

The role of the collectively made chair in the Jimmy Possum chairmaking tradition.

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Abstract

The Jimmy Possum chairmaking tradition (1887–1955) is a unique Australian material cultural expression bound to the history, community, and landscape of Deloraine, Tasmania, the location that this studio research project was undertaken. While the tradition's chairs are in major Australian and international public institutional collections, little is known about the tradition's chairmakers or its mysterious namesake beyond the limited scope of the last scholarly enquiry conducted by Honours students enrolled at the Tasmanian School of Art in 1978.

This research seeks to better understand the tradition through reflecting on the implications of the collective act of making a chair in the Deloraine district, the home of the Jimmy Possum chairmaking tradition. The chair created during the studio research, *Re-Examine*, is the major work at my Doctor of Visual Art examination exhibition. The work employs the work practices and design configuration of the Jimmy Possum tradition as a reference point but diverges from it in regard to its materiality, production, and in terms of its meaning to the communities that identify with the tradition.

The studio research project also seeks to better understand how artists and designers can augment and provide unique insights into historical material cultural traditions that conventional text-based historiographical inquiries have difficulty explaining. *Re-Examine*'s creation sought a deeper historiographic understanding of the Jimmy Possum chairmaking tradition through the assembling of community knowledge and engagement. The work's creation both informed the tradition and was informed by the tradition.

Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

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Date



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Chapter 1: Introduction

This Doctor of Visual Art (DVA) studio research project focuses on the Jimmy Possum chairmaking tradition (1887–1955), a unique Australian material cultural expression bound to the history, community, and landscape of Deloraine, Tasmania, the location that this project was undertaken. While the tradition's chairs are in major Australian and international public institutional collections, little is known about the tradition's chairmakers or its mysterious namesake beyond the limited scope of the last scholarly enquiry conducted by Honours students enrolled at the Tasmanian School of Art (TSA) in 1978.¹ A central question posed in this DVA studio research is, how can a furniture practice yield more insight into historical enquiry? This has been investigated through the reflection of the making of a collectively made chair. This reflection directly references the design, work practices, materiality, and connects with the various communities associated with the Jimmy Possum chair tradition. The creative output of this research has explored how the process of communally making *Re-Examine* (Figure 1) has developed a deeper understanding of the tradition among participants and how this understanding has strengthened the bonds of the community who are deeply connected to the tradition.

The importance of preserving tradition is enshrined in the 2007 United Nations Scientific, Educational and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) convention for the protection of intangible cultural heritage.² UNESCO uses the term *tradition* interchangeably with intangible cultural heritage.³ Tradition can be described as the intergenerational communicating of understandings around customs, beliefs, aesthetics, etc., through word of mouth or practice.⁴ The Jimmy Possum chair tradition is part of a wider Australian vernacular furniture-making tradition, a style necessitated by isolation, poverty, a lack of tools, and unsuitable materials.⁵ It was adapted from transplanted European and North American traditions to suit local needs and conditions, and

¹ Michael McWilliams, Mary Dufour, Jenny Sharp, and Adam Thorp, *Chairs Made by Tasmanian Bush Carpenters during the 19th and Early 20th Centuries* (Hobart: Tasmanian School of of Art, 1978).

² United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, *The Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage 2003*, accessed 26 March 2016, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>, 1–5.

³ Ibid.

⁴ *Cambridge Dictionary*, accessed 26 March 2016, dictionary.cambridge.org.

⁵ Kevin Carney and Peter Cuffley, *Chairs* (Lilydale: Pioneer Design Studio, 1974), 12.

exemplifies Lois Sullivan's maxim: form follows function.⁶ Australian vernacular furniture, also known as *bush* or *make-do* furniture, was generally fabricated by people possessing no formal skills to solve immediate domestic needs.⁷ The style declined in the early to mid-twentieth century due to increased wealth and improved transport systems in rural Australia that allowed people living in remote areas access to factory-made furniture.⁸ Since the 1970s, Australian public galleries and museums, such as the National Gallery of Australia, Tasmanian Museum and Gallery and Deloraine and District Folk Museum (figure.1), have developed extensive collections of Australian vernacular furniture. The style's most prominent example is the Jimmy Possum chair, named after its enigmatic original artisan (c. 1850s–1920s).⁹ The tradition of the Jimmy Possum chair is contained in and bound to the history and landscape of the Deloraine district in Northern Tasmania. It was sustained by a series of solitary makers who lived in the area and adapted the original chairmaker's design and work practices between 1890 and 1955.¹⁰ Peter Hughes, senior curator of decorative arts at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, commented in May 2017 that “the museum has [vernacular chairs] that by no means attract the same kind of interest as the Jimmy Possum chair”.¹¹

The Jimmy Possum chair design configuration, work practices required to make it, and its materiality are fundamental reference points for my chairmaking practice. My chairs' increased number of back rungs, use of salvaged seasoned timber and employment of battery powered drills and sanders are divergencies from the historical makers practice. However, the most critical point of difference is the context in which the chairs are made. My chairs are made within a group ‘making event’, whereas the historic chairmakers worked as solitary makers. This studio research project

⁶ Susan Lambart, *Form Follows Function?* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1993), 4.

⁷ McWilliams et al., *Chairs Made by Tasmanian Bush Carpenters during the 19th and Early 20th Centuries*, 3.

⁸ Clifford Craig, Kevin Fahy, and Edward Graham Robertson, *Early Colonial Furniture in New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land* (Melbourne: Georgian House, 1972).

⁹ Graham Cornall, *MEMORIES: A Survey of Early Australian Furniture in the Collection of the Lord McAlpine of West Green* (Perth: Australian City Properties Limited, 1990).

¹⁰ McWilliams et al., *Chairs Made by Tasmanian Bush Carpenters during the 19th and Early 20th Centuries*.

¹¹ Natalie Whiting, “The Man, The Mystery, The Chair: Who Was Jimmy Possum?” ABC News, 8 May 2007, accessed 12 May 2007, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-05-08/jimmy-possum-the-chair-and-the-mystery/8504768>.

interrogates key similarities and differences of this modality via the inquiry's central topic: The role of the collectively made chair in the Jimmy Possum chairmaking tradition. In responding to this question, this studio research project concludes that the making of a collective chair serves as a means to better understand the past, coalesce the present, and construct a future.

The project is informed by George Petelin's idea of “making as research”,¹² and Tony Fry's adoption of the Aristotelian term *Phronesis*, wherein “action, theory, and practice function together with foresight”.¹³ The making of a collectively created chair is the means, principle, and motive of the project. The field work, facilitated through the application of participatory action research (PAR),¹⁴ was conducted in the Deloraine district from March 2016 to June 2017. The suitability of PAR methodology to the studio research fieldwork is summarised by Julie Ozanne, who describes PAR as working

in a collaborative, less hierarchical way that shares power with all stakeholders, and supporting stakeholders to learn progressively and publicly by testing action, ideas, and possibly making mistakes along the way. It enables stakeholders to participate in identifying questions, answering them and making decisions about action.¹⁵

PAR was adopted as the project's methodology to augment the primary methodology of studio based research, in response to the Deloraine community's self perceived ownership of and identification with the Jimmy Possum tradition. This connection initiated a dichotomy of “us” being the community and “them” being outsiders such as myself, a researcher from a *mainland* university. To counter this, a contribution to local knowledge about the tradition via a cogent collection of oral histories, a developed understanding of the making process of the tradition and curatorial input towards an exhibition of the chairs was required to articulate my bona fides. My immersion in this process formed a collaborative knowledge making process that sought to encourage engagement in nascent forms of reflexivity that would stimulate local discursive practices and group activities that would outcome in a shared sense of ownership. Arts researcher and educator Timo Jokela sees

¹² George Petelin, “It’s Research, But Not as We Know It,” *Scope: Contemporary Research Topics* 5 & 6 (2011) 8–16.

¹³ Fry cited in Philip Whiting, “Re-Educating Designers, Re-Directing Design, Design Futures,” paper presented at Edulearn11, 2011, accessed 9 December 2016, https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au/bitstream/handle/10072/42782/73420_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

¹⁴ Julie Ozanne and Bige Saatcioglu, “Participatory Action Research,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 35, no. 3 (2008): 423–29.

¹⁵ Ibid.

PAR's role in community art and communal art education as the empowerment of the participants, even if the concrete target is to execute a particular art product¹⁶.

The conclusions of this studio research are based on the reflections of outcomes, both tangible and intangible, and developed through a historiographical synthesis of process and literature informed primarily by R. G. Collingwood's idea of history as re-enactment, which

continuously reinforces that a historical inquiry cannot simply report the *outward* activities and expressions of a historical event. Rather its job is to exegete and ascertain the psyche behind the past events, so as to communicate the thoughts of the historical period to the present.¹⁷

As an archaeologist, Collingwood valued the 'object' as being equal to text in its ability to convey information.¹⁸ I employed his idea of history as re-enactment as a critical reflective methodology in this research because of his perspective on the object and, by extension, the methodologies' ability to construct meaning via the physical making of a chair.

The works submitted for examination are the material expressions of the studio research, and they align with design theorist Klaus Krippendorff's proposition that "Meaning is the core of the (making) design process, and the artifact becomes a medium for communicating these meanings."¹⁹ The major examination work *Re-Examine*, 2016–17 (figure 2) is an artefact of the act of re-examining the chairmaking tradition. Its creation in the geographic location of the tradition, Deloraine, facilitated historical inquiry and coalesced community around the making of it. The act of making the work enhanced the understanding of the tradition personally and communally. *Re-Examine* (figure 2) was fabricated during six making events over sixteen months (table 2); its components were carved by various participants out of timber resourced from people and places significant to the Jimmy Possum tradition. *Re-Examine* is accompanied in the DVA exhibition *Once*

¹⁶Jokela, T 2015, "Art-based Action Research-Participatory Art for the North". *International Journal of Education Through Art Volume 11*, pp. 433-448.

¹⁷ Margit Hurup Nielsen, "Re-Enactment and Reconstruction in Collingwood's Philosophy of History," *History and Theory* 20, no. 1 (1981): 2.

¹⁸ Guatam Ghosh, "Civilization as Self-Determination: Interpreting R. G. Collingwood for the Twenty-First Century - Part I," *Comparative Civilisations Review* 75 (2016): 29–43.

¹⁹ Ulla Johansson-Sköldberg, Jill Woodilla, and Mehves Çetinkaya, "Design Thinking: Past, Present and Possible Futures," *Creativity and Innovation Management* 22 (2103): 121, doi: 10.1111/caim.12023.

in a life-time by twelve studio research examination works (2015–17), which explore elements of my practice such as place, person, and time. The exhibition was named after a remark made by a community member about the lack of research regarding the tradition. That an exhibition seems to happen “once in a lifetime”²⁰.

These studio research examination works were employed to articulate these elements to the participants of the studio research making events. My works are accompanied by three reference works. Two of these are works produced by Bronwyn Harm, who assisted in documenting the studio research project over its lifespan. They include a series of photographic images of participants' chairs made during and after the making events (2016–17) and two ten-minute documentation films of process and community engagement. The other reference work is a rare example of a historical chair made in the Jimmy Possum tradition, the *McMahon Chair*, c.1905 (figure 3) named after its purported maker.

The studio research's making events' participants were predominantly drawn from the local community of Deloraine with some coming from Hobart and Launceston. They were predominantly men over fifty years of age, with a gender ratio of three men to one woman participant. The research project abided by Griffith University's health and safety policy and the participants were made aware of the University's Human Research Ethics clearance (GU Ref No: 2017/132) and its implications. Participants identified in this exegesis have signed all relevant forms pertaining to this clearance.

