaele resonates with the artist. The long, drawn-out effects of the ordeal, the wounds, physical, spiritual and psychological, that each generation has had to process—or has avoided processing—is familiar territory. After the initial response of 'battening down the hatches', closing down and avoidance, successive generations have had to process this trauma. Now the young generation responds with awe to their forebears' action on such battlegrounds, finds inspiration in it and pays tribute to it. *Falls the Shadow* is the visible mapping of this journey.

Every journey brings with it rituals. And rituals bring with them connotations of history and mystery. The purpose behind the pattern of a ritual is often cloaked in the mists of time. This is what Helen Pollock addresses. She explores the space between the ritual and the reason, between the known and the unknown, the visible and the invisible. Such analysis is not new in her work. As early as 1986 the theme was articulated in *Ritual* (1986) with its masks of Artemis, the virgin

(opposite) Helen Pollock in her workshop, Auckland 2008
(Photograph: Derek Brickell)

(right) HELEN POLLOCK *Jacob's Ladder* 2001
Terracotta and steel, 2200 x 400 x 960 mm.

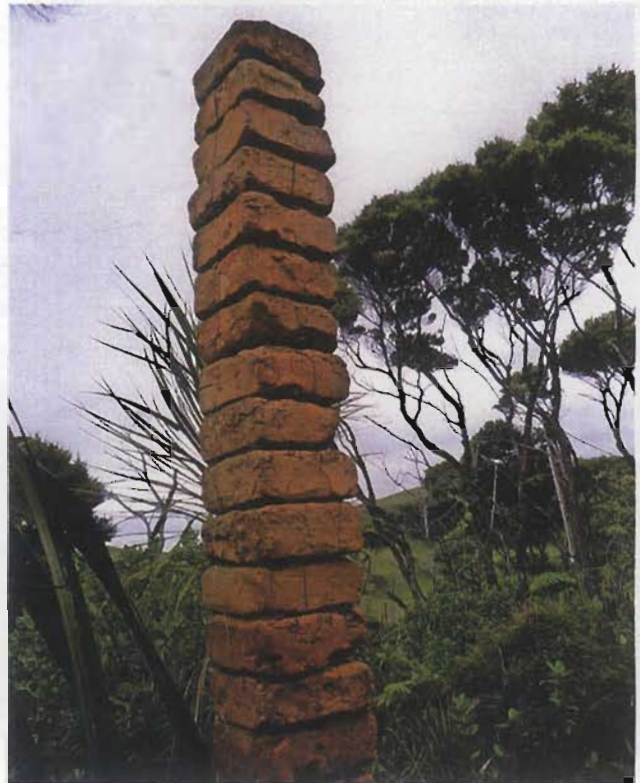
(below) HELEN POLLOCK *Southern Crossing* 2001
Terracotta, each piece 500 x 500 x 500 mm.
(Photograph: Glenn Jowitt)

huntress; Demeter, protector of marriage and goddess of fertility; and Hecate with her associations to the underworld, decay, death and renewal. Through these forms Pollock explored the archetype of the Mother Goddess. This was a seminal work for the artist in chronicling her personal narrative. She describes her journey since then as more of a dream path than a deliberate career development,⁴ but there is a coherent order to the map.

Consistent through Helen Pollock's work over the past 20 years is an autobiographical element in a journey that is unique and individual but at once universal and familiar. So too are the forms and symbols the artist employs to chart her course. Vessels, markers, fragments of the human body—together they tell her story. In *Reconstructing* (1988) Pollock begins to gather up the pieces of the human form, to draw together the chapters of the narrative. The work had its origins in a dream, a dream of reaching back to the underworld, of trying to retrieve, then reconstruct, the self. These surface-weathered, wounded figures, all blindfolded and inward looking, are almost like crucifixion figures. Damaged they may be, but survivors they are. The bodies are torn and wounded but in essence are indestructible. And their suffering becomes a means of transformation. Their personal Passion is symbolic of life's weathering of the soul and a signifier of the resilience of the human spirit and its qualities of endurance and transcendence.

