Let me begin this paper with a personal anecdote. While walking towards my university library, dragging a large suitcase behind me, I realised that I was hungry and so detoured via the university café, where I noticed two fellow postgraduate students deep in conversation. I decided to join them for lunch, and as I sat down, one of them turned to me and asked perplexedly, “How is my studio practice research?” The easiest and the least satisfying answer to this question is the rather dismissive response, “How is it not?” To me it seems clear that studio work throws up interesting questions, which may be answered outside the studio context, and that these answers can, in turn, generate new studio work. The dynamic also works in reverse: research outside the studio, sometimes in an area completely unrelated to one’s usual studio practice, can trigger a whole new line of studio work.

While all artists work and think differently, many experience intense pleasure from spending long periods of uninterrupted time in the studio. This is the still bliss that comes with fulfilling an individual sense of destiny, the kind of autotelic mindset suggested by flow theory. My private description of this kind of temporary mind/body truce is ‘running on the train tracks of destiny’; after spending too much time bumping over rough ground, constantly trying to enforce a hierarchy of competing interests, one experiences a sense of profound relief upon reaching a surface one glides effortlessly upon.

However, while such solitary time is valued by many practising artists, problem solving is essentially situational, therefore artists sometimes need to step beyond their studio to explore other people’s ideas and challenge their own preconceptions. If an analogy is drawn between studio work and scientific research, the problem with an isolated, self-referential and self-generating practice becomes apparent. In my practice as a painter, theory provides a pathway between individual creative work and cross-media or interdisciplinary collaborations. To adapt Lowry and McKinnon’s idea—that a crucial role of theory is to build a ‘flexible and speculative bridge’ between disciplines—theory enables me to participate in collaborative projects. What follows is a concrete example of this.

Although I currently live in New South Wales, I grew up in Tasmania, and spent most of my twenties living and working in London. My cousin Julien Poulson, a musician, has had a similar life/work trajectory: he was raised in Hobart, but spent most of his twenties and thirties living in Melbourne and various international cities. We shared a common early antipathy for all things Tasmanian, which was gradually replaced, as we aged, with a strong but not uncomplicated passion for the island. Like Julien and many other Tasmanian artists, I came to recognise that the island was at the centre of my creative psyche.

‘The Green Mist’ is an entity Julien conceived as a floating, international group of musicians—as he states, a ‘band without walls’. Their first album, Next Stop Antarctica, is a peculiar mix of pop, blues, and folk, with lyrics that describe characters and events from Tasmanian history. It came about after Julien moved back to Tasmania to help his father assemble a book on the history of Southport, a small town in the deep south of the island. Somewhere in the process of caring for his dying father and sorting through his chaotic paperwork, Julien discovered that the stories his father had collected were sinking into his creative unconscious. Historical narratives and Tasmanian characters began to populate his albums and musical performances.

I wrote a review of Next Stop Antarctica, identifying myself as a family member and describing how listening to the album evoked, for me, an incredibly resonant sense of place. It embodied my memories of growing up in Tasmania, the strange ever-present history of the place, even atmospheric features like the pitch-black shadows, howling southerly winds, and the fast-changing landscape of ice-blue skies and near-constant rain. The review was published in an obscure music magazine and resulted in an invitation to present a paper at a symposium held at the University of Technology,
Sydney (UTS), organised by Dr Anthony Mitchell, on the theme of ‘music and place’. After the symposium, I asked my colleague Keryn Stewart whether she would be interested in reconfiguring the paper into a journal article. During the process of preparing the article, I dropped back to a primary research role, and Keryn was responsible for nearly all of the actual writing (see Stewart and Hopcroft 2009).

I was fascinated by the way Keryn took my original paper, a brief piece of reflective writing, and systematically explored the link between art and place. She interrogated how the album managed to construct a ‘Tasmanian sound’ by examining all aspects of the album’s production, including its promotion on the social-media sites Myspace and YouTube, its instrument selection, lyrics, album imagery, the musicians’ level of knowledge about Tasmanian history, the album’s fan reception, surrounding press releases, and interview content. Among other things, Keryn connected the theme of the ‘Tasmanian Gothic’ to the band’s music. The term ‘Tasmanian Gothic’ refers to a regional genre that focuses on themes of horror and the uncanny, celebrates a dark and haunting aesthetic, and often depicts the landscape as a kind of human presence or agent of narrative catalyst. Although a significant amount of research exists on the Tasmanian Gothic phenomenon in the visual arts, cinema, and literature, there is less material linking this genre to contemporary-music production.

Aligned with the idea of a personified landscape is an exploration of how traumatic events mark a physical space, and the way remote places, such as Tasmania, with its brutal colonial history, seem to erode the clear demarcations of linear time: the past keeps happening. Maria Tumarkin (2005, 13) uses the term ‘traumascapes’ to describe “…a distinct category of places transformed physically and psychically by suffering, part of a scar tissue that stretches across the world”. Emily Bullock (2009, 33) writes that the Tasmanian landscape “...is haunted by the past and, in turn, haunts its inhabitants”, a sentiment echoed by Simon Schama (1995, 7) in his statement that landscape is “...built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock”. It was after reading Bruce Elder’s Blood on the Wattle (2003), and particularly the chapters on violence against the Tasmanian Aboriginal population, that many of these ideas began to take hold; in my studio I began to seek a visual expression of Bullock’s description of a landscape saturated by both history and memory. I sought to capture the psychic resonance of the place, this odd feeling that too much blood had been shed, too recently, for it to be absorbed into the island’s dark soil.

