



# Don't tell

A little girl, dressed in a kangaroo costume, stands forlorn and sad, oddly lost in the landscape. In the background, one sees scribbly fragments of sentences in a child's handwriting like "Last week Dad dug a hole where the water couldn't get to us to set fire to the letters", "I drew big kisses and hid them in my pillow" or "Mum said a shut mouth catches no flies".

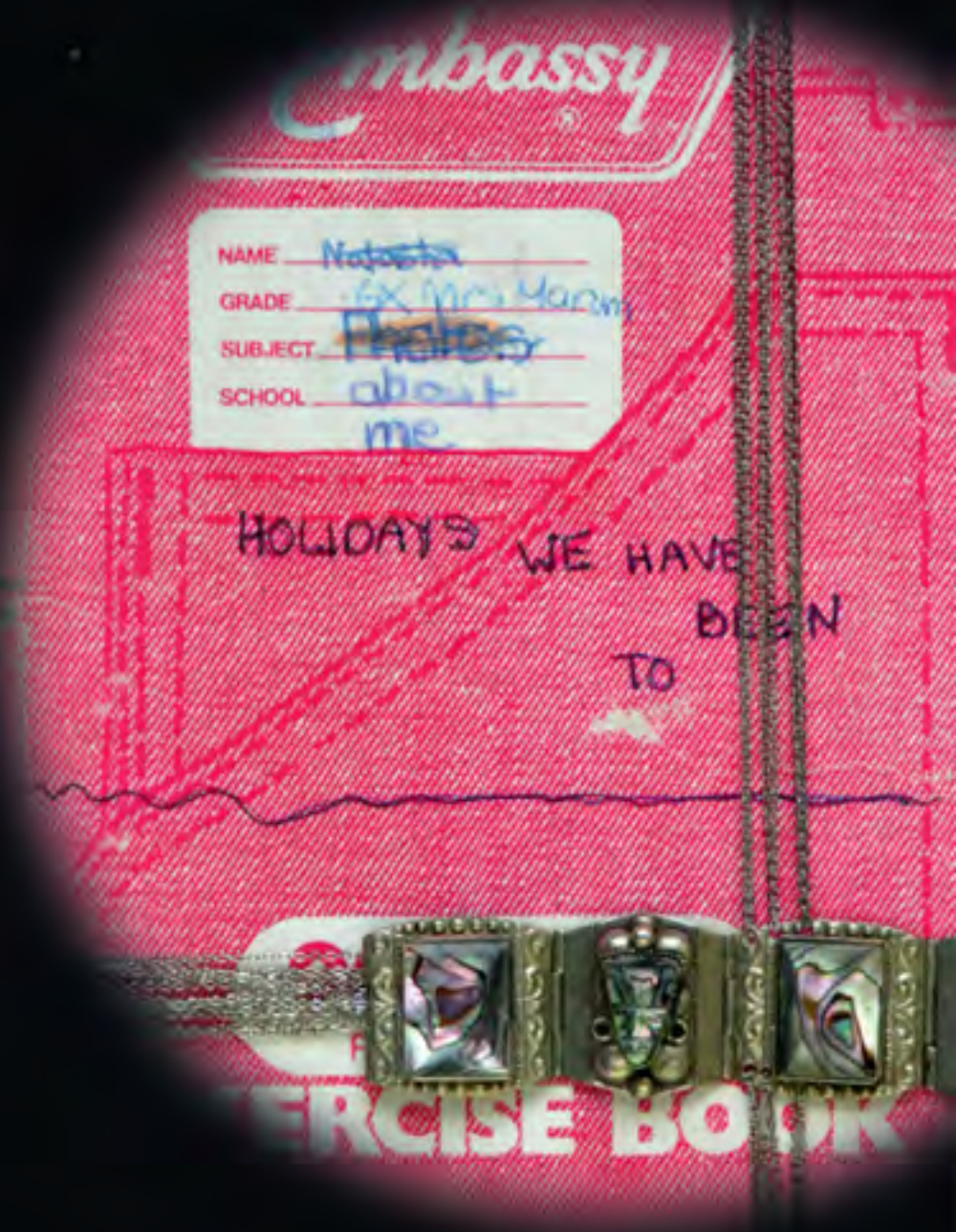
The large photographs draw the viewer into a peculiar spell, as the young girl discomforts us in her familiarity and strangeness. The images invite questions: why does the girl look sad and puzzled? Why is she in surreal and alluring scenes with a piece of furniture or a stuffed toy? Is the girl perhaps the writer of these sentences? What disturbs her and why isn't she smiling into the camera, proud of her kangaroo costume? Then the viewer discovers a golden chain that spells the words "don't tell", and follows

it to a staircase that leads to a cellar revealing five diaries chained up with gold, silver and antique jewellery.

In *secret*, through photography and diaries, scenes from the life of a girl are reconstructed. The mutually charged works by Natascha Stellmach, exhibited at HERRMANN & WAGNER Gallery, Berlin involve a world within a world. The text fragments: parental words of warning, verbal punishments, threats, sayings or prepubescent yearnings could be in those locked diaries. These fragments, in their isolation and taken out of context become astonishingly cruel. The handwriting hints at a girl who is wrestling with parental authority and the strange world of grown ups – and is told to be quiet.

