

Alexandra Mills
In Darlinghurst

2021


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CATALOGUE

'In Darlinghurst'

This exhibition is being shown in a building that was built in the 1840s to house stonemasons working on the new military barracks on Oxford Street. At the same time, just up the road in Forbes Street, the new Darlinghurst Gaol was being occupied by prisoners on a site that is now the National Art School.

The new gaol was an innovation in prison policy. The buildings were designed in a radial plan to allow constant surveillance of prisoners who were expected to work and learn while incarcerated. The hope was that by learning skills, prisoners would be equipped to stay away from crime on their return to the community.

By the 1870s the Gaol was referred to as an 'industrious hive of labour'. The prisoners worked with timber, stone, metals, leather, paper, textiles and fibres to bind books, shoe horses, make brooms, building materials, boots, mats, hats and clothing for themselves and other colonial institutions. Prisoners worked in harsh and, often, unhealthy conditions. Food and clothing was often inadequate and conditions were generally harsh. Executions were held on site and many prisoners experienced brutality. The original vision for reform of their lives was consistently threatened by overcrowding and cost cutting.

Henry Lawson wrote about his experience at Darlinghurst Gaol in his poems *The Song of a Prison* and *One Hundred and Three*. He describes the buildings and the prisoners' work which, by the time he was there, was often monotonous and meaningless.

The work in this exhibition is made with materials and methods that would have been available for the work of those first prisoners and have been used by students on the same site since its conversion, in 1922, to a trades school and an art school. The colour blue used in several works refers to the way Reckitts blue whitening powder was put into the whitewash painted on cell walls. (Fragments of the blue whitewash can still be seen on the walls of the Cellblock Theatre on the National Art School campus.) This work also makes reference to Lawson's words, to the gaol buildings and to the prisoners themselves.

References:

Poetical Works of Henry Lawson Angus & Robertson 1970 Sydney. Deborah Beck Hope in Hell National Art School 2020. John Ramsland *With Just but Relentless Discipline* Kangaroo Press 1996

The artist: Alexandra Mills graduated last year from the National Art School's Master of Fine Art program where she investigated the labour of prisoners who lived and worked in Darlinghurst Gaol.



Oxford Street

\$950

Salvaged birdcage wire on board
20 x 30cm

Unlike the intentional order of the gaol buildings, outside in Taylor Square and the laneways behind the Victorian era Oxford Street fronts were haphazard, often makeshift structures of backstairs and iron balconies.



Fancy mending

\$650

Digital print on muslin, tarlatan and Belgian linen
110 x 70cm

At Darlinghurst Gaol the men prisoners were occupied in trades skills. Contemporary accounts report that the women's work was largely cleaning, washing and needlework. This work is a patchwork of images of women prisoners and scraps of the clothes they wore when photographed on admission.