This DVA exegesis will discuss the context and outcomes of the studio research, a historical thesis and contextual survey is beyond the scope of this creative research project. Chapter 2 will outline foundational terms and techniques, in part to describe the pre-existing understanding of the tradition as well as provide a theoretical platform to identify new knowledge arising from the research. Chapter 3 will describe my chairmaking practice regarding technology, materiality, configuration, and delivery. Chapter 4 will outline R. G. Collingwood's idea of reenactment and how this methodology has been applied to investigate these terms and techniques. This outline will cover a synopsis of Collingwood's idea, as well a review of contemporary critical support or concerns about the idea. Chapter 5 will directly respond to the research question to outline the syntheses that generated the

²⁰Personal interviews with Gary Larcombe and Roger Nutting, February 2016–June 2017.

project's new knowledge. The conclusion will summarise the project and the contribution to knowledge that it offers

I acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which I have worked and conducted my research, and recognise their continuing connection to land, water and community. I pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging²¹.



Fig.1. Unknown, *Jimmy Possum Chair*, c. 1905. Armchair. Blackwood and eucalypt. Reproduced from Bronwyn Harm Portfolio.

²¹ Reconciliation Australia, "Welcome to and acknowledgement of Country." <https://www.unisa.edu.au/Documents/QA-welcome-to-country.pdf>



Fig. 2. Mike Epworth *Re-Examine*, 2016-17. Armchair; 119 cm x 66 cm x 48 cm. Cedar, black wood, hoop pine, eucalypt. Reproduced from Bronwyn Harm Portfolio.



Fig. 3. Unknown, *McMahon Chair*, c.1905. Armchair; 97 cm x 60 cm x 50 cm. Eucalypt. Reproduced from Bronwyn Harm portfolio.

Chapter 2: Background to the Studio Practice

1. Personal Motivations

This studio research emerges out of a thirty-five-year expression of my eight-generation family tradition of Australian vernacular furniture-making. As a teenager, I worked by my grandfather's side, learning handskills that he had learned from his grandfather, who in turn had learned from his grandfather, who had learned from his grandfather, Anthony Rope,²² a First Fleet convict carpenter. The parameters that contain this family tradition and the need for my individual expression are forces that bear upon my practice's conceptual framework and work practices. This tension is also evidenced in the work of the historic Jimmy Possum chairmakers and will be discussed in later chapters.

My first home was a 1920s' tin-and-bush-pole shack in drought-stricken Western Queensland, where I lived in the early 1960s. It was predominantly furnished with packing-case and hand-hewn furniture made by the original occupants. The examination exhibition work *Kennedy Chair* (2016, figure 4) is made from salvaged wood from a piece of this household furniture—my childhood bed—which is the site of my first memory: finding out about President Kennedy's assassination in 1963. Using decoupage, the seat and headrest display the local newspaper from that day, which my grandmother kept a copy of to remember the event (figure 3).

In 1967, my father, forgoing the vicissitudes of dying cattle, moved the family to Armidale, NSW to take up a position as a lecturer in Rural Science at the University of New England (U.N.E). At U.N.E he also commenced a PhD investigating *The incidence of homosexuality in stud bulls*. Later, we moved to Darwin where the family went through the 1974 Cyclone Tracy (figure 5), which destroyed our home, furniture, and personal belongings. Nine months after the cyclone, my father died when struck by a bolt of lightning. These events have framed key elements of my practice, such as the loss of connection to place and people, and the attempt to reconstruct this connection via salvaged debris and the memories attached to it. These themes have implications regarding my choice to make

²² James Tobias Ryan, *Reminiscences of Australia* (Sydney: George Robertson, 1895) 3.

communal chairs and will be further discussed in Chapter 5. After my father's death, the family moved to Toowoomba, Queensland, to be near my grandfather. Making furniture and talking about family history and tradition helped my grandfather and I deal with the loss of my father and the attendant grief. This linkage of furniture-making to a therapeutic activity is a fundamental element of my practice and will be examined in detail in Chapter 5.

As a natural progression from these experiences, I started to make seats on the family farm near Toowoomba out of salvaged split-slab timber, as seen in *Heart Bench* (1983, figure 6). To develop my skills further, I went to a private woodworking school in Melbourne in 1987. To pay the course costs, I took a job restoring antique Australian vernacular furniture for a dealer supplying collectors in the then current boom of the style²³ This boom was in part stimulated by the interest and investment of the British aristocrat Lord MacAlpine; when he sold his extensive collection in 1991, it initiated a price crash in antique Australian vernacular furniture.²⁴ It was while I worked for the antique dealer that I first encountered chairs from the Jimmy Possum tradition. In the act of restoring three of them, I was struck by their design and construction, and I started to explore the Jimmy Possum chair by adapting them in my own work. *Pa's Rocker* (1990, figure 7), a rocking chair I made for my grandfather, is an early example of this process. One of the three Jimmy Possum chairs I was required to restore for my employer was the *McMahon chair* (c. 1905, figure 3) a reference work in the exhibition, which I purchased by chance at a Gympie antique swap meet in 2016.

²³ Toby and Julianna Hooper, *Australian Country Furniture* (Ringwood, Vic.: Viking O'Neil, 1988) ,23.

²⁴ Gerald Fuller, "McAlpine Bathing in Glory," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 April 1993, 32.



Fig. 4. Mike Epworth, *Kennedy Chair*, 2016. Chair; 114 cm x 45 cm x 54 cm, Hoop-pine, newspaper. Reproduced from Bronwyn Harm portfolio.

Fig 5. Childhood home post Darwin cyclone Tracy, 1974. Reproduced from Janet Epworth portfolio.



Fig. 6. Mike Epworth. *Heart Bench*. Bench; 86cm x 70 cm 28 cm, Ironbark. Reproduced from Bronwyn Harm portfolio.



Fig. 7. Mike Epworth. *Pa's Rocking Chair*, 1990, Rocking chair; 119 cm x 65 cm x 70 cm, Hoop pine. Reproduced from Bronwyn Harm portfolio.

2.2 A Brief History of the Chair

The understanding of a chair in this research is framed within the cultural context of North America, Europe, and—particularly in relation to the antecedents of the Jimmy Possum tradition—the British Isles. The chair is not a cultural universal. From a postcolonial perspective,²⁵ chairs can be seen as symbolically Western and potentially colonialist in nature.²⁶ As Galen Cranz observes,

A Chinese person might squat to wait for a bus, a Japanese woman may kneel to eat; and an Arab man may sit cross-legged to write a letter. Are they forced to sit without chairs because they are too poor to own one? People who can afford chairs throughout the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Polynesia, do not necessarily buy them.²⁷

The chair can be used as a cultural identifier; it can also be used to identify a place in time. Until the seventeenth century, chairs were a rare commodity due to the paucity of material possessions and the poor quality of housing among the masses. However, records from about 1650 show a yeoman of South Pembrokeshire in Wales as having “stools, benches, and a chair”.²⁸ The development of four-legged chairs was connected to the emergence of framed timber floors in the Tudor era.²⁹ These enabled all four legs to make equal contact with a flat surface, whereas the uneven earthen floors of pre-Tudor times required three legs to adjust to the varying humps and hollows. The examples of pre-Tudor era four-legged chairs such as a Monarch's throne, a Lord's seat, or an academic's chair can be viewed as conveying an authority via the connection of a flat floor belonging to an expensive building that housed the power elite.³⁰ This connection to power is still evident in chairs. As Cranz notes,

Today as in the past, chairs are differentiated by age, gender, and class. They remain embedded in power relations. Rarely is the power literal; it is usually more subtly inter-

²⁵ Karen Fiss, “Design in a Global Context: Envisioning Postcolonial and Transnational Possibilities,” *Design Issues* 25, no. 3 (2009): 3–10.

²⁶ Galen Cranz, *The Chair* (New York: W.W Norton and Company, 1998), 23.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ John Brown, *Welsh Stick Chairs* (Scotland: Bell and Bain, 1990), 15.

²⁹ Fred Crossley, *Timber Buildings in England: From Early Times to the End of the Seventeenth Century* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1951), 23–30.

³⁰ Ibid.

woven into ideas and emotions about social order that we unconsciously support. The modern office separates the furniture of the manager from that of the employee.³¹

The artist Fred Wilson uses these embodied power structures in his work *Whipping Post* (1993–94, figure 8),³² where he surrounds an authentic whipping post used to punish African-American slaves with authentic salon chairs. The chairs are forms that anticipate persons from the power elite occupying them. This is articulated in their placement as onlookers of the whipping post and by extension the brutal act for which it was intended. The work articulates place, time, and identity through the inclusion of a variety of salon chairs that were fashionable in the 1840s–60s among the parlours of the American south slave-owning class and their associates.³³

The improvement to floors that took place during the Tudor era and the subsequent development of the chair from a three-legged into a four-legged structure were the result of the increased wealth of the merchant classes,³⁴ generated through the colonial expansion of Europeans into the 'New World'.³⁵ This expansion introduced new timber species for European domestic consumption, such as mahogany from South America.³⁶ The British power elite increasingly used these imported woods in their chairs, as exemplified by the designs of Thomas Chippendale (1718–79, figure 9), George Hepplewhite (1727–86, figure 10), and Thomas Sheraton (1751–1806, figure 11).³⁷ It was a way of differentiating their chairs from the chairs of the masses, which were made from native timbers such as beech and elm.³⁸ The most prominent of these native wood chairs were the High

³¹ Cranz, *The Chair*.

³² Ivan Karp and Fred Wilson, "A Conversation with Martha Buskirk (1994)," in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 350.

³³ Philippe. Oszuscik, *Material Culture* 26, no. 1 (1994): 68-70. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29763946>.

³⁴ Andrew Fitzmaurice, *Humanism and America: An Intellectual History of English Colonisation, 1500-1625* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5–10.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Christopher Gilbert, *The Life and Works of Thomas Chippendale* (London: Christie's, 1978).

³⁷ Christopher Wilk, *Western Furniture 1350 to the Present Day* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 1996), 120.

³⁸ Clive Edwards, "Vernacular Craft To Machine Assisted Industry: The Division of Labour and the Development of Machine Use in Vernacular Chair-Making in High Wycombe 1870-1920," in *Proceedings of the 9th International Symposium on Wood and Furniture Conservation*, Amsterdam, 14–15 November 2008, 91–102.

Wycombe Windsor chairs.³⁹ Their production employed woodland artisans called bodgers (figure 12).⁴⁰ These piece workers would collectively make chair components in the forest and deliver them to a network of village chairmaking factories to fabricate and distribute around the world. The bodgers would buy a stand of coppiced beech trees (multi-trunk regrowth from the cutting down of the original trunk) and use them for raw material, workshop structures, tooling systems, and water supplies.⁴¹ Their hand-skill work practices were among the last to be industrialised, with strong production still occurring in the 1880s–90s, ceasing between the two world wars.⁴² This tradition was transported to Tasmania by George Peddle in 1884. Peddle was trained in High Wycombe and produced chairs for a middle-class local market from his Launceston factory. The chairs are a direct copy of the design of the High Wycombe Windsor chairs using Tasmanian blackwood. These chairs serve to highlight the difference in manufacturing processes and knowledge about the contemporaneous and geographically close Jimmy Possum folk tradition in regard the large amount of detailed information and images pertaining to it and the dearth of information regarding the Jimmy Possum tradition⁴³. The bodgers' activity peak and demise are mirrored in the contemporaneous Jimmy Possum tradition. Their work practices are similar to the Jimmy Possum tradition in that they are situated in the forest using forest material. The key difference was the production system the bodgers were attached to, that being High Wycombe's twenty chair factories, which outputted 3,500 chairs per day.⁴⁴ By comparison, the Jimmy Possum makers produced at best estimate a combined total of 450 chairs⁴⁵ during the tradition's seventy years. The longevity of the bodger tradition could in some part be due to the influencing effect of the contemporary Arts and Crafts movement on the chair buying market.⁴⁶ The relationship between the Arts and Crafts and the vernacular chair tradi-

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ "Chair Bodging and Chair Making in the Chiltern Hills" (1935), YouTube video, 9:44, posted by "ecol furniture" on 18 August 2011, accessed 21 February 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nP5_OJxNccY.

