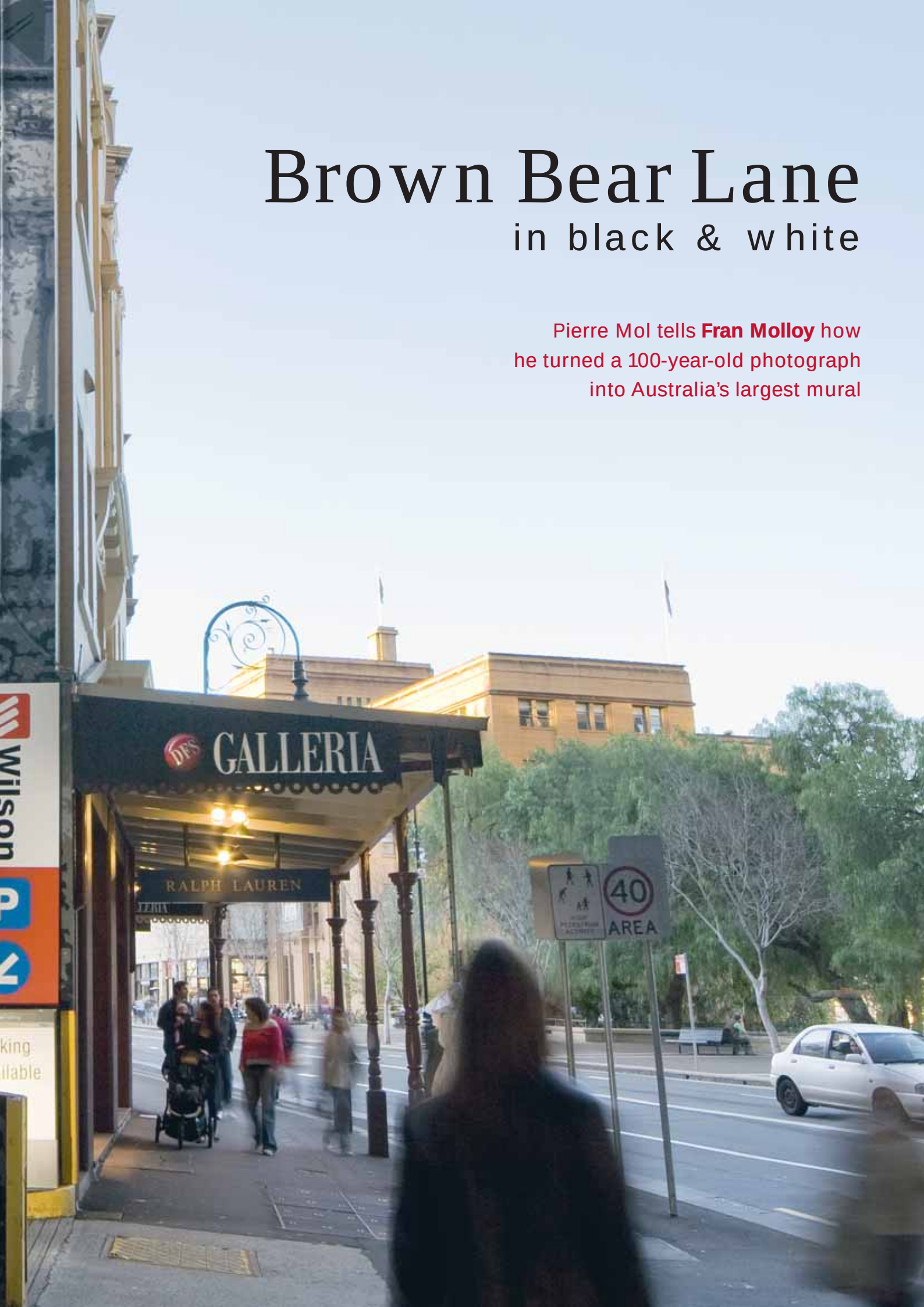
Brown Bear Lane (later Little Essex Street) in 1901

Brown Bear Lane
in black & white

Pierre Mol tells **Fran Molloy** how he turned a 100-year-old photograph into Australia's largest mural



Pierre Mol and part of the equipment of the 21st century muralist

Visitors walking down Sydney's George Street are doing a double-take when they approach the entrance to The Rocks where a larger-than life mural depicts a 1901 view of old Brown Bear Lane.

University of Sydney graduate Dr Pierre Mol created the artwork, which reproduces an original black and white photograph of the cobble-stoned laneway that once linked George Street to Cumberland Street, passing the notorious pub The Brown Bear.

Although the pub and laneway were demolished more than a century ago, on a grey day the artwork is realistic enough to tempt the casual observer to take a wrong turn – and it is rapidly becoming one of the area's most photographed sites.

Mol's varied career includes work as a lecturer, writer, researcher and artist. He is also an academic, with a passionate belief in the value that cross-disciplinary approaches can bring to research – in any discipline.

Mol runs a commercial fine art business, with his commisioned work appearing in private and public spaces worldwide – including an enormous mural for the Sultan of Brunei.