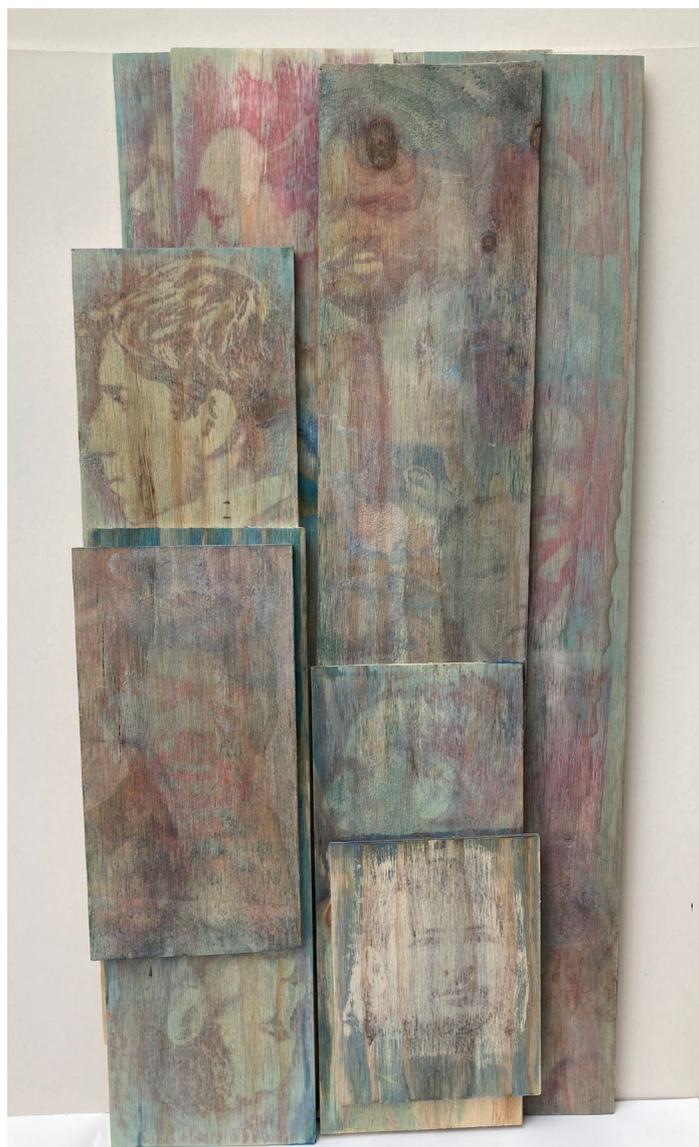


Scrap timber

\$650

Transfer print on plywood
110 x 50cm

Darlinghurst Gaol began photographing prisoners in 1871 and had a sophisticated photographic studio. The images in this work are from identity photos of men prisoners on admission embedded in the kind of materials they may have worked with.



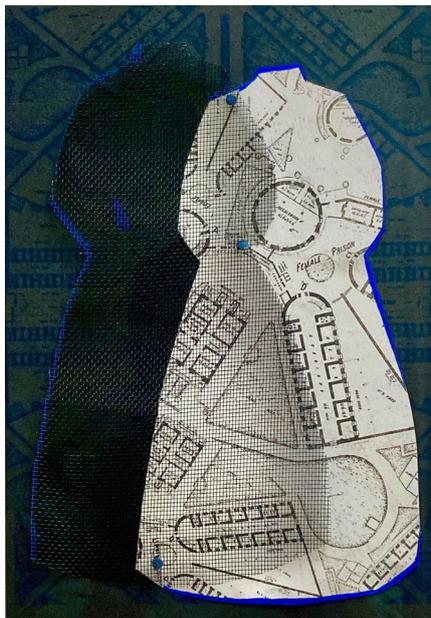
Women's work

\$750 each

Series of three collages of digital prints on paper with tarlatan and tacks
50 x 40cm

While men prisoner learned trade skills and mostly worked at useful activities women's work was 'solely that of scrubbing, cleaning, washing and needlework of the most hideous and dreary description. After working at needlework from 9- 12 the 2-4 they were compelled to go to bed at 5pm. They were locked up with no lighting. They could not work in the workshops, garden or use the library as the men could, nor could they use the schoolroom' (Rose Scott 1896).

The women ate their meals in a yard beside their cellblock (D Wing) and worked at needlework in a adjoining building. The women's cellblock was connected to the chapel by an elevated walkway into the upper floor. It was unsewered until 1891, frequently infested with vermin and had very narrow unglazed windows until the 1890s.



Mary – Ethel – May

\$750

Digital prints on paper with paper collage
28 x 54cm

These collages combine the faces of three women prisoners and the plan of Darlinghurst Gaol in 1890 showing their classification into 'capital felons', misdemeanours before trial' and misdemeanours after trial'. Attempts to keep prisoners segregated by age and seriousness of their crimes usually failed due to overcrowding. The women's cellblock, built for 156, by 1886 held 450 women.



Identifying marks (series of 5)

\$650 each

Charcoal and fly wire on plywood
30 x 20cm

1.112: pickpocketing
2.1460: assault & robbery
3.53: stealing – notorious offender 4.1461: no visible means of support 5.3836: stealing and 16 other convictions

These drawings are of the dresses worn in the identity photos of five prisoners taken on their admission to Darlinghurst. The wire overlay refers to the plain black prison dress worn by women prisoners and described by one contemporary reformer as an 'added degradation'. The women wore 'black, shapeless dresses, with small tight bonnets to protect and hide their hair which was frequently cut short as a hygiene measure' (Beck 45).