⁴² Edwards, *Vernacular Craft to Machine Assisted Industry*.

⁴³ Denis Lake, *The men who made the celebrated chairs, Windsor chairmaking in Tasmania*, (Parguta Press Launceston 2016) 5-18

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ McWilliams et al., *Chairs Made by Tasmanian Bush Carpenters during the 19th and Early 20th Centuries*

⁴⁶ Kevin Rodel and Jonathan Binzen, *Arts & Crafts Furniture: From Classic to Contemporary* (Newtown, CT: Taunton Press, 2003), 23.

tions is complicated. Vernacular furniture was made by poor rural folk who were not part of a craft with a governing guild and as such fell outside the controlled production system enacted by William Morris.⁴⁷ The development in chair manufacturing resulting from the technical advancements arising out of the First World War,⁴⁸ facilitated the emergence of today's mass production, where "a new Aeron chair, which used to come off the line every 82 seconds (twenty years ago), is now boxed and finished every 17 seconds".⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Mathew Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft* (Australia: Penguin Group, 2009), 28–30.

⁴⁸ Wilk, *Western Furniture 1350 to the Present Day*.

⁴⁹ Cliff Kuang, "An American-Made Miracle: How An Aeron Chair Gets Made Every 17 Seconds," *Co.Design*, 19 April 2012, accessed 20 March 2017, <https://www.fastcodesign.com/1669397/an-american-made-miracle-how-an-aeron-chair-gets-built-every-17-seconds>.

Fig. 8. Fred Wilson *Whipping Post*, 1992 - 93. Sculpture. Wood, silk. Reproduced from The Contemporary and Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore. accessed April 20, 2016,. <http://appartement22.com/spip.php?article419>

Fig. 9. Thomas Chippendale *Chair*, c.1767. Chairs. Mahogany, silk. Reproduced from the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Accessed April 21, 2016

Fig. 10. George Hepplewhite *Chair*, c.1779. Chair. Mahogany, silk. . Reproduced from Federal Period Interior Design. Accessed April 21, 2016.

<http://historic-period-home-decor.blogspot.com.au/2015/01/american-federal-period-interior-design.html>

Fig. 11. Thomas Sheraton. *Chair*, c.1800, Chair. Mahogany, silk. Reproduced from Fine Woodworking archive. Accessed April 21, 2016.

Fig. 12. *Bodgers Camp*. c.1900. Reproduced from the woodworking archive, accessed March 12, 2015. <https://www.woodworkingarchive.biz/colonial-corner-cuboard/raising-panels-on-the-table-saw.htm>

2.3 The Vernacular Chair

The development of the chair in the post-Tudor times was articulated in various regional identities throughout Europe and its transplanted colonies.⁵⁰ The English Windsor Chair spread to America and evolved into distinct vernacular expressions of native material and aesthetics.⁵¹ Religious dissidents, usually first-generation literate craftsmen⁵² such as the Shakers, created new chair forms in America that were initially made for themselves and later commercially.⁵³ These chairs influenced the development of the Appalachian Mountains Hillbilly chairs.⁵⁴ While these chairs are descended from a different line to the Jimmy Possum chair, they demonstrate how cultural identity has flowed with modifications and adoption by communities into new forms and styles in a New World context. The Appalachian Hillbilly tradition, like the Tasmanian Jimmy Possum tradition, sprung from a poor mountain community with a self-reliant ethos.⁵⁵ The most renowned of these Kentucky Hillbilly makers, Chester Cornett (1912–81, figure 13), who described himself as a man of constant sorrow, reflected “that I'd heard it all my life, a chairmaker has nothing”.⁵⁶ Cornett's 1965 record gives some insight and understanding of the societal and economic conditions some chairmakers of the Jimmy Possum tradition may have worked under. Studies such as that undertaken by the American folklorist Michael Jones were timely in capturing the life stories of several chairmakers who lived and worked at the turn of the twentieth century. Australia has no similar historical interviews or recordings of vernacular chairmakers. This has made the task of researching Australia's chairmakers more difficult than the researching of their North American peers and may explain why there has been limited scholarly interest in it.

⁵⁰ Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews, *Shaker Furniture: The Craftsmanship of an American Communal Sect* (New York: Dover Publications, 1937) 9–22.

⁵¹ James O'Neill, *Early American Furniture: Designs in the Colonial Style* (Bloomington, IN: McKnight & McKnight, 1963), 22–23.

⁵² B. A. Holderness, *Pre-Industrial England: Economy and Society from 1500 to 1750* (London: William Collins Publishers, 1951), 27.

⁵³ Andrews and Andrews, *Shaker Furniture: The Craftsmanship of an American Communal Sect*.

⁵⁴ Michael Owen Jones, *Craftsman of the Cumberland: Tradition and Creativity* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 47.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Up until the late-nineteenth century, much of rural Europe, North American, and Australia was virtually inaccessible. Welsh chairmaker and historian John Brown (1932–2008) describes rural Wales, noting that if a load would not go on the back of a pack animal, it didn't go.⁵⁷ This remoteness inculcated a culture of self-sufficiency. The design of objects for these people was not influenced by the fashions of their urban contemporaries but rather the availability of materials and fitness for use.⁵⁸ The Welsh stick chair (figure 16) and the Irish hedge chair (figure 15) were expressions of these conditions. These two Celtic-speaking regions' chairs are argued by some antique trade journal authors⁵⁹ to be the Jimmy Possum chair's antecedents. Both types were not built by full-time chairmakers, "but almost certainly were the work of the village carpenter, wheelwright or coffin maker",⁶⁰ or, as noted of the Irish tradition, "even thatchers, farmers and fishermen".⁶¹ The making of both traditions of chairs existed into the 1920s but virtually ceased after World War Two.⁶²

⁵⁷ Brown, *Welsh Stick Chairs*, 17.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Graham Cornall, "The Jimmy Possum Chair: An Australian Icon... And Irish By Descent," *Australian Antique Collector*, June–November 1997, 23–34.

⁶⁰ Claudia Kinmonth, "The Role of Oral History in Researching Irish Vernacular Furniture," *The Crafts* 18, no. 2 (Autumn 1990): 64–65.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

Fig.13. *Chester Cornett Workshop* 1966. Michael Owen Jones. Reproduced from Cincinnati Magazine. Accessed 23 May, 2017.

<http://www.cincinnati.com/features/chester-cornett-humble-chair-maker-mad-genius/>

Fig.15. *Irish Hedge* Fig.14. *Welsh Stick Chair*. c. 1820. Beech..Reproduced from Antiques Atlas, Accessed 12 March, 2016.https://images.antiquesatlas.com/dealer-stock-images/welshvernacular-furniture/18thC_Primitive_Welsh_Ash_Stic_as223a103b.jpg

Chair c.1810. Yew. Accessed 12 March, 2016.
https://a.1stdibscdn.com/archivesE/1stdibs/021414/LizSpradlingCC_DM/18/X.jpg

2.4 Australian Vernacular Furniture

The material culture artefacts of Australian vernacular furniture are inextricably linked with the occupation of Australia by Europeans.⁶³ The European gains in land and resources were the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's losses. Each new dwelling and its attendant household chattels consolidated the claims of first the British then the Australian governments. As the frontier between the invading force and the First Nations fanned out from Sydney Cove to the rest of the continent, so too did Australian vernacular furniture. Its intrinsic virtues of resilience, resourcefulness, and innovation assisted in initiating economic exploitation by Europeans over traditional Aboriginal lands and peoples. It also offered perpetrators of frontier violence a platform to operate and consolidate from, as exemplified in the accounts of the Tasmanian Black Wars (1825–31).⁶⁴

The first expression of colonial Australian vernacular furniture was formed via opportunistic bricolage⁶⁵ rather than a defining style or technical orthodoxy.⁶⁶ Household solutions were fabricated from the debris of the journey and the unfamiliar raw material of the encountered land. The first recorded mention of an Australian home that contained this style of furniture is in court notes of a trial dated 19 May 1788 involving my convict ancestors Anthony Rope and Elizabeth Pulley.⁶⁷ The court notes cite a bed and table;⁶⁸ since there was no provision of furniture for convicts' homes by the Admiralty,⁶⁹ the pieces were very likely made by them. During the 1890s and 1930s depressions, these adaptive frontier skills were reprised and reapplied in the cities among

⁶³ Michelle Hetherington, *The World Upside Down: Early Colonial Records at the National Library of Australia* (Canberra: The National Library of Australia, 2000), 2–7.

⁶⁴ Nicholas Clements, *The Black War, Fear, Sex and Resistance in Tasmania* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2014), 24–26.

⁶⁵ Louridas Panagiotis, “Design as Bricolage: Anthropology Meets Design Thinking,” *Design Studies* 20, issue 6 (November 1999), accessed 20 April 2017, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0142-694X\(98\)00044-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0142-694X(98)00044-1).

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ John Cobley, *Sydney Cove 1788* (London: Angus and Robertson Publishers, 1987), 148.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

the unemployed and poor to make furniture, as exemplified by packing-case furniture.⁷⁰ Because of the material universals of imported massed-produced packing cases, this style looked similar to pieces made in America at the same time. Another influence on Australian vernacular furniture were migrations of free settlers from areas with a vernacular chairmaking tradition such as Germany to areas such as the Barossa Valley in South Australia (figure 14). This area produced many of the works that are now held in the collections of public institutions.⁷¹ There are numerous examples in institutional collections throughout Queensland, Victoria, New South Wales, and Tasmania of locally made chairs that are either direct copies or heavily influenced by types from the British Isles, such as the hedge and the stick chairs.

Fig. 16. Barossa Valley *Hand Arm Chairs* C1910. Eucalypt. Reproduced from National Gallery of Australia. Accessed 21 May, 2017.

http://www.nma.gov.au/__data/assets/image/0005/332519/table_chairs_480w.jpg

2.5 Jimmy Possum and His Chairs

The development of the Jimmy Possum chair's (figure 1) design configuration would appear to be unique to the Deloraine Tasmania region. There are as yet no known examples of the configuration being found in Europe or North America. If this is the case, then the tradition is the only geographically locatable vernacular expression in Australia. While the tradition is influenced by the Welsh stick chair and the Irish hedge chair, further research is required to definitively attribute the chair configuration.

The catalogue that accompanied the exhibition at the Tasmanian School of Art describes the Jimmy Possum chair as follows:

⁷⁰ Noris Ionannou, *The Barossa Folk: Germanic Furniture and Craft Traditions in Australia* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1995), 26.

⁷¹ Cornall, *MEMORIES, A Survey of Early Australian Furniture in the Collection of the Lord McAlpine of West Green*.

