



EVA FERNANDEZ

ARTIST IN RESIDENCE 2021
PARLIAMENT HOUSE OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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Edith Cowan: An extraordinary woman (1861-1932)

As the invited artist to undertake the 2021 Parliament House Artist Residency I created a series of photographic works honouring and celebrating the revolutionary Edith Cowan (1861-1932) OBE on the 100th anniversary of becoming the first woman to be elected to an Australian parliament.

As a young woman Edith Cowan became involved in issues such as social justice, inequality of woman, child protection and the welfare of disadvantaged groups, as well as actively engaging in numerous organisations and advocating for positive change. As a prominent member of the woman's suffrage movement, Edith Cowan saw women of Western Australia granted the right to vote in 1899 and in 1921, and herself became the first female member of Parliament. Edith Cowan succeeded in campaigning for women's rights in parliament, women's equality within legal profession and equality in the family. These were amongst just a few of her achievements.

Through independent research and access to the Parliament's archival material I have produced images that recreate some of the narratives of Edith Cowan's journey while honouring her bravery, intelligence, and tenacity to become the first woman to enter the male dominated domain of Western Australian parliament. I have also paid tribute to Edith Cowan's struggle, from a background of adversity, losing her mother at a young age and her father being executed for the murder of her stepmother, to entering public life without inhibition particularly given the attitudes and conservative mindset of the time.

These works intend to challenge and confront the structures of society, the attitudes, and obstacles of the time, that women have had to overcome in order to attain political and legal representation. I have also explored recent experiences documented by women in the political sphere such as 'gender deafness', the representation of the 'out-spoken woman' or 'ambitious' woman, and the narrative of 'women are more emotional, and men are more rational', as well as women being berated due to their marital status or childlessness and other misrepresentations and attitudes that continue impact women in government today.

One hundred years after Australia elected its very first female parliamentarian, we've come a long way, but it appears we still have some way to go. My work challenges and confronts the structures of society of the time of Edith Cowan, and the attitudes and obstacles that women have had to overcome in order to attain political and legal representation. My work also explores the mistreatment of women in the contemporary political sphere as reflected in recent incidences of misconduct perpetrated against women within this institution reflecting on the complexities of being a female politician.

My creative work takes form as a series of photographic images which play out narratives in the life of Edith Cowan but also extend to the experience of other women who have come after her and experienced similar struggles and challenges. These works aim to honour and celebrate the first woman in the Western Australian Parliament as well as women in parliament in contemporary times. Using portraiture and still-life photography I have endeavored to create a series of photographic images that are aesthetically engaging as well as enlightening and informative, illuminating the life of our Western Australia's first woman in Australian Parliament.



This work examines the discourse of gendered architectural space, recognising buildings as social objects in that they are invested with social meaning and social relationships. The kinds of spaces women have access to, or are denied, can either empower or render powerless, with the built environment largely created for a white, masculine subject.

As Parliament House was built without any consideration of women, there were no facilities for them within the building. Consequently, when Edith Cowan became the first women member in Parliament House, there were no female toilet facilities available. This image conveys the narrative of Edith Cowan either walking to her own home in Malcolm St in West Perth to use toilet facilities or was told to leave her shoes outside the door of the men's facilities to inform any passersby that they were engaged by a woman. The shoes also represent women's fashion from this time and the laborious task of undoing laces signifying the extra complexities of being a female politician.

Edith's Shoes

Parliament House Residency 2021
archival fine art print, 80cmH x 80cmW



Edith Cowan succeeded in campaigning for women's rights in parliament, equality within the legal profession and in the family as well as child protection as one of the founding members of the Children's Protection Society. She also held positions within the house of Mercy for unmarried mothers and the Ministering Children's League. This work represents Edith Cowan's work in protection of children and mothers as well as symbolizing her own difficult start to life. When Edith was just seven years old her mother tragically died in childbirth and Edith was sent off to a Perth boarding school. Both her childhood and young adolescence were shattered by her mother's death and the ongoing trials and eventual execution of her father, convicted of the murder of his second wife. In this image Edith can both be seen as the child and the adult, as her childhood experience led her to become committed to social reform to protect women and children.

Child Protection

Parliament House Residency 2021
archival fine art print , 80cmH x 80cmW

The Diptych, 'A Room of One's Own' Staircase and 'A Room of One's Own' Colonnade, titles refer to the classic essay by Virginia Woolf written in 1929, with the central theme that every woman needs her own space to for self-expression and creativity, something that was permitted to men without question. As women did not have the power of their male counterparts, Woolf believed women's creativity had been systematically stifled throughout the ages. In these images the figure of Edith Cowan walks confidently within the male dominated historical space of Parliament House. The placement of the figure walking up the staircase to the light and standing within the colonnade stoically looking towards the future attempts to reinterpret and reclaim this space as a feminine one and represents Edith Cowan's rise to power in Parliament and her bravery into the unknown male dominated historical building.



'A Room of One's Own' - Staircase & Arches

Parliament House Residency 2021

archival fine art print , 80cmH x 80cmW each

The Diptych Tough nut to crack 1 and Tough nut to crack 2 symbolises Edith Cowan's early election campaign, with the seat of West Perth referred to as having been a 'tough nut to crack'. Edith Cowan gave small silver gumnut brooches to the members of her Election Committee in 1921 as a token of her appreciation. The brooches featured two gum leaves with a cracked gumnut between them, signifying her success. Although Eucalyptus trees are non-deciduous, the loss of leaves symbolises the passing of time and challenges which women still face in Parliament today.



"Tough nut to crack"

Parliament House Residency 2021

archival fine art print, 80cmH x 80cmW each



This still life image references the 17th Century paintings of Vanitas and Memento Mori. Artists of this time used symbolic objects to convey the passage of time, communicating worldly pleasures are not everlasting. I have used symbolic images such as the blown-out candle to convey the passing of time, but in this situation, preparing for a new era with the presence of women within the legal profession. Edith Cowan successfully moved for the passage of a Private Member's Bill to remove women's disqualification for entry into legal and other professions. In this image the text of 'The Speakers' wig box, is partially covered by the branches of gum leaves with only the letters SPEAK visible, symbolizing Edith Cowan's pursuit to have women's voices heard. Edith Cowan was instrumental in giving women a voice in courts of law as legal professionals. In the very front of the image is a cracked gumnut, representing the progress made and again referring to her saying, 'tough nut to crack'.

Speak

Parliament House Residency 2021
archival fine art print , 80cmH x 80cmW

