Fiona Hall, Wrong Way Time, 2012–15 (detail)
Image credit: Clayton Glen
Born 1953, Sydney
Lives and works in Adelaide

“Artists are more renegade and march under their own banner... in that sense they are perhaps more interesting and much more accurate barometers of what’s really going on in the world and of things to come...” ¹

Fiona Hall is a leading Australian contemporary artist who came to prominence as a photographer in the 1970s. During the 1980s, Hall began to explore a wide variety of art forms and her practice now includes sculpture, video, weaving and even garden design.

Hall’s choice of materials and the way she uses them is critical to creating meaning in her work. She transforms ordinary objects in order to analyse the relationship between nature and culture, exploring themes such as environmentalism, globalisation and consumerism. Her recent works warn about capitalist economies, as well as war and cultural collapse.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTwrxjd5Tal>
For the 2015 Venice Biennale, Fiona Hall created a large installation called Wrong Way Time. The installation combines many different components produced in the last few years but is conceived as a single work.

Curator Linda Michael writes:

“This exhibition is Fiona’s response to her times, to the litany of war news, stories about terrorism, climate change, extinctions, environmental pillage, collapsing markets, and so on.”

The dim lighting and gloomy colours impart a sense of dark pessimism throughout the exhibition, reflecting Hall’s belief that we are living in an age of crisis that is ‘a minefield of madness, badness, sadness, in equal measure’, stretching beyond the foreseeable future.

In Wrong Way Time, Hall’s thoughtful manipulation of materials and punning titles extends the meaning of the works by layering concepts to explore her themes. Despite the doom and gloom, there is grim humour and a sense of nature’s potent creativity.
Both the name of the exhibition and the title of a major body of work within the show, Wrong Way Time suggests that humanity has reached the point where we are going backwards.

Dozens of old-fashioned clocks, painted with skulls, skeletons and barbed wire, suggest a sense of danger. This is echoed by the crudely scrawled warnings: COUNTING FOR NOTHING, UNLUCKY STRIKE, WRONG WAY TIME, MELTDOWNS, ZERO HOURS.

The sounds of ‘the cuckoos and caws unsettle as much as the images, evoking the sense that time is running out’.

Image credit: Christian Corte
TENDER

The title Tender refers to both human kindness, as well as the use of money for exchange. Inspired by her ‘wonder, fascination and respect for what birds can achieve’, Hall created hundreds of bird nests from shredded US dollar bills. By destroying the monetary value of the notes, Hall challenges consumption based systems of human trade and their disastrous effect on the environment.

‘Money is part of the lives of all of us... money perhaps is the ultimate symbol of desire... and it’s very interesting for me therefore as a material to incorporate in to the work... the environmental message here, of course, is one of globalisation and the marginalisation of the environment through land clearance, the spread of urbanisation, pollution, all of those things we know about only too well now...’

Fiona Hall, Tender, 2003-05 (installation view)
Image credit: Christian Corte
‘All the king’s horses and all the king’s men, couldn’t put Humpty together again.’

Drawn from the well-known nursery rhyme, the title refers to the inability of members of an army to fix a disastrous situation. Suspended in a grid throughout the exhibition space, 20 ‘king’s men’ hang limply, like skeletons. Crafted from knitted army camouflage materials from around the world, their national flags and emblems are left showing, referencing the omnipresence of human conflict. The inclusion of dice, teeth, bones and boxing gloves transforms their faces into grim masks. These floating, ghoulish spirit figures evoke the nightmarish horrors of war.
How does Fiona Hall’s use of materials contribute to the meanings of the artworks?

I subscribe to the idea that all art is political, in the broader sense—it’s part of its time, even if it’s an abstract painting. I wouldn’t classify myself as a political artist because that’s a very narrow area, protest art. But a lot of my recent work touches on environmental politics, although I try to get beyond the purely political.

How do you think art and politics are connected in Fiona Hall’s work? Would you describe her as a political artist? Why or why not?

Identify and discuss some global issues that Fiona Hall raises in her works. How do you feel about these issues? Create an artwork that responds to an issue that is important to you.

Develop a hanging sculpture using found materials that explores the relationship between humans and the natural world.