Who can she confide in, who can she tell her small and big fears and worries to? The diaries as a custodian of secrets, lie lovingly decorated and anxiously tied-up with chains. With the original diary designs in mind, the artist collaborated with Blanche Tilden – a Melbourne Goldsmith, renowned for her work with links, chains and rivets.

The jewellery, every young girl's dream, also serves to increase the value of the hidden words. Who wouldn't, in an unguarded moment, despite the

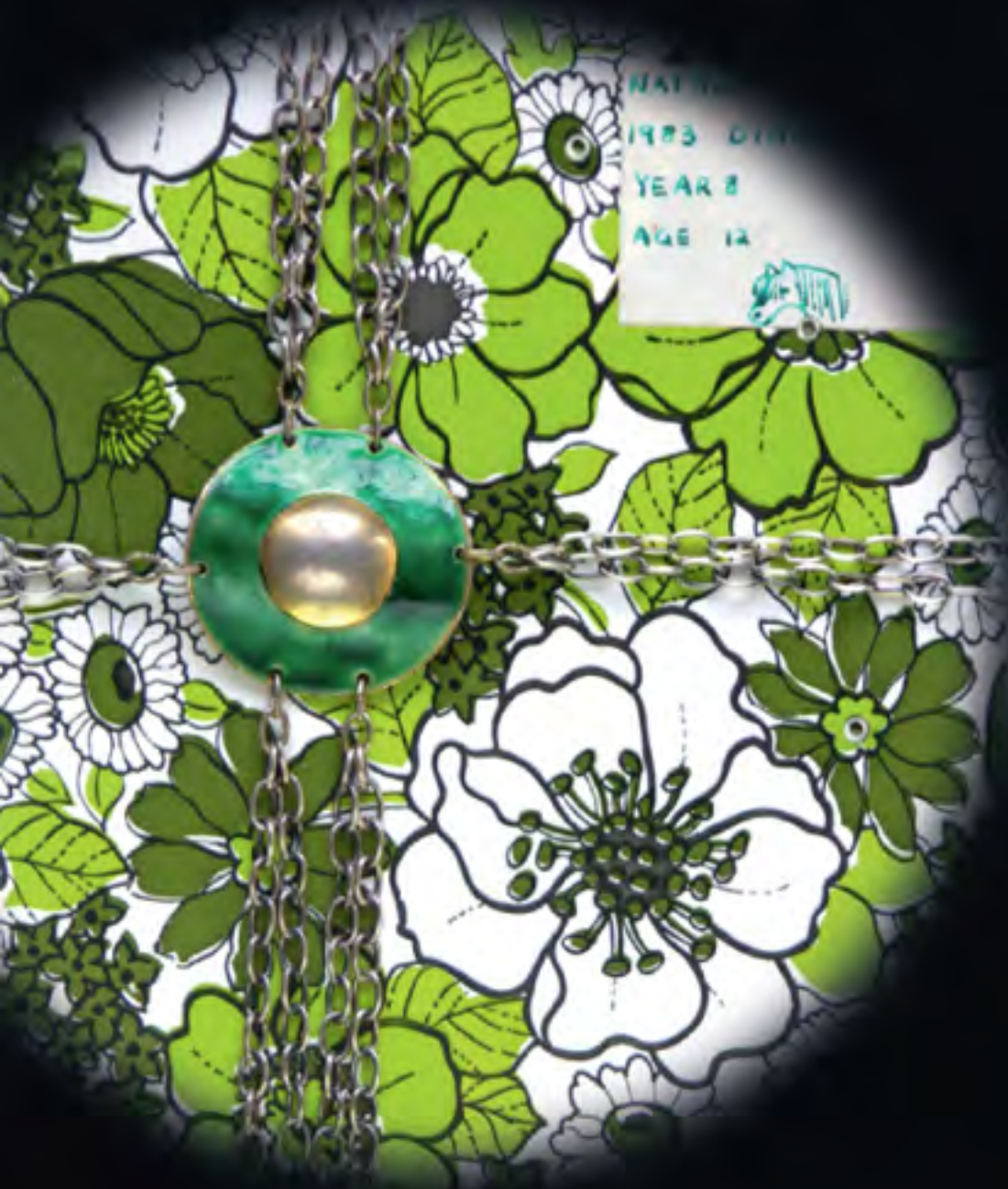




enthraling aesthetic, break open the chains to leaf through the diaries hidden in a room like the cellar, perhaps remembering with an ounce of guilt, secrets entrusted in their diaries.

Natascha Stellmach's work revolves around identity, memory and repression. In this work she draws on images and ideas from *The Book of Back* a work she exhibited in 2007 at Künstlerhaus Bethanien as a recipient of the Australia Council artist residency and

grant. The artist continues her investigation into daily life, wavering between fiction and reality, between the staged and the existing. In her work dealing with memory, Stellmach places objects, people and landscapes as a clue, reminder and fact. Simultaneously, her works are an aesthetic representation of trepidation and the uncanny. Personal experiences, taboos and the invisible are transformed into fiction. In this way the artist creates dialogues that one can resonate



with. The viewer is invited to decode life traces and it is the obscured nature of the visual clues in the photographs that summon associations, recognition and recollections of the past. What is forgotten and possibly repressed returns and evokes an emotional response.

Natascha Stellmach has found a personal artistic approach of commemoration and selection, investigating identity by attempting to stand in the way of the River of Forgetting. In this way she produces questions, images and emotional spaces (of memory) that the viewer can barely drag themselves away from.

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