Four legs tapering from the base protrude through the slab seat to support the arm rests. ... Two outside back spindles protrude through the armrests, secured to the top rail with wooden pegs. The central back spindle was similarly pegged.⁷²

The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery describes the chair as a:

Solid seat utilised as a structural core. By jointing the legs through the seat to support the armrests, and jointing the framing of the chair-back through the armrests and the seat, the maker has integrated the whole structure to resist the stresses placed on it by the sitter.⁷³

There may or may not have been a person called Jimmy Possum.⁷⁴ There are no known records of anyone by that name living in Northern Tasmania at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.⁷⁵ The only histories that attest to his existence are oral, passed down in the Deloraine community for generations. These oral histories differ and are highly contentious among community members.⁷⁶ The name is, according to several local oral histories, derived from a mysterious chairmaker who reputedly lived and worked out of a hollowed tree, like a possum.⁷⁷ To establish a better idea of the actual personage of Possum, more research will need to be conducted. A consistent response from the Deloraine community to this enigma is an acceptance of the unknowability of Possum. The exhibition of historical chairs I developed and curated with the Deloraine Folk Museum in 2017 (figure 17) entitled *History and Mystery* reflects this sanguine sentiment. Another subject beyond the scope of this research but in need of future inquiry is Possum's cultural background. There is circumstantial evidence that equally suggests that he may have been an ex-convict, a refugee from the Irish famine, or an Indigenous man. The latter possibility has been strengthened by my discovery during this studio research project of a 1905 postcard depicting what appears to be an Indigenous man sitting in front of a tree entitled *A*

⁷² McWilliams et al., *Chairs Made by Tasmanian Bush Carpenters during the 19th and Early 20th Centuries*.

⁷³ Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, "Jimmy Possum Chair," *Tasmanian Decorative Arts 1803–1930*, accessed November 2015, <http://static.tmag.tas.gov.au/decorativeart/objects/furniture/P1991.75/index.html>.

⁷⁴ McWilliams et al., *Chairs Made by Tasmanian Bush Carpenters during the 19th and Early 20th Centuries*.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Pioneer's Home (figure 18). The image was painted by the visiting Geelong artist Laura. H. Davey, who produced ten watercolours of Northern Tasmania in 1905 for a postcard printing company.⁷⁸ There are several local oral histories that also suggest the possibility that Jimmy Possum was Indigenous.⁷⁹ The Tasmanian Aboriginal Corporation is unaware of a person of that name living around Deloraine at that time;⁸⁰ however, this does not preclude the possibility of him being Indigenous.

Until 2016, the name Jimmy Possum was suggested to have been concocted by antique dealers.⁸¹ This has been disproved by Peter Cuffley's recent research,⁸² Cuffley discovered the term in recently released Trove documents. The term is recorded in an 1887 *Tasmanian Journal*'s serialised story entitled "The Mortgagee's Wooing", which tells the story of cattle workers staying in an abandoned ex-convict built hut in Mole Creek, 20 kilometres from Deloraine. The story tells of a murder that occurred there, and that the victim "died in the Jimmy Possum chair you are sitting in right now". This mention in Victorian era true-crime fiction and the lack of references or images of Jimmy Possum chairs in middle-class homes of the era, suggest the style was associated with the underclass. There is only one known image of Jimmy Possum chairs from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century; the 1900 photograph of the Saddlers Arms Hotel in Elizabethtown shows two chairs sitting on its verandah (figure 19) This association with hotels and alcohol concurs with oral histories of Jimmy Possum swapping his chairs for 'grog' at another inn near Montana⁸³ 10 kilometres from Deloraine.

⁷⁸ Des Beechey, "L.H. Davey Paintings," accessed 15 January 2017, http://beecheyspostcardhistory.org.au/homes/publishercard/Vy5ULiBQYXRlcg==/TC5ILiBEYXZleSBQYWludGluZ3M=/*//*//*//*/*/.

⁷⁹ Personal interviews with Roger Nutting, Gary Larcombe, members of Deloraine community, February 2016–June 2017.

⁸⁰ Personal interview with Denise Robinson, Board member of Tasmanian Aboriginal Corporation and Indigenous Officer of Arts Tasmania. 15 March 2017.

⁸¹ Conrad Blakeman, "Folk Art Finds," *Collectables*, June 2013, 55–59.

⁸² Peter Cuffley, *A Renewed Search for Jimmy Possum, Chairmaker* (Bendigo: self-published, 2017), 4.

⁸³ McWilliams et al., *Chairs Made by Tasmanian Bush Carpenters during the 19th and Early 20th Centuries*

The skills sharing among the various makers is still unknown. There are no records of makers instructing other makers, with the exception of the oral history regarding Jimmy Possum coming out to stay with William Larcombe (1862–1942) and showing him his techniques and processes.⁸⁴

Given that most of the makers lived around Reedy Marsh (10 kilometres north of Deloraine) and were all active members of that community, there must have been some interaction between them. The stories about the makers also suggest they were people who “enjoyed their own company”⁸⁵ and that they made their chairs by themselves rather than communally. Gary Larcombe, a descendant of the Reedy Marsh makers, tells of his Uncle Arthur making chairs by himself on the verandah.

⁸⁴ Personal interview with Gary Larcombe, 23 May 2017.

⁸⁵ Personal interviews with Gary Larcombe and Roger Nutting, February 2016–June 2017.



Fig. 17. Deloraine and District Folk Museum. *History and Mystery Exhibition*. 2016. Reproduced from Bronwyn Harm portfolio.

Fig. 18. Laura. H. Davey. *A Pioneer's Home*. c. 1905. Postcard : printed, col. ; 8.8 x 13.8 cm. approx. Reproduction rights owned by the State Library of Victoria. Accession No: H8262. Image No: a09946. Accessed October 18, 2015.



Fig. 19. *Elizabeth Town - 'Saddler's Arms' Hotel* - Reproduced from Tasmanian State Archives / NS2604/1/2. Accessed May 2017.

2.6 Jimmy Possum Historical Chairmakers

There are other competing oral stories as to the genesis of the Jimmy Possum name. One is that it conflates other chairmakers from the district.⁸⁶ These known and unknown chairmakers are connected to farming families around Reedy Marsh. They made chairs for themselves and for their families from the 1890s until at least the mid-1950s.⁸⁷ The most prominent of these families are the Larcombes, with at least seven historical makers spanning three generations. Two of the studio research making events were attended by descendants of the Larcombe chairmakers. As a result of the studio research's skills-sharing events, these descendants are now starting to reactivate their family tradition. Other maker families were the Cooks, the Kings, and the McMahons,⁸⁸ with several other yet-to-be-identified makers operating in the district in the early twentieth century. According to Larcombe family stories⁸⁹, William Larcombe was reputed to have learned to make the chair from Jimmy Possum. His chairs are almost identical to the original maker's pieces. William's brothers, nephews, and great-nephews copied or were taught by William and began to introduce adaptations to the design. Other families from the area did the same. All these subsequent makers idiosyncratically reinterpreted and altered the design but abided by the configuration described earlier in this chapter. They altered elements of the chair, such as changing the number of back rungs, altering their shape from round to flat, using different shaped arms, transforming the headrest into a moustache shape, and, in later chairs, employing sawn instead of split timber. The examination exhibition reference work *McMahon Chair* (c. 1905 Figure 3) is reputedly made by one of the McMahon brothers in a Reedy Marsh farm workshop and exemplifies some of these changes. There is no known evidence of Jimmy Possum chairs being made beyond a small area Northern Tasmania between 1880 and 1955. Why the tradition was contained to this area is beyond the scope of this research project and will be a continuing topic of research for me.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Personal interview with Gary Larcombe, 23 May 2017.

⁸⁸ McWilliams et al., *Chairs Made by Tasmanian Bush Carpenters during the 19th and Early 20th Centuries*.

⁸⁹ Personal interviews with Larcombe family members, January 2016 - June 2017.

2.7 JIMMY POSSUM Furniture Shops

The registered trademark JIMMY POSSUM belongs to a Bendigo furniture manufacturer and retailer (1996–2016).⁹⁰ While a paragraph on the company's website acknowledged the original maker and his place of origin, the furniture manufactured by the company bore no resemblance to the chairs from the tradition. The company's marketing strategy of full-colour advertisements in trade and weekend newspaper magazines resulted in high consumer awareness in Eastern Australia where the company operated nine retail outlets. Anecdotally, this has meant the general public seem to associate the name Jimmy Possum with the company rather than the chairmaking tradition of Deloraine. This association is the subject of the exhibition work *This Is Not a Jimmy Possum Chair* (2016, figure 20). The chair is decorated with the advertisements from a series of *Weekend Australian* magazine full-page advertisements (figure 21). The company's name was a source of indignation for the Deloraine community and the descendants of the historical makers. However, they acknowledged that the company was acting within the law and believe that activities such as this research project⁹¹ are a means to counterbalance the lack of knowledge of the origins of the name.

⁹⁰ The company unexpectedly closed during the course of my research; it was a well-known and high-end brand.

⁹¹ Participant feedback, Deloraine Focus Group, 21 June 2017.



Fig. 20. Mike Epworth *This Is Not A Jimmy Possum Chair*. 2016. Armchair, 119 cm x 66 cm x 48 cm. Hoop pine, newspaper. Reproduced from Bronwyn Harm portfolio.

Fig. 21. JIMMY POSSUM shop advertisement, Reproduced Australian Weekend Magazine, Accessed August 15 2015.

Chapter 3: Process, Practice and Decoration: The chairmaking practice.

3.1 Materials

A fundamental difference between my practice and many of the historical Jimmy Possum chair-makers is my use of salvaged seasoned timber as opposed to forest-derived green-wood as seen in the reference work *McMahon Chair* (c.1905 figure 3). I use seasoned wood for my chair components because of its structural superiority to currently available harvested timbers and because of its connection to human experience. This metaphysical⁹² connection can manifest in a grandfather's rake handle or a kitchen bench-top, or a window-sill that looks out to a familiar sight. These bits of timber need to be processed into specific lengths and widths. They also have to be graded into sections such as straight or mixed grain or having knots. The knotty timbers are used as seat planks, whereas the straight-grained timbers are split up and used in legs and back rung components. In the finishing stages of a chair, I use other salvaged material such as old shoes for chair foot pads and newspapers found under linoleum to decoupage seats and headrests. The cultural universal of events in newspapers such as the assassination of Kennedy links place to time through the material to the famous event. The *where were you when* phenomenon paradoxically links people globally while also placing them at a remembered geographic spot. The selection and re-organising of the newspaper stories found in *Joe's Chair's Isms* (2015, figure 22) allows a diachronistic view of societal change. Sexism and racism are evident in advertising and articles; the jarring effect of reading them now allows an understanding of the distance, or in some cases the lack of distance, society has moved from these normative positions. This recasting of identity attached to objects is applied by Fred Wilson in his project *Mining the Museum* (1992-93, figure 23) where the pre-existing narratives embedded in objects are rearranged so as to ironically critique its original intention. This altered relationship to material allowed the studio research to connect and engage with the Deloraine community through their connection to the material and its narratives, as evidenced in *Wash Your Hands* (2016, figure 24), a communally made work donated to the Deloraine Hospital. The arm chairs in the exhibition exemplified by *Re-Examine* and the studio work's *Flood chair* were all made using a cross laminating system where the bottom frame's timber runs at ninety degrees to

⁹² Massimo Carra, with Patrick Waldberg and Ewald Rathke ; translation and historical foreword by Caroline Tisdall. *Metaphysical Art* (New York : Praeger Publishers, 1971) p.5

the timber of the seat. This configuration is used to give the seat strength. It is different from the solid timber seats used in the historical chairs. This is due to the non-availability of large trees to split into single slab seats and the abundance of sawn timber sections that is available to be salvaged. The inclusion of side boards or “breadboards” at the side of the seats are to increase the chairs strength by further bracing it and to cover the exposed end grain. Exposed end grain can in the case of weathering, lead to splitting and subsequent weakening of the seat, making it potentially dangerous to sit on. These design elements have been arrived at after a process of experimentation and incorporated in all the arm chair seats.