I discovered Bullock’s research during the wider process of considering the relationship between cultural artefacts and their place of creation, and the specific exploration of the nexus between Next Stop Antarctica and Tasmania. When I contacted Bullock, she was living in Queensland (but has since relocated to Hobart), and was finalising her thesis on Tasmanian Gothic. She kindly sent me some of her unpublished conference papers and referred me to two writers who left a marked influence on my studio practice: Chloe Hooper and Carmel Bird.

In A Child’s Book of True Crime, Hooper splices together the unlikely genres of children’s literature and true-crime writing, and uses them to tell the story of a murder in a small town south of Hobart. This novel was important to my practice for the strange interweaving of a dark narrative into the jolly mindset of children’s literary characters. Hooper describes the book as a tribute to Australian children’s literature, albeit a warped one (Stewart 2005). The novel was the literary equivalent of imagery that I sought to realise in my studio: a kind of picture-book imagery for adults. I responded to the practice of disguising subversive or dangerous ideas in an innocuous format.

Bird’s novel Cape Grimm is also set in Tasmania, this time in the remote north-west part of the island. It is both a love story and the history of a fictitious cult. The narrative is populated by remarkable, otherworldly characters, the most memorable being a red-haired, pale-skinned identical twin brother and sister who eventually marry each other and farm tulips.

While Hooper was significant in terms of genre hybridisation, Bird was important in purely visual terms. The image of the married twins (intimacy piled on top of intimacy to suffocating effect) brought my visual imagination back to Grant Wood’s famous painting American Gothic. Over the years I have experimented with various versions of Wood’s composition, usually near-identical figures standing in front of a squat, colonial style church. After reading Cape Grimm, I painted two children standing in front of a church, the boy cradling a fluffy white rabbit and the girl holding a falcon, surrounded by the lichen-stained gravestones, crushed-pink stone pathways, and wrought-iron fencing typical of Tasmanian country churches. In the background, stone devils squat on headstones and marble angels stride across others. One headstone is inscribed, in tiny script, with the name ‘Leonard Cohen’, a piece of visual humour I refer to as a VCR-joke (terminology that evolved in the age of video, where animators would include references within their cartoons that could only be spotted by hitting pause). A species of endangered orchid found only on the island, an exotic bright magenta with a little red tongue, grows in clumps in the foreground. The painting is titled A Tasmanian Childhood (figure 1).

A Tasmanian Childhood represents the synthesis of many of the ideas generated by exploring Tasmanian Gothic and Next Stop Antarctica. While the image functions primarily...
on an expressive level, its conceptual basis includes the interlocking themes of claustrophobia, Tasmanian history and trauma. I found that I shared with Bird a fascination with using historical narrative as the basis for a creative, fictional work. The painting is informed by both readings of Tasmanian history, particularly Blood on the Wattle, and memories of growing up on an isolated island in the days before cheap airfares and the Internet. My aim was to create something that seemed both frozen in time, but capable of contemporary resonance, akin to revisionist fairy tales, a genre that I have recently become interested in. I liked the idea of creating a cast of characters who inhabit a fictional island, closely based on Tasmania, who live out their narratives in an imaginary space, inspired by reality but representing a substantial departure from its confines, a kind of re-imagining of history.

In line with contemporary re-tellings of traditional fairy tales, the narratives of these paintings are neither morally didactic nor prescriptive, preferring to allude to expressive states rather than fully articulate them.

My interest in revisionist fairy tales—and, more specifically, the nexus between word and image and my twin practice as an artist and writer, led me to co-curate, with Caelli Jo Brooker, an exhibition of artists’ books with a fairy-tale theme. Titled Happily Ever After: Alternative Destinies in Contemporary Feminine Narrative (figure 2), the exhibition brought together over seventy local, national and international artists and writers and asked them to work together to create new versions of traditional fairy tales, via the format of handmade books. My involvement in this exhibition can be traced back to the interest in Tasmanian...
Gothic triggered by Next Stop Antarctica, and the research process that underpinned the transformation of my initial album review into the UTS journal article.

While I did not create any visual work for the Happily Ever After exhibition, I wrote two pieces of fiction that, in collaboration with other participants, were used as the basis of artists’ books. The first, titled Whalesong, is a story told from the point of view of an Antarctic whale. It describes events surrounding the recent collision between Japanese whaler Shonan Maru 2 and Ady Gil, a New Zealand-flagged protest vessel. In part a piece of social protest, and in part an attempt to play with the conventions surrounding the writing of the ‘animal voice’, Whalesong aligns with my interest in re-imagining historical events, particularly from the point of view of fictitious entities, and the gothic notion of a personified landscape (or in this case, seascape).

The second piece of writing was a novella with the histrionic title of 1001 Nights: Being an Erotic Memoir and Private Journal of the Virgin Scheherazade—A Gripping Tale of Love, Death, Identity, Transformation and Metamorphosis. Based partly on personal diary entries and using the framing device of Arabian Nights, the novella experiments with the use of tense to build narrative intensity and create a sense of the past collapsing into the present. Even the title itself, with its conflation of the distinct genres of memoir and journal (one written more or less contemporaneously, and the other always retrospectively) refers to this preoccupation. Once again this work reflects an ongoing investigation into the re-imagining of history, and the manipulation of linear conceptions of time for creative purposes, an interest that can be tracked through my investigation into Tasmanian Gothic, the writings of Bird and Hooper, and Next Stop Antarctica.

It is necessary to close the circle between theory and act, image and idea, and reiterate how theory can help practice travel beyond the studio walls. The multiple collaborations initiated by Happily Ever After encouraged many other artists and writers to engage with ideas located outside their ordinary realm of practice. As the focus of the exhibition was interdisciplinary dialogue, a scaffolding of ideas supported these relationships, forming a bridge between creative people and artworks.

ENDNOTES

1 Peter Conrad describes a similar epiphany: “Everything that constituted me had been made by the place I left long ago, where I would never live again” (1988, 232).

REFERENCES