The Pearl Street Gallery, Brooklyn, New York, is pleased to present New Adventures of Mark Twain: Coalopolis to Metropolis. The exhibition features an inspired body of work created by a group of Australian artist-scholars and authors in response to an obscure historical incident. The recent discovery of an original letter sent by Mark Twain to a Newcastle dentist in gratitude for relief from a toothache during his Australian lecture tour in 1895 has become a moment for critical reflection and creative interpretation. Twain chronicled his travels in Following the Equator: A Journey around the World, and observed that Australian history is always picturesque; indeed, it is so curious and strange, that it is itself the chiefest novelty the country has to offer...it does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies (1899).

Patricia Wilson Adams
Brett Alexander
Liz Ashburn
Helen English
Anne Graham
Miranda Lawry
Philip Schofield
Pam Simmo
Kris Smith
Trevor Weekes

Essays by Don Watson, Peter Hill, Hon. Tim Fischer, Gionni Di Gropo

New Adventures of Mark Twain:
Coalopolis to Metropolis

Sept. 28 - Nov. 4, 2007
Reception: Saturday, Oct 6, 5:00 to 8:00pm
Opening remarks by Benjamin Genocchio, Art Critic, New York Times
New Adventures of Mark Twain: Coalopolis to Metropolis

Upon arrival onto this land, the spirits declared that he [Mark Twain] must have a tooth knocked out in accordance with local custom. He didn’t have to know what tribal territories he had crossed, only that he had a toothache, and a local dentist dutifully removed the nuisance. But we now know another explanation. He was about to deliver his own Australian poem, binding the ancient sounds and words gathered across many territories and tribal lands. Spiritual permission was unconsciously sought and granted with the avulsion of his tooth. This Twain did, as guest in and in accordance with the Dreaming for his safe journey across this ancient land.

-Gianni Di Gravio, archivist

What really captured my imagination were all the dualities in Twain’s life which I then decided to represent in some kind of visual form. –Philip Schofield, artist

I was captivated by the idea… that he spent most of his time on the train, and his observations came from looking out of the train windows at the landscape and the towns and cities. –Miranda Lawry, artist

I decided to use Mark Twain as a catalyst to find out what was happening in Newcastle in 1895…that year the Great Northern Railway had a string band… and not only that, it consisted of workers from the railway. –Helen English, musician

Mark Twain so typifies the America culture and all its contradictions. –Brett Alexander, artist

Twain was very funny about how his books were illustrated and who illustrated them. From [one of his] books I chose single boys or groups of figures to become his observers to the beautiful Australian lies… The borders of the artworks are extremely decorative… as befits those ornate lies. –Liz Askew, artist

The driving factor for me in this project was my early readings of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn and the influence they had on kids in Australia. –Pam Sinnott, artist

I wanted to find a way to embrace crazy adventures like rafting on the Newcastle harbor and horse riding down a coal mine—the sort of things Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn might do if they were transplanted to Newcastle. –Trevor Weeks, artist

The way he transformed himself, and reinvented himself, fascinated me…it seemed to me he was always wearing a costume. –Anne Graham, artist

The tombstone images document the passing of time at the grave of James and Mary Johnson. As “a faint wind mourned through the trees” while I was photographing the moonlight image, the midnight graveyard scene in Tom Sawyer was never far from mind. [James Johnson was the sole survivor of the wreck of the Dunbar in 1857]

–Kris Smith, artist

Incongruous Incredibilities

by Graeme Sullivan

Mark Twain quipped that “Australian history… does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies” (1899). But he went on to say that the “lies” are “all of a fresh sort, no moldy old stale ones.” It’s a history that is “full of surprises and adventures, and incongruities, and contradictions, and incredibilities.” This is an especially apt description of the surprises found in The New Adventures of Mark Twain. In his catalogue essay, Peter Hill finds fresh surprises in the way artworks “rhyme” in time and place. He draws attention to the changing rhythms of influence that shape contemporary art. For many Australian artists in the past, rhymes were mostly heard and seen as echoes of events that happened first on other shores. The effect was the avulsion of his tooth. This Twain did, as guest in and in accordance with the Dreaming for his safe journey across this ancient land. The driving factor for me in this project was my early readings of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn and the influence they had on kids in Australia. But how is new knowledge created by this ‘art research?’ First, there is an unequivocal creative impulse that is a critical starting point in looking beyond what is known. Irrespective of whether the origin of knowledge is stable or shaky, there is a need to move beyond prevailing attitudes, assumptions and assurances. Second, there is acceptance that traditional systems for knowledge that rely on probable outcomes or plausible interpretations cannot fully respond to the challenge of new possibilities. This is where artists take us—to where we’ve never been, to see what we’ve never seen. And the ‘creative academic’ brings us back, and helps us look again at what we thought we knew. Disrupting the known by facing the unknown is precisely what the ‘creative academic’ achieves in exhibitions such as The New Adventures of Mark Twain because the past never stays the same.

In thanking the Newcastle dentist, Mr. Wells, Mark Twain wrote “I will now depart on my journey in greater comfort than upon my arrival.” In visiting this exhibition, it is hoped viewers will depart in greater comfort knowing that past truths are “full of surprises and adventures, and incongruities, and contradictions, and incredibilities”—Mark Twain would have expected nothing less.