He is a part-time academic at the College of Fine Arts at the University of New South Wales, where he teaches Art and Archaeology. His own Art and Archaeology practice covers a range of projects, from creating visualisations of a site for planning or educational purposes, to explaining and reproducing cultural artefacts.

Although archaeology is a growing part of his practice, Mol describes himself as an artist with an interest in archaeology on the side.

"I really haven't been out of university for something like 20 years," he admits.

Mol took a year off after leaving school then completed a Bachelor of Visual Arts degree at the then City Art Institute (now the College of Fine Arts at the University of New South Wales.) Graduate studies in painting followed and then he enrolled at the University of Sydney to study philosophy.

"I wanted to do my PhD and needed a good understanding of the history and philosophy of science, which helped me develop the scientific model I used in my PhD to analyse art history," Mol says.

Further postgraduate studies in art culminated in the award of a PhD in Art History in 2002 for the development of a model that helped understand the different language and terms used by art historians across time.

photos: Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority

"You can't disassociate art history from archaeology, because they both investigate the culture of the past."

"We couldn't actually identify whether there has been development and progress in art because of the language used by art historians and art theorists – terms are used very loosely," he says.

"Science has one of the only models in any discipline that talks about progress in a very fixed way, so I developed a system based on the scientific model that art historians can refer to, it's something that you apply in the margins of your theory, in the margins of art history."

While completing his PhD, Mol was also undertaking postgraduate studies in historical archaeology at the University of Sydney. The relationship between art history and archaeology is very strong, Mol says.

"If you talk to art historians or archaeologists on their own they don't really work as if there's a connection between the two disciplines, but in fact there's a very tight working connection," he explains. "You can't disassociate art history from archaeology, because they both investigate the culture of the past."

Sydney Foreshore Authority archaeologist Dr Wayne Johnson says that he has engaged Mol and other artists to bring archaeology to life for the public, both through historical documentation of sites and for visualisation.

"Artists do have a role to play in the interpretation of the results of archaeology," Johnson says. "For example, we've used an artist to do a reconstruction of a building over the site of an excavation of a series of eight terrace houses in The Rocks at Foundation Park."

Mol is continuing research in archaeology at the University and maintains strong ties with the Archaeological Computing Laboratory, which is involved in visualisations of historic sites.

"I deal with visualising artefacts as well as sites, gathering the archaeological data together to make sense of it," he says.

Increasing public interest in archaeology has put pressure on archaeologists to present their findings in a more accessible way. Archaeologists these days are constantly consulted on the educational use of their data for museums, schools, for TV shows and documentaries, Mol says.

Visualisations allow the use of archaeological data in a way that helps the general public understand the meaning of what is being dug out of the ground.

"A lot of the archaeological data is cultural data, not just the measurements of buildings," Mol says. "The data includes what

the building was used for, whether it was religious purposes, festivals or other cultural purposes."

He believes that a cross-disciplinary approach, consulting experts in fields such as art history, will allow archaeologists to properly visualise the data.

"Until recently archaeologists haven't concentrated on the conceptual side of the culture or why things happened over time – they have just been interested in getting to the facts," Mol says. "But when you start talking about this information in a historical way, you need to consult people who have studied cultural history."

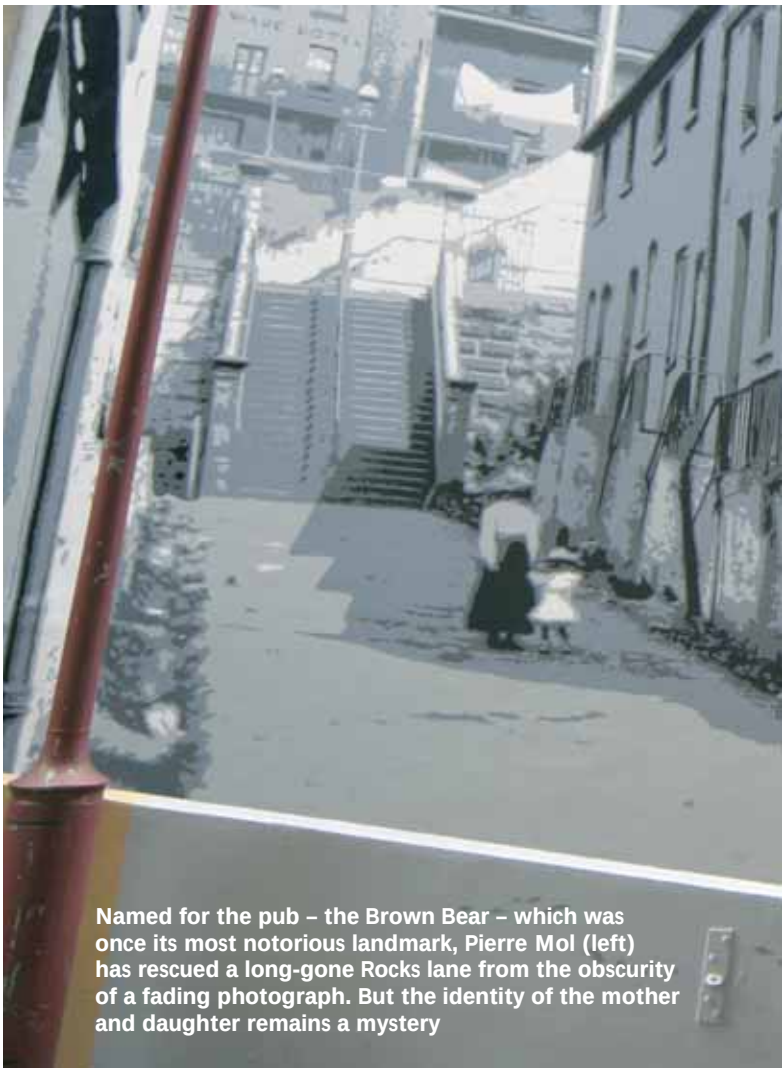
Things are changing; Mol says that archaeologists and art historians are beginning to collaborate for exhibitions and museum presentations – although, he admits, archaeologists aren't keen on museum work, they prefer to be out in the field.