The titles are the women's prison numbers followed by notes from their record sheets.



Pinned

\$750

Transfer print on Fabriano, tacks
60 x 45cm

Women prisoners on short sentences worked in the laundry and did rudimentary needlework. This work makes a patchwork of images taken from photographs of the pre-prison clothes of three prisoners.

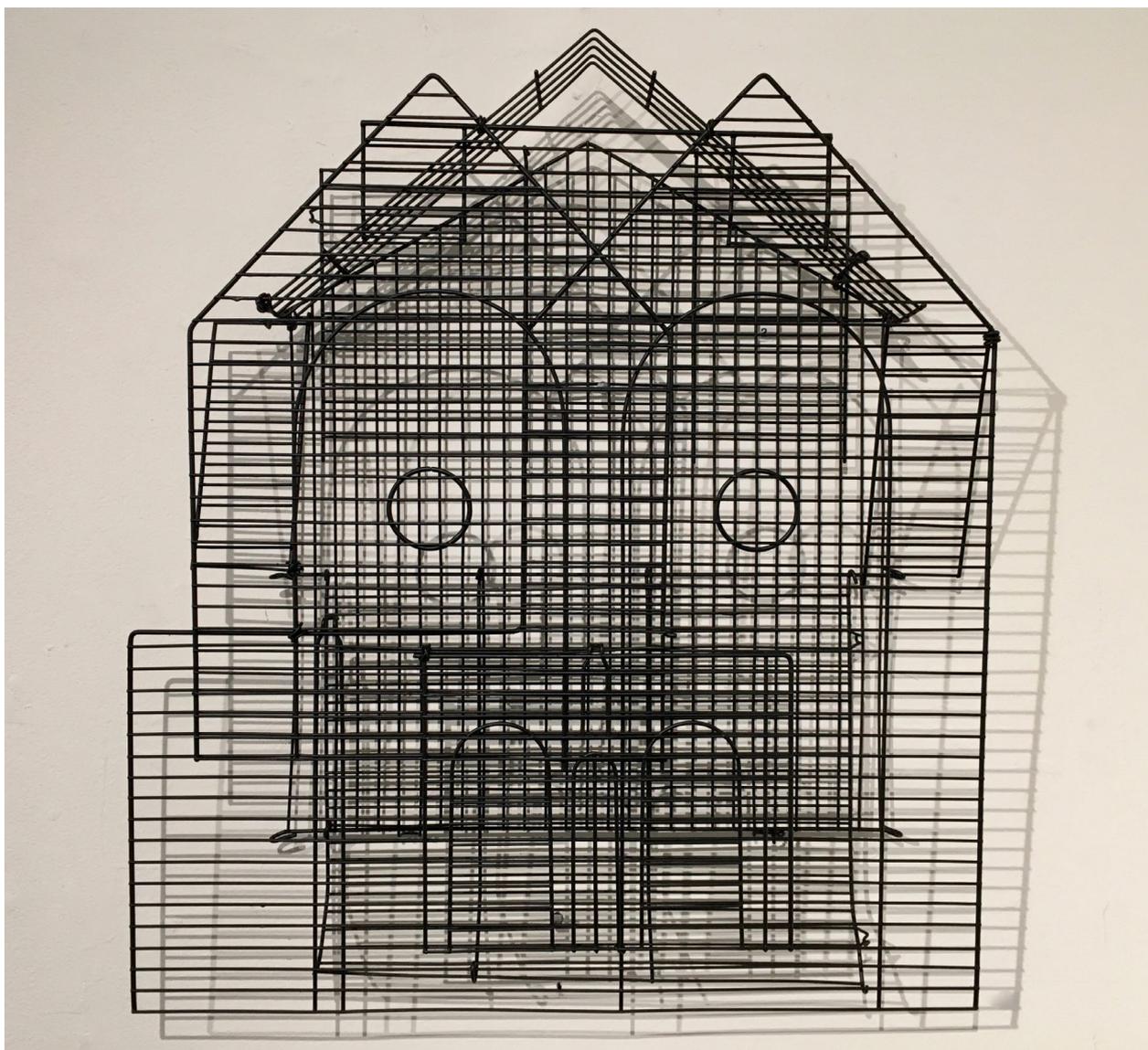


Starvinghurst / library

\$1,250

65 x 50 x 20cm

Henry Lawson's ballad One Hundred and Three calls the gaol 'Starvinghurst' where 'They ... feed him up in hospital to give him the strength to starve' (35). The building is now the library of the National Art School.

