

Diana Baker Smith

**THIS PLACE
WHERE THEY
DWELL**

11 MAY – 4 AUGUST 2024

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Archives can be fragmented places, with obvious gaps, lapses and limits on how much they can provide us. For historians, archives are often approached as evidence to support their arguments, with a pre-determined end point that follows a linear path. But what if we expand the meaning of an archive from a collection of historical documents to that which takes on many forms? What might this do to shift the way we approach histories, ideas, and memory?

For Diana Baker Smith these ideas are but a starting point, a position from which to tease out how and where memory dwells, and how these memories can be accessed, activated, and embodied through performance and site-specific responses. A story of both fact and fiction, *This Place Where They Dwell* (2024) is a proposition to reconsider the former home of artist Margo Lewers, now the Penrith Regional Gallery as a protagonist in a tale of many characters.

The 4-channel video installation was filmed, and is presented, in the rooms where Lewers lived with her family, then alone for almost three decades of her life. The ongoing presence of Lewers struck Baker Smith who recalls:

“We walked through Lewers House, and she was everywhere and yet nowhere to be seen... I imagined the way she would have walked through that house, the familiarity with which she would have pushed the front door open and gone into her studio, or into her bedroom. I imagined her looking out the windows to her garden ...”

Much of Margo’s work, her relentless experimentation and creative tenacity happened in private, which saw her practice spill out from the canvas into the home, as wall paintings, mosaics, and an artist garden. The traces of this life are unpacked by Baker Smith, who worked in collaboration with choreographer and performer Lizzie Thomson and composer and soprano Jane Sheldon, merging forms to call into being this life once lived.

One of the points of inspiration for Baker Smith is a dance performed at the last exhibition of work Lewers made. Commissioned by the Adelaide Festival Centre in 1976, the installation of hand-painted fabrics marked a significant new concept

for Margo as she drew from her years of interior design, painting, and sculptural practices to tell a new story that combined all these forms as a whole.

Intrigued by records of Lewers’ intense emotional response to the live performance by American choreographer, Marilyn Wood (1929 – 2016), Baker Smith engaged in a series of conversations with Cheryl Stock, one of the dancers and collaborators on the project. Stock recalled how Wood worked to create the dance piece by “scoring the site” a pre-performance technique whereby “performers immerse themselves in the spatial qualities, sounds, movement and behaviour of a site”ⁱ. Baker Smith, together with Thomson, noted the sounds, rhythms, and architecture of the Lewers’ former home, in preparation for their own site-responsive performance.

In *This Place Where They Dwell*, the affinities between the narrative faculties of film are found in coalescence with the improvisational possibilities of voice and movement. As Thomson moves, it is as if there is a slow and important puzzle to solve, with light and colour as her guide. A singular voice holds a different note in each of the four rooms, extending through the house as a chord without pause. For Baker Smith the reflective ritualistic movement of Thomson’s body and Sheldon’s minimalist composition, act like other archives, as they take on the character of a collection of stories and movements that recall historical narratives. Here memory is reconsidered as dynamic and rhythmic rather than fixed, and in a state of becoming that is shared with the architecture.

For Baker Smith reanimating the work of women artists who have, for the most part been written out of art history, is as much an act of resistance as it is a challenge to the way we seek to remember. *This Place Where They Dwell* gives form to the silences and gaps within historical narratives with poetic urgency. It is a place of privacy and the subconscious – a manifestation of what might still exist if memory was to take form as movement, colour and sound.

Nina Stromqvist, Curatorial Programs Manager

ⁱ Cheryl Stock, “From urban cities and the tropics to site-dance in the world heritage setting of Melaka”, in Hunter, V. (Ed.). (2015). *Moving Sites: Investigating Site-Specific Dance Performance* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315724959>

Diana Baker Smith
This Place Where They Dwell
2024
Four channel 4K video
5 mins 15 secs

Artist: Diana Baker Smith
Choreographer and Performer: Lizzie Thomson
Composer and Soprano: Jane Sheldon
Costume Designer: Leah Giblin
Cinematographer: Nisa East
Video Editor: Kate Blackmore
Sound Mix: Bob Scott
Colourist: Justin Tran
Edit Assistant: Eloise Martin-Jones
Production Assistant: Amy Prceвич

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HOME OF THE LEWERS BEQUEST

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