"But art historians also have to get out in the field because of the cross-disciplinary nature of contemporary archaeology. Art historians have to deal with objects and with science and real ground data."

He believes that the archaeologists who will make a difference in future are those who have a good feel for cross-disciplinary studies, and cites the University of Sydney's Department of Archaeology as a leader in this approach.

"They refer to other consultants in different fields, historians, anthropologists, technicians," he says.

He adds that he gains a lot of satisfaction in his own role in explaining and interpreting historic sites. For instance, the mural



Named for the pub – the Brown Bear – which was once its most notorious landmark, Pierre Mol (left) has rescued a long-gone Rocks lane from the obscurity of a fading photograph. But the identity of the mother and daughter remains a mystery

"It's quite a confronting image and because it's right at the beginning of The Rocks, it gives a good introduction to what The Rocks is about."

depicting the original Brown Bear Lane in The Rocks is just a snapshot in time of a site which had dozens of different uses over different periods, he says.

He says that The Rocks remains a highly dynamic place, despite its heritage nature and the attempts to preserve the past.

"The mural reproduces a photograph from 1901, complete with figures representing the fashion of the times. It's quite a confronting image and because it's right at the beginning of The Rocks, it gives a good introduction to what The Rocks is about," he says.

"It's not just a fun park for history. I think that the educational side of what I do is really important."■

Painting by numbers

Turning a 1901 black and white photograph into an uncannily realistic looking building-sized mural takes a lot of skill and planning – but even an experienced artist such as Pierre Mol would have taken many months to complete the project without some technological shortcuts.

The on-site painting of the mural by Mol and his assistant took just seven days, although there was about a month of studio preparation beforehand.

"The cost of doing this project by hand would have been prohibitive," Mol says.

"In my business, you have to think of every single shortcut to cut costs. It teaches you to be resourceful. I have no problem using technology because without it, the work would be unaffordable."

The photograph was scanned and then "posterised," using Photoshop, to reduce the many shades of grey to just five tones, three grades in black and white.

Then, another image was created, using a different graphics package – a line drawing of the photograph, outlining the border between every single colour variation on the image.

The image was divided into 64 squares which would be used on-site.

Then, each square was printed onto acetate, used for projecting the image onto a large sheet of paper in the studio and then Mol traced the lines onto the paper using a special "transfer pen."

Then the image had to be reversed before it could be transferred to the wall.

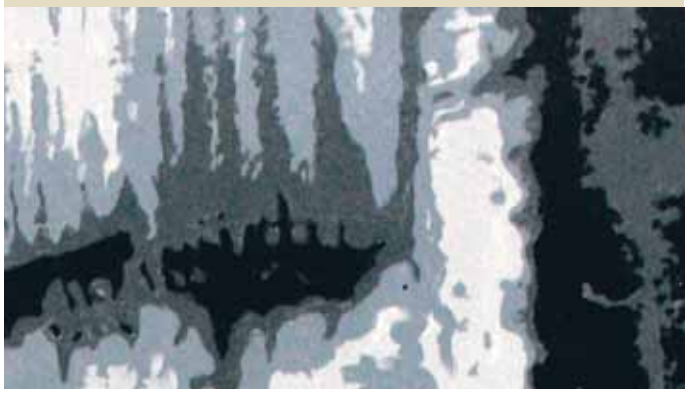
Meanwhile, down at The Rocks, scaffolding was being erected along the wall so that the artists could access the full height of the building; the first stage in the mural process was to transfer the image from each of the 64 squares of paper, onto the wall.

Paper to wall was accomplished by wiping the paper over with water which released the line image to its final destination on the side of the building.

Before that, however, every individual shape within the line image had also been numbered.

"Because we work so close to the wall, you can't see what line is what – so every shape had a number and that number corresponded to the number of a particular paint," Mol explains.

"And so, at the end, it became just painting by numbers."



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