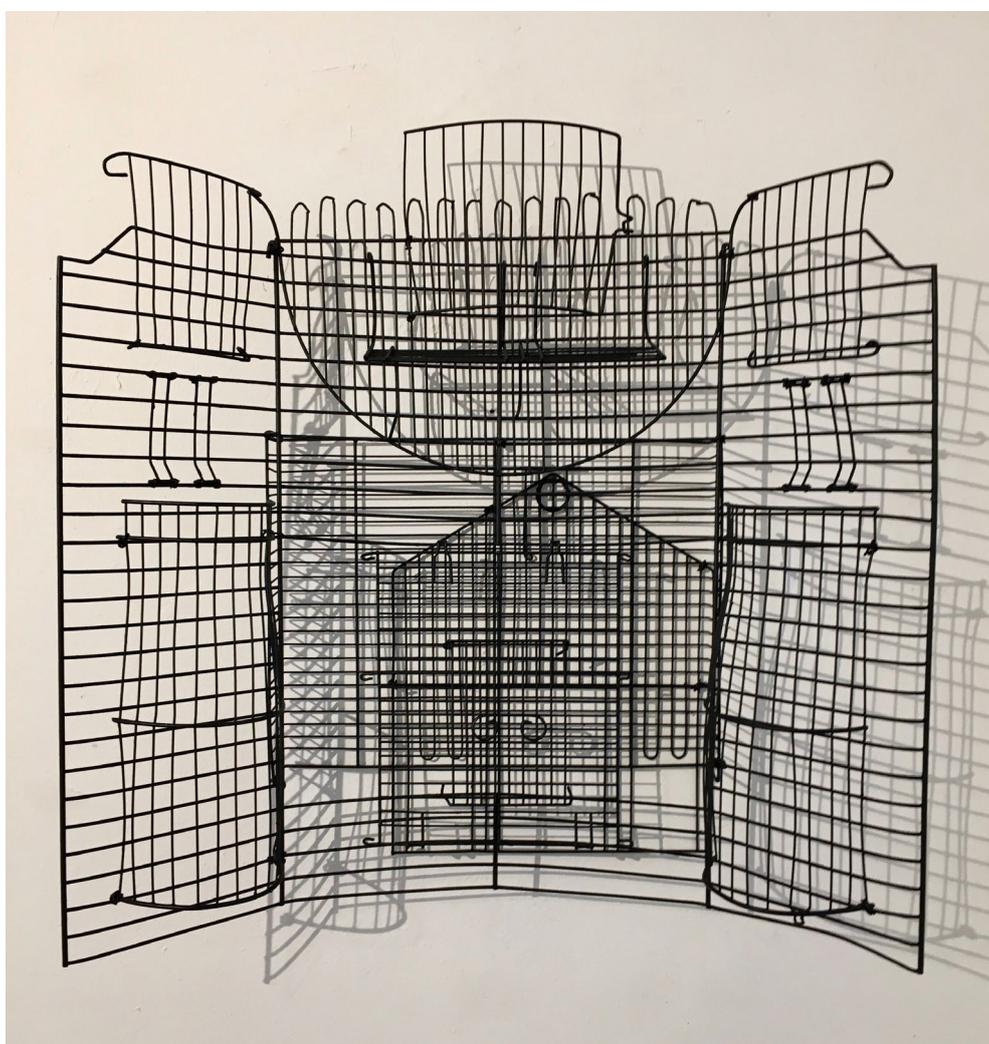


Gates of Hell

\$1,250

60 x 60 x 20cm

The main gate of Darlinghurst Gaol faced Forbes Street and opened to the Governor's house which featured a clock that matched the one in the gable of the Hyde Park Barracks. Early public hangings occurred from a platform above the gate. After this gate was replaced (in 1880) by the present one it no longer aligned with the Governor's house and executions were moved to a more discreet scaffold inside the walls. This work depicts the present gate but with a hanging platform - so we don't forget.