The painted seat of *Hard Rubbish* is an example of a cross laminated timber seat utilising an existing distressed finish salvaged from an old painted table. The weathered end grain of the table was utilised and where the table boards had to be cut, the clean raw timber has been covered up by thin strips of painted board. This process was an experiment conducted during the studio research. The purpose being to provide the participants with as many options for utilising salvaged timber, including painted surfaces, as possible.



Fig. 22. Mike Epworth. *Joe's Chair's Isms*, 2016. Double-seater chair, 120 cm x 110 cm x 60 cm. Hoop pine, newspaper. Reproduced from Bronwyn Harm portfolio.

Fig 23. Fred Wilson Mining The Museum 1992 - 93. Maryland Historical Society.
5149b111e4b0905e2adccbd5/5166879ee4b07ccd0c1dba23/5166879ee4b035d7482f9081/1365673931406/wilson5.jpg. Accessed January 28, 2017.



Fig. 24. Mike Epworth and Members of Mountain Preservation Society, Tasmania. Huts. *Wash Your Hands* 2016. Armchair 119 cm x 63 cm x 49 cm. Hoop pine, celery top pine, eucalyptus. Reproduced from Bronwyn Harm portfolio.

3.2 Technology

The drawknife (figure 25) , a sharp blade with two handles set at right angles, is the central tool in the production system used to make Jimmy Possum's, the historical makers', the participants', and my chairs. This tool requires the act of pulling a blade toward the body, an ancient woodwork technique dating back to early Palaeolithic peoples.⁹³ The blades come in a variety of shapes and sizes; their individuality is felt in the hands of the carver as they draw the blade along a rough timber face to make it smooth. The heavy knives are used to remove large chunks of wood while the light ones are used for dressing the wood. A split billet of timber is held in a portable vice to allow the knife to remove splinters and transform it into a formed chair component. These components are hand-shaped into an elliptical rather than a machine-rounded profile to give more comfort to the chair sitter, which is due to the wider and broader interface of the carved component. The chair's joints need to be tight fitting to achieve maximum structural strength; they must have round tenons that fit tightly into drilled mortice holes. This is accomplished for the back rungs by a tenon cutter that fits into a bit and brace auger and acts like a pencil sharpener to cut perfect size tenons.

My aim in choosing technologies is not to replicate the historical toolkit but to maintain what I see as the critical characteristic of the historical production system: its portability. If a piece of equipment cannot fit and be carried in a backpack then it is not included. The leg's tenons are made using a drilled piece of hardwood with a hole matching the leg mortice. This is firmly pushed and rotated onto the component to leave a burnished mark which the drawknife works to; after this is repeated several times, a tight tenon joint is achieved. The vice can be set up quickly at places of the carver's choosing (figure 26). This could be a scenic spot like the bank of a river or near a historic site or structure to be close to a material supply. Participant carvers can choose to stay briefly at a site or conversely to stay several days at the place where they are working. This also means that groups with pre-existing connections can traverse the landscape and collectively decide where they wish to carve. The configuration of the workspace can have four vices around a tree or on a trestle. My observation of the participants at the various events was that the act of carving with each other facilitated exchanges. This social engagement was reinforced by feedback from the participant focus

⁹³ Bruce L. Hardy, Marvin Kay, Anthony E. Marks, and Katherine Monigal, "Stone Tool Function at the Paleolithic Sites of Starosele and Buran Kaya III, Crimea: Behavioural Implications," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 98, no. 19 (2001): 10972–77, accessed 23 April 2016, doi: 10.1073/pnas.191384498.

group;⁹⁴ they reported that they took real pleasure in working together and learning about new people and new things about old friends.⁹⁵ This process is critical to the creation of the collective-made chair.

The components for 'Re-Examine' were made at the various making events of the research project. During these events participants made their own components and fabricated their own chairs as well as contributing what they considered to be their best component to 'Re-Examine'. The work was assembled at the final making event by the attending participants, then disassembled for ease of transport to Queensland. I re-assembled and finished the chair at my studio on the Sunshine Coast. The participants were briefed of the process at the initial introduction session and sent images of the finished work when the chair was finally assembled.

There has been an ongoing production of Jimmy Possum chairs by several of the participants. These chair's variations have replicated the historical tradition's makers' variations on the original makers' chairs. Roger Nutting, the custodian of a King chair, produced a work that followed my process of using reclaimed material with connection to place, person and time but referenced the King chair's six rungs and paint finish. Nutting along with Warren Vergin and Steve Tolver-Banks used my production process, a mix of modern and traditional tools and handskills to make their work. There was however a divergence between the three makers in regard the level of finish they achieved. Vergin's work achieved an almost machine made look while Nutting and Tolver-Banks works emphasised a hand made look. All three makers have also shared they're making processes with members of their families.

⁹⁴ Participant Focus Group recorded 21 June 2017 Deloraine

⁹⁵ Ibid.



Fig. 25. Drawknife Carving, 2017. Reproduced from Bronwyn Harm portfolio.



Fig. 26. Work station with vice. 2016. Reproduced from Bronwyn Harm portfolio.

3.3 Communal Making

The focal modality of my practice and of this studio research is the act of making a chair within a group context. This activity can be described as a community arts activity.⁹⁶ Initially, these skills-sharing workshops were primarily driven by economic expediency; I realised there was more demand for them than the chairs I was producing through my practice. At the time, I believed that this was due to a lack of outlets for handmade furniture in Australia and the limited understanding of the Jimmy Possum tradition among the buying public. However, over time, I came to see the collective making of a chair as a means of having a direct dialogue with people interested in the tradition as well as expanding an appreciation of the tradition. During these workshops, I witnessed a divergence in the styles of the chairs that participants made. I had also observed divergences in the work of the various historical chairmakers of the tradition. The communal making became the dominant part of my practice and the activity that gave me the most satisfaction. I have conducted the workshops in a variety of settings and for a variety of clients such as Sudanese refugees,⁹⁷ Indigenous young people, substance-abuse program participants, and high school students⁹⁸ (figure. 27). I have sought to extend my practice through this project in using the skill-sharing workshops as a historiographical methodology as well as a means of developing a deeper understanding of their capacity in community development.

⁹⁶ Australia Council, <http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/artforms/community-arts-and-cultural-development/> viewed 30 April 2017

⁹⁷ Queensland Government, Department of Premiers and Community, Annual report 2006

⁹⁸ Peter Gunders, "Students Keep Alive the Art of Bodging," *ABC Southern Queensland*, 30 October 2014, viewed 30 October 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/local/photos/2014/10/30/4118016.htm>.

Fig. 27. Student from Toowoomba State High School Artist in Residence project 2015. ABC Southern Queensland. Accessed 10 March 2016. <http://www.abc.net.au/local/photos/2014/10/30/4118016.htm>

3.4 Design Adaptions of My Practice

3.4.1 Dining Chair

There is anecdotal evidence that an unknown Larcombe made dining chairs (C1900, figure 28), examples of which are held in the country's largest Jimmy Possum chair collection at Sovereign Hill, Victoria. However, these chairs do not have interlocking components characteristic of the armchairs that define the tradition. To meet this definition, my dining chair's back legs are housed in the headrest and use the solid framed seat to triangulate and lock in the backrungs. I arrived at this configuration by observing the Story Bridge in Brisbane and noticing that it looked like two chairs with backs to each other. The chair is made using the same materials and techniques as the armchairs and utilises shorter sections of salvaged timber to minimise offcuts.



Fig. 28. Dining chair possibly member of the Larcombe family. C1900. Dining chair. Blackwood. Sovereign Hill Collection. Reproduced from Bronwyn Harm portfolio.

3.4.2 Twelve Backrungs

Another key difference between my studio practice and those of the historical Jimmy Possum chairmakers is the number of backrungs they used. The majority of the historical chairs have five rungs, while a small number have six and one identified has four. I incorporate twelve backrungs into my chairs. My motivation for the increased number is sitting comfort, which is further enhanced by the stepped-out mortice hole configuration (figure 29) that houses the round of the lower back. I also flatten the backrungs to give them more interface to the sitter's back as opposed to the chairs of many of the historical makers, with the notable exception of the *McMahon Chair* (1905 figure 3), which features rungs carved to a round profile. Several persons during the project expressed the belief that I had moved away from the defining configuration of the tradition. My response to

these opinions was that I believed the key defining element of the tradition lay with the legs intersecting the seat and being housed in the arms, which all the historical chairs complied with. I also added that another characteristic of the tradition was the variety of backrung profiles and numbers. The most common configuration of bank rungs in post-event chairs made by participants were the same as my chairs, although a few made six.



Fig. 29. Mike Epworth. *Flood Chair* 2016. Arm chair; 118 cm x 65 cm x 48 cm. Hoop pine, newspaper. Reproduced from Bronwyn Harm portfolio.

Chapter 4: Collingwood's History as Re-enactment

4.1 Applying Collingwood's History as Re-enactment

The reflection and synthesis of this studio research are informed by a specific historiographic study of the Jimmy Possum chairmaking tradition. R. G. Collingwood's idea of re-enactment is employed as a methodology to understand not just the differences of the *outside*, being the various chairs of the tradition, but also the *inside*, being the makers' motivation for making these chairs.⁹⁹ This duality is a key characteristic of Collingwood's methodology and through it a constructivist¹⁰⁰ understanding of how the historical chairmakers thought and acted can be developed. This understanding is then applied in action and reflection in the dialectic making of a collective chair in both object and meaning. A process of reenactment through the interpolating and interrogating of assembled evidence is used to establish *a priori* understandings of the chairmakers and, by extension, the chairmaking tradition. This reenactment is part of what Collingwood calls historical imagination.¹⁰¹ The deductive approach of *a priori* and *a posteriori* understandings of knowledge was elemental to Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*,¹⁰² a foundational influence to the theoretical framework of Collingwood's re-enactment¹⁰³ and Petelin's concept of making as research.¹⁰⁴

Collingwood was an archeologist, because of this professional focus he placed the material object on the same level as text and as oral histories, seeing it as a source of *a posteriori* knowledge. The ability to 'read' the *a posteriori* knowledge in an object is particularly important in understanding the Jimmy Possum tradition where there are little textual primary sources and conflicting oral histo-

⁹⁹ William H. Dray, *History as Re-enactment* R.G Collingwood's Idea of History, (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1995)133

¹⁰⁰ Gary K. Browning, *R. G. Collingwood Philosophy, Politics and the Unity of Theory and Practice*, (New York PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2004) 23

¹⁰¹ A M Adam, R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History. Rev. ed., edited and with a new introduction by J. van der Dussen*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993). 510.

¹⁰² Van der Dussen, *Collingwood and the Idea of Process, Progress and Civilization*, *History and Theory* 29:21-41. 1995

¹⁰³ Robin George Collingwood, *The Idea Of History*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1946)

¹⁰⁴ George Petelin, "It's Research, But Not as We Know It," *Scope: Contemporary Research Topics* 5 & 6

ries. Through the act of carving, the participants were able to reenact the experience of the work practice of the historical makers. This was evidenced by the marks on the historical chairs that the participants, after learning how to carve, could read as being drawknifed. This *a posteriori* knowledge was used in historical imagining by myself and the participants to deduce *a priori* understandings of a variety of questions posed regarding the historic marks, such as what were the logistical requirements to create them and why did the historical makers alter drawknife work practices to achieve idiosyncratic effects. These dialectical exchanges that occurred in response to the questions that arose were conducted during the physical act of carving. During this act, snippets of knowledge such as weather patterns, family stories, childhood memories, timber species locations, and historic sites would be added by participants to the assembled evidence. This information would sometimes contradict, sometimes corroborate, and sometimes augment other information. The act of carving as a meta-activity allowed this dialectic process not to become divisive among the group; a position taken on a subject would not automatically create distinct blocks of supporters and detractors engaged in an adversarial debate. This communal approach to the doing and the making of a chair was compatible with the communal approach of knowledge making through the application of Collingwood's idea of history as re-enactment. Collingwood's idea of history was able to be translated to the collective. The communal approach allowed the participants to actively participate in developing a broader understanding of the Jimmy Possum tradition. This allowed a group of contemporary community members to coalesce around the tradition. It also allowed the descendants of the historical chairmakers to view the non-descendants within the group as also belonging to the reactivation of the tradition, and to realise that they as descendants did not occupy a privileged position due to their family connections.