The theme is reiterated in *Storehouse* in 1992. In this installation, seven vessels, each one almost a metre high, stand sentinel before grinding stones set in the ground that lead like flagstones to an altar with a life size goddess figure holding up a new moon. Beyond the obvious agricultural cycle there is a human analogy here. These vessels are the storehouse not just of food but of all things precious; nourishment for humankind. Ideas, treasures, memories are kept in this special place, the human soul. They may be dealt to by the processing of life's experience but it is the contents of the vessels, ground and refined, that are offered up to ensure the continuity of life.

Two years later, in *Craving Images* (1994), Pollock continues her search for images that represent the inner yearning of the universal condition. Again she finds them in that symbol of endless endeavour, the human body—particularly the head and the face, often eyeless, inward looking. It was in 1998 with the work *Wave*⁵ that the image of the upraised arm begins to surface in her work. This is developed the following year in *Surface Tension*, 13 upraised arms reaching out, trying to break the surface tension. What



keeps the physical away from a spiritual knowing? Is there a surface tension? What solvent would penetrate this surface tension? Where, why and when is there any permeability? These questions are born of the artist's own journey of exploration. *Surface Tension* explores parallels between the scientific phenomenon of surface tension and personal transcendence, growth and change.

Pollock's spiritual journey continued with a return to her birthplace, Dunedin. This finds expression in the work *Jacob's Ladder* and in the exhibition *A Southern Crossing* (2001). In her personal quest at this time Pollock set out to find the Jacob's Ladder she remembered from her childhood. This was an actual ladder up a coastal cliff face at Long Bay just north of Dunedin which, as a child, she had climbed with her father⁶. Fuelled by a whiff of this magical memory, Pollock created *Jacob's Ladder* (2001) a work constructed from old clay tablets that she discovered and literally dragged out from under the ground, dried and fired in a kiln. This constructive reconstruction of her early life signifies ascension both





physical and spiritual. An individual life journey can be likened to Jacob's Ladder, the Biblical symbol of personal transformation.

The title work of the exhibition *A Southern Crossing* was arranged as a Southern Cross, formed out of anchors or water jacks. The work alludes to the faith of those who set out across the water in search of a better life, and of the comfort, hope and fear engendered by the first sighting in the night sky of that signifier of their new life. The form of the work also evokes images of old leather suitcases or boxes on a wharf or railway platform, and speaks of family and precious belongings, of arrival and departure. The analogy is continued in a key work in the exhibition, the double headed *Looking Backwards to See my Way Forwards*, and in *Passage*, arms reaching upwards, craving divine guidance and protection. Such individual works cumulatively create a themed installation. *A Southern Crossing* could be read as a generic journey, a journey such as that made by the artist's ancestors⁷ but common to all New Zealanders—of voyaging, crossing the seas, of arrival, tossing cases and boxes (baggage often labelled 'not needed on journey') onto the shore, driving a jack or two into the ground and holding on, somewhat tenuously, to this new life.

Out of *A Southern Crossing* comes *Four Directions* (2005), markers for the four bearings, north, south, east and west. This continuing interest in ritual, direction finding and rebuilding leads to *Reading*

Backwards (2006)⁸ which is a gathering up of parts, fragments of the body—heads, hands, feet, torso—pieces disparate and separate but all with their finders. Although they look as if they are to be assembled to make a greater whole, these individual pieces do not fit together; the finders don't match the keepers. The scale relationship varies from piece to piece; there is only one half of a body and shadows fall unexpectedly. There is an analogy here with the driving force behind Pollock's urge to create. Helen Pollock has always needed to find the pieces of the puzzle, to put it all together. This in itself transfers into the logistics of working in three dimensions—creating a sculpture in the round, a work that is completely comprehensible from all approaches.

As with completing a puzzle, the key pieces came together conceptually for Pollock in a single statement, between the memory and the silence, *Falls the Shadow* (2008). Themes of suffering, searching, return, homecoming and ritual are finally united and presented in this visually powerful and evocative statement.⁹ *Falls the Shadow* is a forest of bisque fired clay arms stretching up from the water and mud of the battlefield, palms upturned, reaching towards the skies. The gesture is one of futility, and of exaltation. It speaks of shared emotion and grief, reaching to make a connection, the universality of the human condition. Carefully chosen texts, the graphic backdrop of sepia toned, shell-blasted trees, the 'Soundscape',¹⁰ all contribute to the creation of a still, contemplative



(above left)
William (Bill) Ralph Young, the artist's father in 1917

(above centre)
HELEN POLLOCK *Falls the Shadow*—detail 2008
(Photograph: Paul Smith)