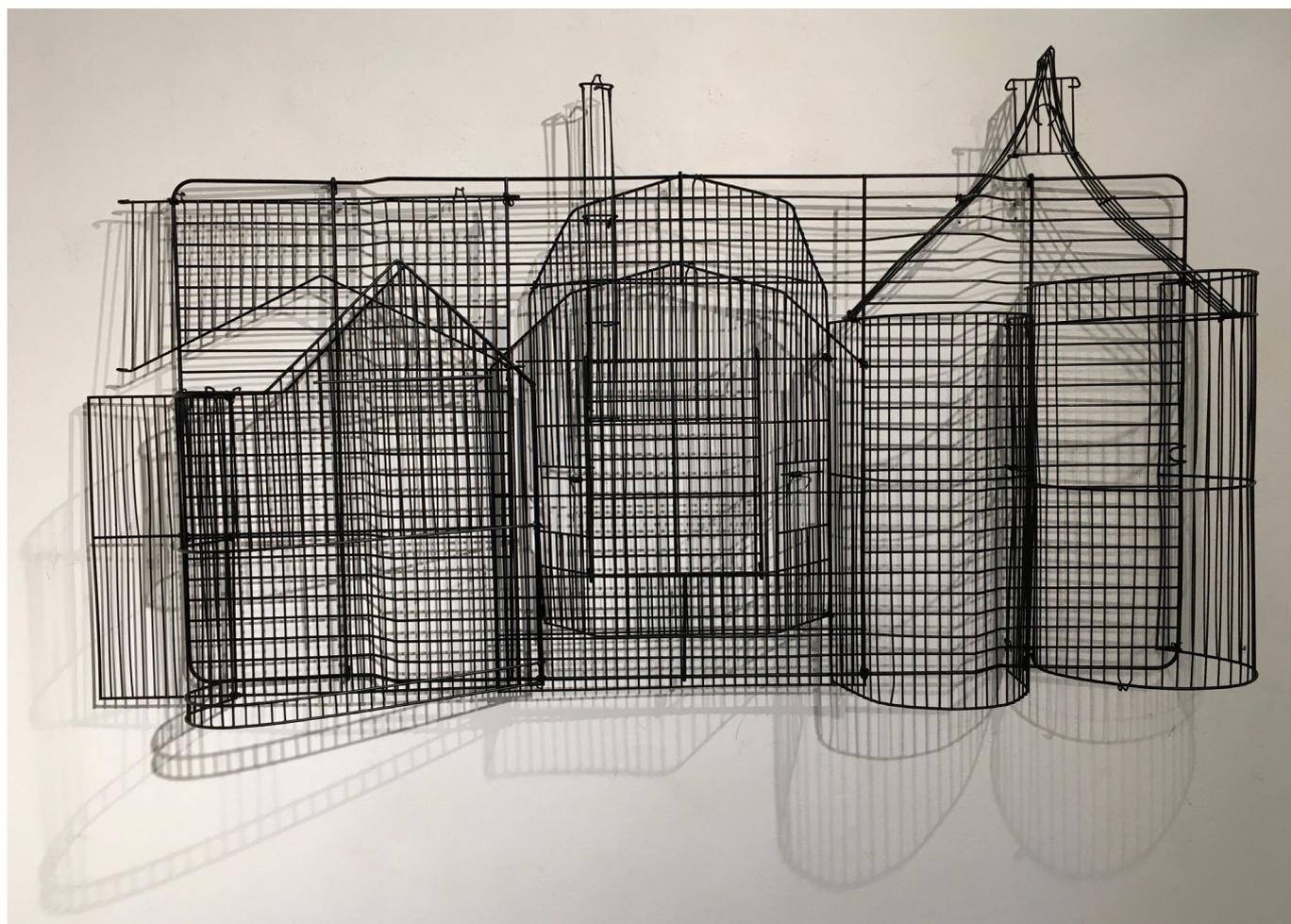


9 o'clock

\$1,750

65 x 110 x 20cm

This work depicts a view of the Darlinghurst Gaol buildings visible from above the Burton Street gate. The title refers to the nighttime call of the warder from the watchtower: 'Nine o'clock and all's well' signalling that all prisoners are locked up with lights out. Today, this view at the National Art School is virtually unchanged and at 9 o'clock in the morning the stillness is about to be broken by the arrival of the students for classes.