The PAR methodology of the studio research coalesced community and facilitated a coherent response. Several participants saw the traditional social science approach of an expert questioning them as an intrusion and expressed a distrust of their approach, feeling that they would take away knowledge from the community without contributing anything in return. This distrust was evidenced in their stories regarding the 1970s' and 1980s' antique dealers who took most of the tradition's chairs away from the community and became the articulators of knowledge regarding the tradition. In the community's eyes, the antique dealers disempowered them.¹⁰⁵ As a result of PAR's

¹⁰⁵ Deloraine Participant. Focus Group recorded 21 June 2017

natural pluralism and the compatible methodology of re-enactment, the community developed more agency in the keeping of knowledge regarding the tradition. The re-enactment methodology provided the community with a means to process and collectively control new knowledge they developed. It also allowed them to hold any current understandings of the tradition as contingent, awaiting the possibility of future information that contradicts or reverses this current understanding.

William Dray believes Collingwood's methodology has weaknesses in regard to how much of what might normally be called human affairs is really open to a re-enactment¹⁰⁶—that ascribing certain thoughts to a historical person to develop an understanding of their motivations, only works when they think in “a certain way, [and] also act in a certain way”.¹⁰⁷ Carl Hempel, who asserted a model of deductive-nomological reasoning (a scientific explanation of human actions), believed that re-enactment could only be heuristically helpful. At best, he thought, it was a first step to understanding the connection of the agent's thoughts and actions.¹⁰⁸ If Hempel's process was applied to the historically ambiguous personage of Jimmy Possum and the question of why he chose to only make five-backrung chairs, a potential problem may arise in regard to the unknowability of Possum. The sheer lack of evidence around the personage and subsequent tradition necessitates a speculative imagination. For example, Possum did not make six-backrung chairs, which were more comfortable than five-backrung chairs; this could indicate a more rugged understanding of comfort in the late nineteenth century or it could illustrate Possum's lack of concern for customer feedback or it could mean a culturally located respect for the codex of knowledge that a past teacher handed on to him.

Collingwood accepts that explanations are contingent, and that as certain understandings come to light, certain explanations will foreground or background but not disappear.¹⁰⁹ This contingent

¹⁰⁶William H. Dray, *History as Re-enactment* R.G Collingwood's Idea of History, 73

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸Gary K. Browning, *R. G. Collingwood Philosophy, Politics and the Unity of Theory and Practice*, 96

¹⁰⁹ Bryant E Griffith , *The Idea of Idea an Interpretation of a Key Concept in R. G. Collingwood's Philosophy of History*, - philpapers.org 1976, viewed 20 February 2017.

quality of re-enactment was useful in a group dialectic context. Participants noted the high degree of resilience and hardiness among the district's past generations.¹¹⁰ Some participants felt that the "old people's" idea of comfort was not as developed as their sense of survival. They could remember as children visiting their older relatives and being confronted by the home's austerity. They also remembered that Jimmy Possum chairs were always on the verandah. Some could even remember the last of the historic makers, Arthur Larcombe, sitting in a chair while making another chair on the verandah.¹¹¹

This verandah placement is also seen in the only historical photograph of the chairs, a C1900 image of the Smithtown Town Hotel, 15 kilometres from Deloraine. This information, when added to information from the 1978 ethnographic field-work that mentions that William Larcombe died in one of his chairs by the fire¹¹² and the 1887 journal story that also mentions an ex convict being murdered in a Jimmy Possum chair inside his hut,¹¹³ assembles *a posteriori* knowledge regarding the placement of Jimmy Possum chairs in households. The reenacted *a priori* understandings of this *a posteriori* knowledge look to the inside of the agent's motives; in this case, the people using the chairs. Accordingly, these people accepted the discomfort of a five-backrung chair as normal because of their lifestyle of little material comfort. Further to this, the next and succeeding generations relegated the chairs to the verandah due to an advancing understanding of comfort. This reenactment foregrounds the explanation of Possum making his chairs for hardy customers and contextualises the explanation of a lack of care for customer feedback. This can be applied further to assist in understanding why Jimmy Possum did not make six-rung chairs and why succeeding chairmakers modified the chair design elements to make it more comfortable. Thus, the process of reenactment has provided an insight into Jimmy Possum's motives; through it, he is made more knowable. Collingwood believed that art, like politics, warfare economics, science, or religion, is a problem-solving activity;¹¹⁴ it is not one whose problems can be expressed before their solutions are

¹¹⁰ Personal interviews with studio research participants, January to June 2017

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² McWilliams et al., *Chairs Made by Tasmanian Bush Carpenters during the 19th and Early 20th Centuries*.

¹¹³ Peter Cuffley, *A Renewed Search for Jimmy Possum, Chairmaker*.

¹¹⁴ Gary K. Browning, R. G. Collingwood *Philosophy, Politics and the Unity of Theory and Practice*, 96

discovered.¹¹⁵ He maintained that art is of the present, that if the problem-solving expression was done before the act of creation, then the artistic task would already be accomplished.¹¹⁶ Michael Krausz believes that Collingwood's theory of understanding as reenactment does not sufficiently allow for such human activities as creativity.¹¹⁷ Krausz contends that art has an emergent quality where the finished work typically transcends the explicit intention of the artist and that this is the space that the viewer finds valuable.¹¹⁸ However, this position does not allow much insight into critical questions such as how the various historical chairmakers' modifications came into being. Were these modifications considered or did they just happen as the chairmakers had tools in their hand? To understand this, the participants and I engaged in re-enacted reflections focusing on how they themselves considered and implemented their modifications to the design and process they were shown to make. From this *a posteriori* understanding and applying what Collingwood refers to as historical imagination,¹¹⁹ the group felt that the modifications of the historical makers were most probably the result of pre-determined ideas developed prior to the act of making.¹²⁰ This position appears to assuage Krausz's skepticism of Collingwood's methodology in regard to creativity. Therefore, the application of historical imagination and re-enactment provided an insight as to possible thoughts and actions of the historic makers when faced with a similar situation as that faced by the participants.

¹¹⁵ Robin George Collingwood *Idea of History* 56

¹¹⁶ William H. Dray, *History as Re-enactment* R.G Collingwood's *Idea of History*, 137

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ J. Van der Dussen, *Collingwood and the Idea of Process, Progress and Civilization*, *History and Theory* 29:21-41. 1995

¹²⁰ Gary K. Browning, *R. G. Collingwood Philosophy, Politics and the Unity of Theory and Practice*

Chapter 5: The Significance of the Studio Research

5.1 Overview

In the creation of a chair, individual components combine to create the finished object. This process can be viewed as analogous to the building of social structures in communities, where individuals coalesce around a cause. The significance of this research is that in the creation of *Re-Examine*, a chair becomes both a physical structure and a social structure: a social artefact.¹²¹ The research has looked at how interrelationships of technique, technologies, and materials' metaphysical connections can assist in bringing a disparate community together through the communal act of making. In this exegesis, I have reflected on how these elements intersected and nourished each other in the making, and continue to connect and sustain each other in the object and to reflect. This has informed responses to the question of how can a furniture practice yield more insight into historical enquiry? The first three sections of this chapter will outline how these elements combined in the creation and the object of *Re-Examine*.

5.2 Communal Synthesis

For the purposes of planning, executing, and reflecting on this studio research, I have determined four groups of community attached to the Jimmy Possum tradition. The first three groups were discussed in broad terms in the 1978 TSA study, while the other group comprises myself and the authors of this study (see Table 2).

1. Descendants: Persons whose ancestors were historical Jimmy Possum chairmakers.
2. Inheritors: Owners of historic chairs passed down through the family and custodians of the stories of how their family got them. Several of these persons are also descendants.
3. Locals: Persons living in the Deloraine district who have or have heard stories about Jimmy Possum passed down from previous generations. This group sees the Jimmy Possum narrative as being intrinsically linked to their community. The Deloraine and District Folk Museum (DDFM), the Tasmanian Mountain Huts Preservation Society and Roger Nutting (president of the TMHPS) are considered locals for the purposes of this research.

¹²¹ Philip Brey. 'Artifacts as Social Agents' in *Inside the Politics of Technology. Agency and Normativity in the Co-Production of Technology and Society* (ed. H. Harbers), (Amsterdam University Press, 2005) 61-84.

4. Intellectually connected persons: Persons who have been attracted to the chair and tradition via literature, the antique trade, or chairmaking interests. This group includes people such as Michael McWilliams, Peter Cuffley, and me.

At the beginning of the research project, these four groups were, as Roger Nutting states, “dormant”.¹²² To make contact with them, I approached the DDFM, which has examples of historical chairs in their collection and sells copies of several self-published local histories mentioning Jimmy Possum. These references to the tradition are largely based on the 1978 TCA study and its subsequent exhibition and catalogue. Through the Museum, I was introduced to the local council, tourism peak-body, historical society, and, most importantly, Roger Nutting, a valued museum volunteer and president of the TMHPS. In our telephone conversations to organise the initial workshop sponsored through the TMHPS, we compared notes and stories and developed a shared understanding of the interconnectivity of the huts and the Jimmy Possum chairmakers. Nutting broadened my understanding of the tradition and its contexts considerably.¹²³ He described a material culture around the mountain fur-trapping industry, which flourished at the time of Jimmy Possum chairmakers. This practice ended in the early 1980s due to animal cruelty concerns.¹²⁴ The trappers constructed ingenious dwellings and process plants out of available materials and used the same tools and techniques employed by the historical chairmakers.¹²⁵ We speculated that there may be a connection between the name and design innovation of the chair that reflected the need to keep possum skins dry in these mountain huts. Nutting is also the custodian of the *King Chair* (figure 30), the only known chair of the Jimmy Possum chairmaking tradition to have a name, date, and place recorded, being chiselled into the bottom of the seat (M. King Deloraine, 1909). The *King Chair* had never been recorded or documented prior to this research. It had been considered by many locals to be a lesser work when compared to what they thought was a ‘proper’ Jimmy Possum chair. The chair’s inclusion in the Deloraine Museum’s *History and Mystery* exhibition suggests a transforming understanding among the local community of King’s place in the tradition. In my conversations with Nutting, I was also able to share some of my research findings,

¹²² Personal Interview with Roger Nutting March 12 2016.

