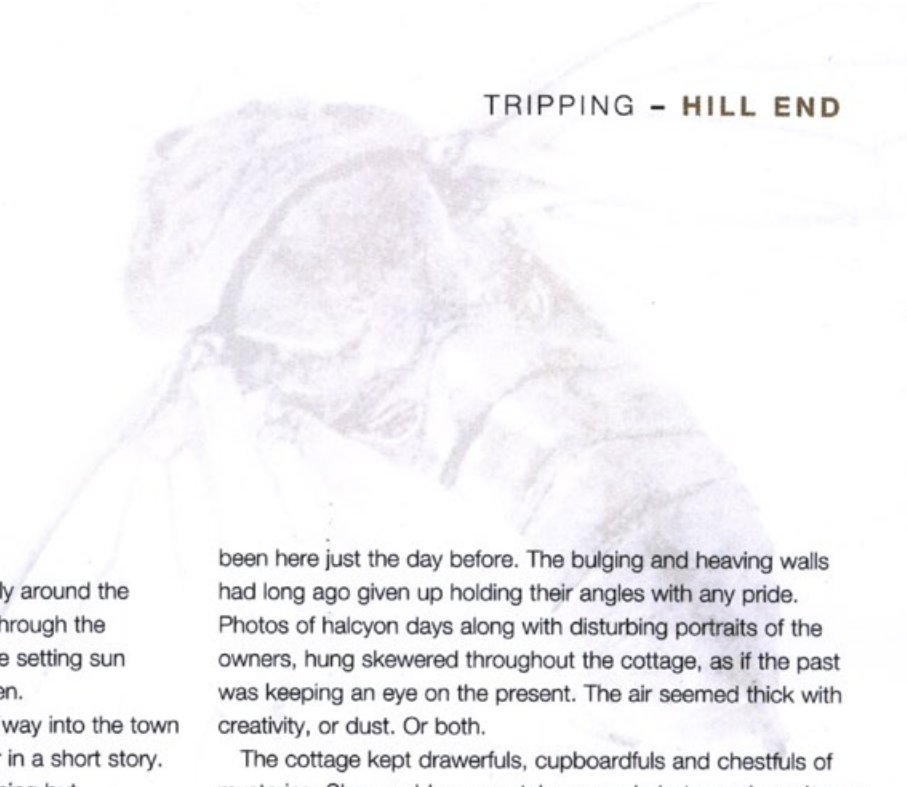


# The *Topography* of Inspiration

A personal journey into the creative cornucopia of Hill End,  
and the joys of an emerging artist's first experience as  
"artist in residence", told by JOHN KILBEY.

Grape Tree, Zoe MacDonell, 2004, digital photo, 38 x 27cm. Courtesy of the artist.





### Deadlines!

Loaded to bursting, Zoë's car crept tentatively around the undulating dirt track, the potholes shuddering through the steering wheel. The heat made her delirious, the setting sun blinded her through the dust-cruised windscreen.

As she rounded the last bend and made her way into the town of Hill End, Zoë MacDonnell felt like a character in a short story. For the past week, her existence had been nothing but deadlines: finishing the work for her next exhibition, getting it to the Sydney Opera House Exhibition Hall for Object Gallery's Sydney Style Show, getting it hung just so, making last minute adjustments, writing artist statements and catalogue notes, fixing everything she couldn't have foreseen would need fixing – not only did all of these tasks have to be completed but they had to meet someone else's DEADLINE!

Zoë rolled the word 'deadline' around in her mind and noticed it had lost some of its authority out in the expanse of dry, lolling hills before her. Zoë MacDonnell, 'artist in residence', sounded more powerful here.

Then the road opened and curved salaciously straight to the beating heart of Hill End, a small town, rustic and in parts dilapidated, a veritable gold mine of Australian art history, and her home for the next month. Here the great John Olsen had lived once, and Brett Whiteley had visited. Before them, in the fifties, the town had played host to such luminaries as Donald Friend, Russell Drysdale, Margaret Olley, Jean Bellette, Paul Haefliger, David Strachan and Jeffrey Smart.

Walking into the pub to ask directions she realized she was announcing her arrival to the whole town. Alive with laughter and rowdy discussion, the entire hotel clientele froze mid-sip, even the music seemed to stop mid-beat. But as the words "Haefliger's cottage" came out of her mouth, everyone seemed to know who she was. She was in.