Women of the Town (series of 5)

\$1,500 each

70 x 40 x 30cm

Many of the women on short sentences at Darlinghurst Gaol had been convicted of offences in the local area resulting from being destitute such as 'vagrancy', 'no visible means of support', 'loiter on footway' or 'indecent behaviour as a common prostitute'.

This series of 5 works imagines both the street clothes of these women and with the rough black dresses they wore in prison.

The title comes from Henry Lawson's poem Women of the Town.



Model Prisoners

\$1,500 each

Salvaged plywood, masonite, timber panels, birdcage wire
140 x 65cm

Based on a photograph of men modelling new prison uniforms c1885.

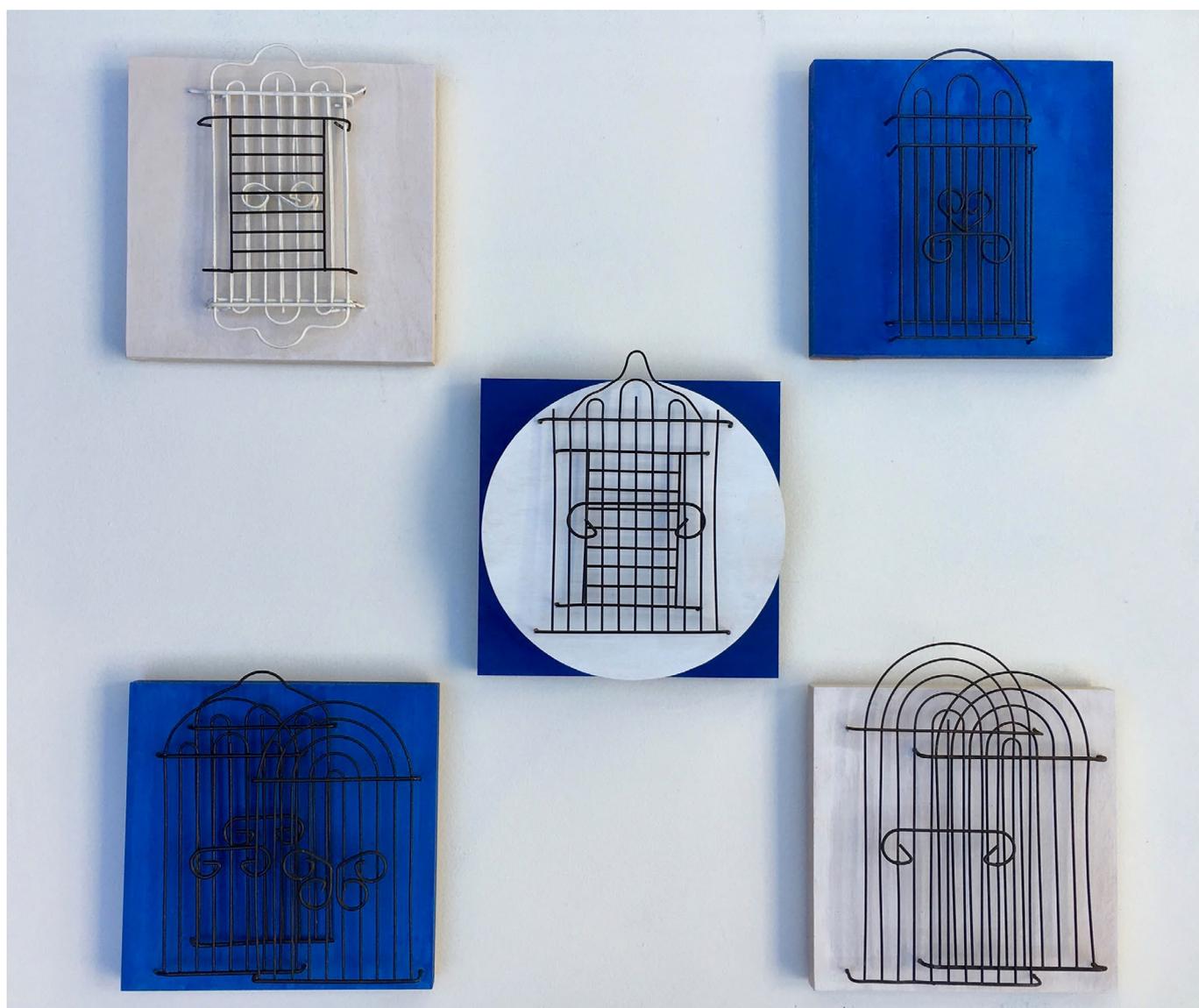


Darlinghurst city (series of 5)