¹²³ Simon Cubit, *Mountain Stories, Echoes from the Tasmanian High Country Vol1*, (Hobart Forty South Publishing Pty. Ltd. 2016) 6

¹²⁴ Ibid

¹²⁵ Deloraine Participant. Focus Group recorded 21 June 2017

particularly the image of the Davey *A Pioneer's Home* postcard (1905 figure 20). This image, along with several oral histories regarding the man depicted and the place where he lived and worked, suggested to me that Jimmy Possum may have been Aboriginal. Nutting thought the idea was plausible and raised it on a statewide ABC radio program on 12 July 2016. He was censored over ensuing weeks by other locals who took issue to the possibility of Jimmy Possum being Aboriginal. The individuals used terms such as 'insulting' to describe what they felt as diminishing their local identity, which they took to be European¹²⁶. This possibility was continuously discussed by participants during the project's events and at the conclusion was considered to be yet another mystery that surrounds Jimmy Possum; an unknowable element that cannot be dismissed out of hand, nor be confirmed. The Tasmanian ABC News produced a story about the research project, shown on their Sunday News programs and on rotation for News 24 on 12 May 2017. The producer of the story saw this enigmatic possibility as the main element of the story. It was interesting to note that participants reported that there was a lessening of the hostility towards the proposition that Jimmy Possum could have been an Aboriginal man evidenced in this second broadcast.

The intellectually connected group were the most geographically disparate. They were also the most connected via their social media and business activities. This group appears to have started in the mid-1970s with antique dealers from Tasmania and Victoria buying chairs from the descendants and on-selling them or keeping them for their personal collections. Michael McWilliams's parents are included in this group, and they inspired him to conduct an ethnographic study for his Honours project at the TSA in 1978. The data and conclusions from this project have informed and framed all subsequent dealers' trade magazines articles about the tradition. The 1978 TSA study is valued by the descendants because of the stories about their ancestors. McWilliams continued this early intellectual interest into his later art practice. His works *Get Together* (2013, figure 31) and *Lizard's Surprise* (2015, figure 32) are set within the Northern Tasmanian landscape and articulate an intrinsic link between it and the Jimmy Possum chair; a tension point of the Jimmy Possum story sits somewhere between the wild and the domestic. The artworks and articles inspired or influenced by McWilliams's work have attracted more intellectually interested persons over the years, who in some cases have purchased or made a chair because of them. It is very probable that this developing and broadening of the understanding of the tradition beyond Deloraine influenced a Bendigo furniture manufacture/retailer to register the name Jimmy Possum as a trademark.

¹²⁶ Personal Interview with Roger Nutting March 12 2016.

The dormancy of the Jimmy Possum tradition may be the result of the contentious nature of its history. The 1978 TSA study describes a variety of explanations regarding the origins of the name. Initially, the local group didn't believe the inheritor group's claims as to the provenance of their chairs. This is because of the number and variety of places where Jimmy Possum was supposed to have worked and lived. This local scepticism was also noted in the 1978 TAC study and was discussed during the making events. Using Collingwood's history as re-enactment theory as a lens, Roger Nutting, several members of the Larcombe family, and I reached the conclusion that these stories did not conflict and were probably correct. We reasoned that because Jimmy Possum was an itinerant fringe dweller, he could have stayed at several farms during the winters and lived at his tree during the summers. As the Larcombes noted, in Possum's time, local farms required a full-time wood cutter and splitter to supply the fuel for heating and the steam engines. They had been told by their ancestors that there had been a general prohibition on alcohol on the farms at the time, and a breach would result in being asked to leave.¹²⁷ The oral histories and images of chairs at local inns would suggest that Possum was fond of alcohol and as a result he could have lived at a few farms where he made his chairs. Following on from this idea, we looked at chairs ascribed to Jimmy Possum that were said to be made on a farm and those made within proximity to the Montana tree home/workshop. There were distinct differences in the quality of material and structural integrity, which could either indicate two distinct makers or that the place where the chairs were made had an effect on the making process. The community and I are planning a future project to reenact the conditions of the two places of work to further develop our understanding of the implications of these differences.

There were historic points of contention between the descendant and intellectually connected groups, as seen in two recurring complaints. Firstly, the families believe they and their ancestors had been tricked out of chairs by nefarious dealers, an activity that continued until the early 2000s.¹²⁸ Secondly, as a result of these dealers, an orthodoxy emerged that privileged the unknown Jimmy Possum over the known historic chairmakers in terms of public recognition. Some believed that this was a result of the intellectually engaged group's pecuniary interests in the

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Gary Larcombe, interview with the author, 21 May 2017

tradition¹²⁹ and their fascination, bordering on fetishisation, of the mystery of the unknown Jimmy Possum rather than the known chairmakers or the tradition.¹³⁰

To better enable understandings of the tradition, there was a need to create a dialogue between the groups connected to it. This dialogue was made possible through the act of communally making a chair in the Jimmy Possum tradition. This dialogue initiated through the central act of the research, the production of a communally made chair, illustrates how a furniture practice can yield more insight into historical enquiry. The common cause of making facilitated a sharing of histories and memories that became a dialectic exchange. The transformed understandings that arose out of these exchanges broadened the participants' and my understandings of the tradition and joined us as a community. This was evident at the opening of the *History and Mystery* exhibition (figure 15), with members of all four groups attending. The participants believed that the show was an accurate representation of the tradition and the community. The synthesis of various components of the community resulted in benefits for the Deloraine Museum in foregrounding a local identity in regard to Tasmanian cultural tourism promotion.¹³¹ This elevated identity also had the effect of giving members of the descendant families a focus to reactivate their family tradition and connections. The descendants viewed communal chairmaking as a good way to re-engage with family and the local community and to learn from the research emerging from a renewed scholarly interest in the Jimmy Possum chairmaking tradition.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Deloraine Participant. Focus Group recorded 21 June 2017.

¹³¹ Northern Tasmania Tourism Board. <http://www.northerntasmania.com.au/events/jimmy-possum-history-mystery-exhibition/> viewed January 21 2017



Fig.30. Michael King. *King Chair* 1909. Armchair; 100cm x 62 cm x 50 cm. Douglas Fir. Reproduced from Bronwyn Harm portfolio.

Fig.31. Michael McWilliams, *Get Together* 2013. 2013. Painting. Oil, canvas. Reproduced from Bronwyn Harm portfolio.

Fig.32. Michael McWilliams *Lizard's Surprise* 2015. Painting. Oil, canvas. Reproduced from Michael McWilliam's portfolio.

5.3 Technology Synthesis

The historical chairmakers of the Jimmy Possum tradition, like the bodgers in High Wycombe and Chester Cornet in Kentucky,¹³² used tools and techniques unchanged for centuries. Their skills were an anachronism in late Victorian and early twentieth century mass production.¹³³ The re-enactment of their techniques not only allows a window into pre-industrial work practices but also allows them to encounter similar dilemmas faced by the original makers. Principal among them was making the choice of what tools to select from the currently available technologies. These selections have production implications historically and contemporarily. Historically, this is exemplified in the use of sawn timber in some of the tradition's later chairs exemplified in a chair from the Sovereign Hill collection (figure 33). This material emerges out of a sawmill and its attendant industrial systems, rather than the individually sourced split timbers used by Jimmy Possum and the early historical makers. This places the earlier makers closer to the natural environment and the later within proximity to the village and its machinery. This negotiation between technology and place is still active. The services rendered by large machines can now be conducted by portable battery-powered motors. The portability of the production system was important in facilitating the communal chairmaking experience.

Various factors such as bad weather or access to historic material sites meant that venues needed to be changed regularly. The simple pre-industrial tool system used by the historical makers and re-enacted in the making of *Re-Examine* enabled this to occur without logistical problems. However, the re-enacted system used cordless drills to bore holes and cordless sanders to smooth rough timber rather than the bit and brace and rasp of the historical maker's toolkit. The cordless tools offered a broader engagement and quicker completion time by allowing more people to be working on the various stages of chairmaking simultaneously. The tools were included in the production system because of these social factors and their ability to be carried in a backpack. This self-transported production system meant that the making events could be held in the natural environment or in a home workshop. The flexibility enabled various participants to host workshops at sites relevant to them and the tradition, which meant material could be sourced within the imme-

¹³²Michael Owen Jones, *Craftsman of the Cumberlands: Tradition and Creativity*,

¹³³ Jill Cassidy, *Deloraine's Industrial Heritage: A Survey* (Launceston, Tasmania: The Australian Heritage Commission and the Queen Victoria Museum, 1986), 49–110.

diate environs of where the workshop was held. It also meant that the host's oral histories and memories were given context through the place of production and the material being worked with.

Another portable technology that greatly assisted in the process of communal chairmaking was the smart phone. This technology provided access to social media platforms and an ability to document and research the chair's production processes. It can take an image or video, record conversations, and access historic minutiae. The smart phone provided the means to organise a making event within a short timeframe. It would have been difficult, verging on impossible, to organise an equivalently diverse group in historical times because of the slow or non-existent communication systems in place. The difference is also evident in the altered dynamics of sharing knowledge. The historical makers, who had no phone system, limited postal services,¹³⁴ and were living in a time with few motor vehicles, would have had very limited opportunities to disseminate (or receive) skills beyond their contained location.

Participants took images and videos of techniques and recorded me advising them on material or process. They used this resource post-workshop to make their own chairs and they also shared it with their friends and family via social media. One participant Warren Vergin collaborated with an interstate family member. He made a lot of the components in Deloraine and sent them up to the family member to be assembled with components the family member had made. This person had learned to make them from the knowledge recorded and transmitted by Warren Vergin on a smart phone. The smart phone also allowed various descendants of the historic makers to access data relating to the family histories and to share this with the group. While some participants drawknife-carved components, others would document, while others would research. This provided a frame for teamwork, utilised in the group building of the chair and in the group building of knowledge. This new combination of pre-industrial and post-industrial technology created the opportunity to conduct a communal chairmaking process.

This smart phone–assisted connectiveness altered the way in which the tradition historically created chairs. While participants who made a chair after the making event were on the most part working solitarily, as the historical makers had done, they were all connected and shared their making experiences via their smart phones. In the case of Warren Vergin, who made his post–

¹³⁴ Ibid.

making event chairs concurrently with others geographically removed from him, the chairs were made by different people at different places. Smart phone technology framed the experience of making a chair and this experience could be joined by other people geographically in situ or removed.

Fig.33. Unknown, *Jimmy Possum Chair*. c. 1920. Armchair. Blackwood. c. 1920 Sovereign Hill collection. Reproduced from Peter Cuffley's portfolio.

5.4 Material Synthesis

The blending of *Re-examine*'s individual components into a chair joins all their material and social connections. They are linked together because of their tensile strength and associations with the narratives of people, places, and time. The cedar plank in the front of the seat was given to me by Michael McWilliams. When I see and touch the seat, I think of the place it came from—a 1835 northern Tasmanian inn (figure 34)—and McWilliams handing it to me there. The plank was a skirting board taken out during recent renovations. As a boy, McWilliams lived in the inn with his parents, who were among the first antique dealers to collect Jimmy Possum chairs. The plank of cedar is a palimpsest¹³⁵ of individually constructed meanings and memories for not just McWilliams and myself but for other known and unknown people who had connections with the 182-year-old structure. The seat's back plank was handed to me by Gary Larcombe when we visited his uncle Keith Larcombe's (1922–2001) abandoned house (figure 35). Keith was a farmer and a chairmaker who sat in his one of his own chairs (figure 35) beside a home-built low cupboard. The seat's back plank came from this cupboard's top; there is still a ring that appears to have been made by a hot cup being placed on it. The blackwood under-carriage of the seat comes from a wooden post at the top of a set of steps 100 metres from the remaining stump of the purported Jimmy Possum tree at Montana (figure 36). The post was cut in 2007 out of a blackwood tree that grew four metres away from the Jimmy Possum stump. I counted seventy years of growth rings in a 100 x 100 mm section, so the tree could have been growing at the time of Jimmy Possum. He may well have used timber from trees biologically related to this one in his chairs. Fixing these timbers together framed my re-enacted understandings of historical place and persons within the Jimmy Possum tradition. It also allows McWilliams, members of the Larcombe family, and the owners and guests who stayed near the tree a connection to both the object and potentially a visceral connection to each other.