(above right)
HELEN POLLOCK *Falls the Shadow*—detail 2008
(Photograph: Glenn Jowitt)

(left)
HELEN POLLOCK *Surface Tension and Permeability* 1999
Installation at Cheltenham Beach, terracotta, dimensions variable
(Collection of Cooper's Creek Winery) (Photograph: Glenn Jowitt)

(opposite) HELEN POLLOCK *Falls the Shadow* 2008
Installation in the Auckland War Memorial Museum,
dimensions variable (Photograph: Krysztof Pfeiffer)

environment, the commemoration that is *Falls the Shadow*.

Appalled by the general lack of awareness of the experiences of those at the Western Front in 1917, and compelled to unwrap the mystery that has veiled it for so many years, Pollock physically retraced the footsteps of her father across northern France to Cologne. Then clay uplifted from the battlefield mud of Flanders where the Canterbury and Otago troops were stationed near Passchendaele, was brought to New Zealand and incorporated with clay from the Coromandel to create the ceramic forms.¹¹ Clay hardens and fuses under the stress of the intense heat of the firing process. The material is pushed to its limit. This is a metaphor for what happened at the Western Front—ordinary young men were changed forever.¹² Symbolizing sacrifice, *Falls the Shadow* can also be seen as representing the vigour of new growth, the indestructibility of the human spirit and the certainty of new life—a powerful symbol of peace and regeneration. These are the themes that endure in the work of sculptor Helen Pollock.

1. 'Falls the shadow' from T.S. Eliot's poem *The Hollow Men*; the line 'Between the Memory and the Silence' is the artist's adaptation.
2. Particularly the chronic medical conditions visited upon members of her family.
3. Helen Pollock's father was a signaller in northern France in the First World War and was a member of the New Zealand Division of the occupying force in Cologne.
4. Interview with the artist, 4 December 2008.
5. Shown at the Women's Refuge fundraising exhibition in the Becroft gardens in 1998.
6. Pollock's quest was ultimately successful. The original Jacob's

Ladder from Long Bay has been retrieved and the artist is in the process of restoring it to install it in a sculptural as well as functional form on a cliff face at Bethells Beach in Waitakere City. The significance of this reinstatement cannot be overlooked. Genesis 28:12—Jacob laid his head on a stone and dreamt of a ladder with angels ascending and descending. When he awoke in the morning he named the place Bethel. Beth (place) el (God)—The Place of God in Hebrew (sometimes translated as The House of the Dissident Sect).

7. Both the maternal and paternal branches of Helen Pollock's family emigrated from Scotland to New Zealand in the mid to late 1800s.
8. Exhibited at New Zealand Sculpture Onshore 2006.
9. Thematically aligned to *Falls the Shadow* is *Standing To*, the work that Pollock exhibited at Narrow Neck for New Zealand Sculpture Onshore in November 2008. This work comprises two pairs of slightly larger than life size feet, positioned in line and 'standing to'. 'Standing to' is a twice daily ritual in the British Army; to the east at sunrise and to the west at sunset, to steady the troops for the day or night's action. The subject references the historical use of Narrow Neck by the military. The link to the biblical imagery, 'feet of clay' is open to multiple interpretations.
10. 'Soundscape' is an original composition by Andrew McMillan written specifically for *Falls the Shadow*. The arrangement is a collage of the sounds of the clay from the battlefield at Passchendaele being manipulated in Pollock's studio and sound made from items used in the trenches. Empty shell cases are used like a flute, the chipping of a spade is used as percussion, and a shovel is used as a gong.
11. In October 2007 a ceremonial presentation of the clay was made at Tyne Cot War Memorial Cemetery to Prime Minister Helen Clark on the 90th anniversary of the Battle of Passchendaele. *Falls the Shadow* will be installed at the Passchendaele Memorial Museum as its special commemorative exhibition for 2009, opening on Anzac Day (25 April) through until Armistice Day (11 November).
12. 'The disposable ordinariness of the clay material is a powerful metaphor for the all too common military attitude of the time; of the 'disposable ordinariness' of young men's bodies, especially those of the lower ranks', Helen Pollock *Between the Memory and the Silence Falls the Shadow* Auckland War Memorial Museum, Auckland 2008 p. 11.