\$850 each

Salvaged birdcage wire, acrylic paint, wood stain on board
54 x 35 x 3cm

The Gaol was described in the 1860s as a miniature city. These works are made from the disused doors of cages intended to house pet birds. The view depicted is that of the cockerel weathervane on the high point of the chapel roof.



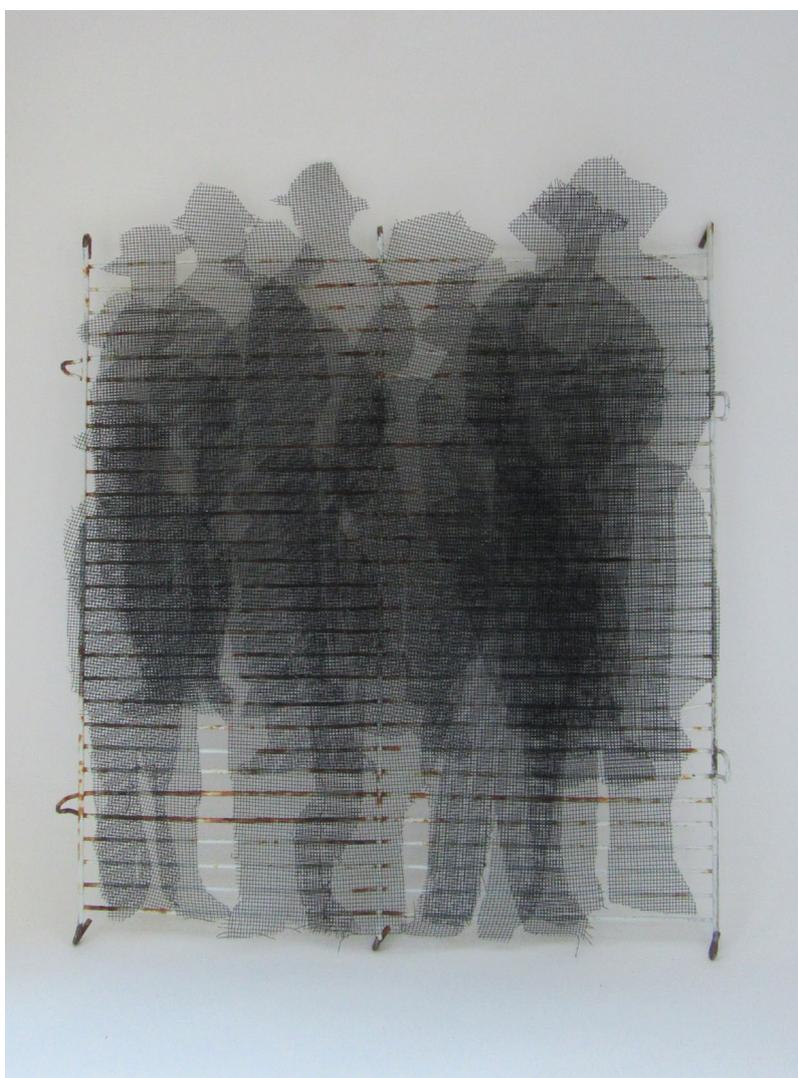
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The Men

\$995

Fly wire on salvaged birdcage panel
35 x 35cm

The images of these men are taken from a photographs taken in the 1880's of a line up of prisoners. The title is from Henry Lawson's poem 'One Hundred and Three' written about his experience of serving a sentence in Darlinghurst Gaol and reflects his regard for some warders who treated prisoners with humanity: "The public call us the criminal class, but the warders call us 'the men'".





maunsell wickes
gallery

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