The cottage was just down the road. The trees stretched tentatively above, providing some relief from the punishing sun. Behind quaint picket fences small, often

overgrown, cottages poked. And there, in the middle of the town common, stood Haefliger's Cottage, just as it had looked in the pictures she had seen. She entered the garden, littered with dark plums, which squelched underfoot. The front door seemed askew in its hinges. In fact the whole house seemed lopsided. She opened the door.

Inside it was like a museum, filled with the belongings of its previous owners – Jean Bellette and Paul Haefliger – whose books, antique furniture and knick knacks were left as if they had

been here just the day before. The bulging and heaving walls had long ago given up holding their angles with any pride. Photos of halcyon days along with disturbing portraits of the owners, hung skewered throughout the cottage, as if the past was keeping an eye on the present. The air seemed thick with creativity, or dust. Or both.

The cottage kept drawerfuls, cupboardfuls and chestfuls of mysteries. She would soon catalogue and photograph each one to use in her work – a topography of inspiration, an intricate map of Hill End. She would print, paint, draw and work these into maps of her state of mind, onto her preferred medium, silk. And now this process was about to come under the scrutiny of the entire town, and the very walls of Haefliger's Cottage itself.

Suddenly a van pulled up at the front of the cottage. "It's my 50th birthday party tonight," a thickly accented Mexican voice called over the fence, "Won't you come over to celebrate? It will be a good opportunity for the town to meet you... so come over around eight eh?" The van roared off.

Next door was less than 1km away – a Mexican ranch in miniature hidden amongst plum trees, the porch lit with coloured fairy lights. Music spilled from the back as Zoë entered. The birthday boy Lino Alvarez, was giving his guests lessons on how to assemble fresh burritos. Jovial and welcoming, Hill End – regulars and friends, playwrights, musicians, actors and sculptors, came forward to introduce themselves – the landscape artist Luke Sciberras, Garry Shead, photographer Brett Hilder, John Firth-Smith and artist Michael Ramsden. Lino, a highly successful ceramicist, gave a speech to the hoots of the assembled, telling of his rise from humble beginnings in Mexico

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to owning his own piece of paradise in Hill End, Australia. The crowd was rowdy and Zoë received many kisses and compliments before making her way under the full moon to the sanctity of Haefliger's.

Over the next week the cottage began to talk to her and Zoë photographed every detail. Dead cicadas, squashed plums, dried paint palettes, wire fly nets, chipped cups, antique shaving kits and of course the textile patterns on the upholstery, the curtains, the table cloths. Her lens closed in as if squeezing the



The Cicada, Zoë MacDonnell, 2004, digital photo, 38 x 27cm. Courtesy of the artist.

essence out of things, creating the raw elements from which she would produce her finished work.

The days were hot and slow, luxuriously slow. She got up early and ate fruit. She went for walks amidst the ruined gold mines, past the local cricket pitch and its relaxing mob of 'roos. She felt isolated and liberated all at once. The landscape was barren, battered and beautiful. The true locals, descendants of

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the original gold rush that spurred the town, were just as accepting as the community of artists, refugees from the city, who came to draw on Hill End.

Even as a young woman staying alone in a cottage in a small town, she felt nurtured, accepted. Part of something. And it seemed everyone had their fingers on the creative pulse. Each came to appraise and critique her work in progress, discussing their own practice and ideas. Each guest became another subtle

layer of detail for Zoë to add to her map.

Time blurred as she became absorbed in her act of creation. After being so long the master of her own time and space – a dreaded deadline reared its head. Zoë's time in Hill End must conclude and she must go back to Sydney to attend her own opening at the Opera House. She packed. From their faded frames the photos of legendary artists of days gone by looked

down on her. Even as she prepared for her return journey, back to the world of deadlines, Zoë acknowledged each of them silently, feeling genuinely supported by the truly artistic community they had begun so long ago.

*Zoë MacDonnell received a scholarship to the Hill End Artist in Residence program via the Ministry of the Arts. As well as having work showing at the Sydney Opera House and in the Modern White show in Berlin, she was one of two artists asked to contribute to the annual Hill End Art Festival at Easter – the biggest time of year in Hill End. ■*

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