Re-Examine's back rungs were sourced from timber salvaged at Gary Larcombe's holiday hut on his cousin Graeme Larcombe's land, which he had inherited from Keith Larcombe. The timber was sourced from an old structure built by members of previous generations of the family (figure 35)

¹³⁵ Robert Hillier, Design Practice as Palimpsest, *The International Journal of Visual Design*, Volume 10, Issue 3 September, 2016, pp.1-18.

These components were split onsite using a shingle splitter that Gary Larcombe and I had found in Keith's abandoned house. This tool was used, according to the Larcombe family,¹³⁶ to split shingles and chair components by their ancestors. The split backrungs billets were taken to several workshops where participants drawknifed the billets into components. The headrest comes from a fallen wall of an 1890s' split slab shed (figure 37) on the Larcombes' Reedy Marsh property. It bears axe marks at its end, which could have been made by tools that also made chairs.

Re-Examine's arms are part of the blackwood post sourced from Montana near the purported Jimmy Possum tree stump. The specific identity of *Re-Examine* as a social artefact of the Jimmy Possum tradition is constructed via the joining of these individual narratives connected to each component into the meta-narrative of the chair.

Participant feedback regarding the chairs they made during and after the communal making of *Re-Examine* provides an anecdotal understanding of how the chairs' specific identity can resist absorption into the broader material meta-narrative of the participants' households. Participants commented on how they set their chairs apart from other furniture (figure 38) to give it a special place.¹³⁷ They recognise their chairs as examples of their technical skills and as embodiments of their personal histories.¹³⁸ They had purposely embedded memory and connection of the material into the structures of their chairs. This connection of their experience to the object altered the chair's relationship to the assemblage of the household. These observations align with Claude Lévi-Strauss's description of structuralism,¹³⁹ in that it is not the individual object but the relationship between such things as the table and the chair or the chair and the verandah that is of importance. Their chairs' relationships with their household has in a sense redeemed the tradition. These connections of the makers to their chairs, through fabrication and metaphysical connections to the chair's material, has also assisted in the redemption of the Jimmy Possum chair tradition. These chairs have been brought back from the verandah, where they would have sat a generation ago, to sit inside in a specially reserved position.

¹³⁶ Deloraine Participant. Focus Group recorded 21 June 2017

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning*, (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1978) 45

Re-Examined has intentionally been left raw. Throughout my practice, I have been concerned with the ultimate location of my chairs—inside or (to share the fate of the historical chairs) outside on the verandah. Consequently, I have always finished my chairs to protect them from the elements. These finishes started with shellac, but due to its lack of endurance I changed to a water-based polyurethane. This factory-made chemical allows me to guarantee the wood will not crack, and it also offers me the ability to decoupage newspapers that I salvaged from under ‘lino’. The result of this is a plastic thematically sealed film that hides texture and aroma. I would like future sitters in *Re-Examine* to be able to feel the marks of the makers, touch the stains of history, and smell the aromas of the Larcombes’ farm, Jimmy Possum’s tree, and the 1830s inn in a synthesised sensory experience. This synthesised experience emerges out of the creative studio research and gives a unique experiential understanding of how a furniture practice can yield more insight into historical enquiry.

Fig. 34. Michael McWilliams parent's verandah with Jimmy Possum chairs, 1976. Reproduced from Michael McWilliams portfolio.

Fig. 35. Unidentified person, Roy Larcombe and Keith Larcombe on Keith Larcombe's verandah, 1978, Reproduced from Michael McWilliam's portfolio.



Fig. 36. Stump of proported Jimmy Possum tree. 2016. Reproduced from personal portfolio.



Fig. 37. Split slab shed on Graeme Larcombe's property. 2017. Reproduced from Bronwyn Harm portfolio.



Fig 38. Warren Vergin. *Armchair* 2017. Armchair. Eucalypt, king billy pine. Reproduced from Bronwyn Harm portfolio.

5.5 Syntheses

The major examination work *Re-Examine* synthesises the forces of material, technology, and community. The work was formed from material's physical and meta-physical qualities. It was made in and by community, using re-enacted and reinterpreted technologies, guided by tradition. *Re-Examine*'s creation sought a deeper historiographic understanding of this tradition through the assembling of community knowledge and engagement. The work's creation both informed the tradition and was informed by the tradition. As each component was being made, community, history, and place coalesced into the act and its intended outcome. The portable, adapted technologies of the historic makers' pre-industrial toolkit combined with post-industrial technology¹⁴⁰ and social media platforms to allow opportunities for an experiential mode of chairmaking and the result of a communally made chair.

This studio research has sought to extend this experiential modality further; it proposes that the act of making an experience of making an object can be used as an investigative methodology that can illustrate how a furniture practice can yield more insight into historical enquiry. In this project's case, it is a means to give a more cogent explanation of a historically marginalised material cultural tradition that has very little recorded detail, conflicting oral histories, and relies on the objects themselves to be the central texts.

¹⁴⁰ Aspa Gospodini Portraying, *Classifying and Understanding the Emerging Landscapes in the Post-industrial City*. Elsevier Journal Volume 23, October 2006, 32

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The creation of ‘Re-Examine’ was made by members of the Deloraine community during skill sharing workshops conducted in Deloraine from January 2016 to June 2017. The work is made from salvaged material which had connections for the participants to the historical chairmakers of Jimmy Possum chairmaking tradition via persons, place and/or time. This studio research seeks to coalesce a community around the Jimmy Possum tradition. Participants in the making events and focus group (figure 40), members of the local community, and cultural institutions with historical Jimmy Possum chairs in their collection have expressed a desire to continue the momentum created by this studio research. To this end, a travelling exhibition of historical and contemporary examples of the Jimmy Possum tradition is being developed with an accompanying book and documentary film. This potential has been made possible by the act of communally making a chair in Deloraine Tasmania, the home of the Jimmy Possum tradition.

In response to the studio research topic, the communally made chair in the Jimmy Possum tradition has revived and renegotiated a modality and an audience. The act of communally making a chair has benefits to both the community and the individual’s sense of connection. It provides a means to alleviate alienation in the making and in the object. The social dynamics of a collectively made chair, as exemplified in the making of *Re-Examine*, allowed for a reactivation of sharing and innovation within pre-existing communities connected to the tradition. They also allow persons outside these communities to connect and sustain the tradition. The act of creating a communally made chair has also provided insight as to how a furniture practice can yield more insight into historical enquiry, particularly where little or no prime-evidence relating to the historical enquiry. The re-activation of the Jimmy Possum tradition is made possible by the re-negotiating of pre-industrial and post-industrial technologies. The inclusion or non-inclusion of technologies is determined by portability. This portability enables future Jimmy Possum chairs to be made in locations significant to future makers. This significance could be determined by the makers’ relationship to place, and the place’s relationship to persons and time. The re-negotiated production system with its emphasis on portability and connectivity can include mobile technologies — post-industrial technologies foster experiential modes of making that can be shared simultaneously in a group. The adoption of pre-industrial technologies serves to connect makers to the Jimmy Possum chair tradition’s production

system. This production system creates the irregular contours and marks of the hand-made rather than the regulated lines of the machine made.

I plan to conduct further research into the potential of communal making, as an alternative production model to the factory, by conducting making events that are run in different locations simultaneously. This inquiry will look at qualitative differences in the experience of making and the relationship to the finished chair. It will also investigate quantitative differences between the two systems in terms of output volume, energy consumption and utilisation of resources.

This vital research into an under-examined history and potential community will continue to foster important Australian research for the foreseeable future.



Fig. 39. Focus group. Left to right. Chris Moorhouse, Mike Epworth, Malcolm Larcombe, Warren Vergin, Adam Anstis, Steve Tolver Banks, Roger Nutting, Marguerite Lester, Gary Larcombe, Kellie Challis (nee Larcombe) Graeme Larcombe. 2017. Reproduced from Bronwyn Harm portfolio.

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Tables

Table1 Examination works

Type of Work	Title of Work
Major Work.	<i>Re-Examine Chair</i> (2016-2017)
DVA Studio Research works. (2015-2017)	<i>This is not a Jimmy Possum Chair</i> (2015),
	<i>2011 Flood Diner-Chair</i> (2015)
	<i>Kennedy Assassination Chair</i> (2015)
	<i>Joe's Shed Isms</i> (2016)
	<i>Hard Rubbish - (blue chair)</i> (2016)
	<i>Flood Arm-Chair</i> (2015)
	<i>Table's Turned</i> (2015)
	<i>Set of Six Diners</i> (2015)
	<i>Everyone Needs Good Neighbours</i> (2016)
Reference Works	<i>Documentation Film X 2</i> (2016-17)
	<i>Images of Participant's chairs</i> (2017)
	<i>McMahon Chair</i> (C1905)
Retrospective Works 1983 - 1990	<i>Adzed Stool</i> (1981)
	<i>Heart Bench</i> (1983)
	<i>Heart Spinning Stool</i> (1982)
	<i>Pa's Rocker</i> (1983)

Table 2: Chronology of Studio Research Events.

Activity	Workshop Date	Community Involved	Number of Participants
Introduction	March 15-25 2016	Deloraine Museum	N/A
Making Event	July 21-24 2016	Tasmanian Mountain Huts Preservation Society	10
Tasmanian Craft Fair. Deloraine,	November 3-5 2016	Tasmanian Mountain Huts Preservation Society Deloraine Rotary Club	15
Deloraine Making Event	December 27-29 2016	Participants initiated through the Tasmanian Craft Fair	3
Deloraine Making Event	January 3-5 2017	Participants initiated through the Tasmanian Craft Fair	2
Historic Makers Descendant Making Event	April 3-5 2017	Members of the Larcombe family	9
Deloraine Making Event	April 29-May 1 2017	Participants initiated through the Tasmanian Craft Fair at the site of the reputed Jimmy Possum tree	3
Historic Makers Descendant Making event	May 3-6 2017	Members of the Larcombe family	7
ABC Television	May 6-9 2017	Museum, Mayor, Larcombe Family, Members of the Mountain Huts Preservation Society Tasmania	40
Focus Group	June 29 2017	Museum, Making Event Participants, Larcombe Family, Members of the Tasmanian Mountain Huts Preservation Society	12

Table 2b

Event	Event Activities
Introduction March 15-25 2016	Briefing community representatives regarding aims of research, ethical obligations of research, contact for Griffith University Ethical Clearance office, health and safety procedures, developing timetable.
Making Event July 21-24 2016	Sharing making skills such as drawknife usage, splitting timber, timber identification, documentation of process and material source Chair fabrication.
Tasmanian Craft Fair Deloraine November 3-5 2016	Presentation of project to wider Deloraine and Tasmanian community, display of drawknifing by myself and project participants
Deloraine Making Event December 27-29 2016	Visit to proported Jimmy Possum tree.Discussion of authenticity of tree. Collection of material.Sharing making skills such as drawknife usage, splitting timber, timber identification, documentation of process and material source. Chair fabrication.
Deloraine Making Event January 3-5 2017	Sharing making skills such as drawknife usage, splitting timber, timber identification, documentation of process and material source. Chair fabrication.
Deloraine Maker Descendants Making EventMay 3-6 2017	Visiting Larcombe farm. Collection of materials from historical makers abandoned homes and sheds.Sharing making skills such as drawknife usage, splitting timber, timber identification, documentation of process and material source. Chair fabrication.
ABC Television May 6-9 2017	Co-ordinating local community members. Liaising with ABC film crew and film site property owners.
Focus Group June 29 2017	The recording of participants feedback. discussions regarding future activities post-research.