

“All Aboriginal art is political, because it is a statement of cultural survival” – so said Gary Foley, activist and first Aboriginal Director of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council for the Arts, in 1984. A generation and a half later, his words still ring true, despite dramatic changes in the production and consumption of Indigenous art over this period. The many and varied representations of cultural identity now spanning the entire continent that constitute the contemporary Indigenous art movement *all* defy the odds and the difficult and sometimes desperate circumstances of their creators to express the vibrancy and the power of the cultures and peoples from which they derive.

Defiance is an obvious theme of many of the twenty four works making up the Sydney Boys High School Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teaching and Learning Art Collection. *Circle, Trapezoid*: the banal formalist titles of Tony Albert's delicate acquaint etchings of ash trays with cartoon-character images of 'traditional' Aboriginal life, complete with cigarettes ready to be disrespectfully stubbed out onto them, actually focus our attention on the affront of these popular 1950s pieces of Aboriginalia. Vernon Ah Kee's ghostly death mask emerges from a network of delicately etched lines, whose very restraint belies, even as they evoke, the *Unwritten* stories of violence and brutality towards Indigenous peoples in Australia. This includes the young Palm Islander Mulrunji whose death in 2004 originally inspired this series, which uses a play on lines as elsewhere in his work Ah Kee cleverly plays on words. So too, Raymond Zada's 2015 etching *A Little Sorry* reprises his 2013 work *Sorry* in a subtle protest at the omissions of the two most celebrated moments Australian society's reconciliationist narrative: PM Paul Keating's 1992 Redfern Park speech, taking responsibility for all the harms done to Indigenous people by colonisation and PM Kevin Rudd's National Apology for the Stolen Generations. Zada's so-called 'Sorry shirt' etching takes both to task for on the one hand not apologising for this multitude of wrongs, and on the other leaving out of his apology all the other crimes against Aboriginal people. The title might also be read as an ironic commentary on the efficacy of T-shirt art as a form of political activism. Reko Rennie-Gwaybilla's *Message Stick* evokes the rebellious subculture of graffitists from which his high art practice evolved, even as his title asserts the validity of *its* traditions as an expression of urban Indigenous identity.

In a subtle twist of Tony Albert's re-readings of domestic Aboriginalia, his protégé Dale Harding draws on the non-threatening medium of embroidery in his *Untitled (I am the new Blak)* to summon the spirit of youthful defiance and innovation encoded in Destiny Deacon's coinage ("taking the 'c' out of black"). Harding's mother taught him cross-stitch, and in *Bright Eyed Little Dormitory Girls – Sack 1* 2014, he continues the maintenance of connection to culture and heritage through links to family which is another common preoccupation of contemporary Indigenous artists. There is defiance too in the artist's addition of a soft mohair collar to the abrasive sackcloth garment his grandmother was forced to wear as punishment for insubordination growing up in the dubious 'care' of the Queensland Department of Native Affairs. Laurel Nannup's seemingly idyllic etching of the Wandering Mission Western Australia where she and her sister were taken from their family as young children and trained as

domestic servants is undercut by its title *No. 28* – a reference to the numbers that the mission authorities substituted for the children's given names. Nannup has placed the Aboriginal world she was denied by the policies of child removal out of reach across a river teeming with fish and turtles. The reduction of people's humanity to impersonal numbers is also invoked in David Nolan's *Number 31*, an exquisitely fine rendering of a prison cell door (his own?) that on closer inspection proves to be unlocked – subtly referencing the liberating power of art over the all-too-common Indigenous experience of incarceration.

At first glance Robert Fielding's screenprint, in which the texts "You See Black" and "I See Red" are emblazoned over his self-portrait, appears deliberately provocative, reflecting the artist's painful experiences of racism growing up in Port Augusta. But Fielding employs the Pitjantjatjara title *Milkali Kutju* – meaning 'One Blood' – to transform the work into an appeal for the reconciliation and forgiveness that he himself has experienced. As a young man he returned to the remote community of Mimili in his father's country where for the past twenty years he has lived and raised his own family. Rhonda Dick's *Yaalytji?* (meaning simply "Where?") also uses the play of meanings across cultures, subtly suggesting an attitude of defiance in its subject's ambiguous hand gesture.

Vincent Namatjira's is also a story of return and reconciliation: with his illustrious grandfather's community of Hermannsburg (Ntaria). In *Indulkana Tigers*, he celebrates the cult of football as an integral part of remote Indigenous culture, challenging our perceptions of these communities, where the closeness of country makes maintenance of aspects of a traditional – albeit severely modified – lifestyle possible. It is tempting to look upon the other works in this collection – those of Tiwi artist Margaret Renee Kerinauia, Yirrkala bark painters Manurrapin Maymuru and Bandina Gumana, and desert painters Paddy Japaljarri Stewart, Neville Poulson, Pirmangka Reid Napanangka, Minnie Pwerle, Ginger Wikilyiri, Karen Barnes, Lorna Brown Napanangka and the unnamed women who produced *Karnta Jukurrpa*, simply as "traditional works", drawing as they do on traditional visual languages and Dreaming stories. But these works are also contemporary – and not just in the obvious sense that their production is *contemporaneous* with their non-remote peers' (including the so-called 'urban' Indigenous artists we have considered).

These men and women are *artists*, often (like Vincent Namatjira) the second or third generation of their families to embrace this vocation. Paddy Japaljarri Stewart is an obvious exception. And yet, his painting in this collection, *Jukurrpa Wangarlakurlu, Janganparurlu manu Parrakurlu*, has 'postmodern' edge. It is a re-painting, with almost identical imagery, of one of thirty works that he and other senior lawmen painted on the doors of the Yuendumu School in the early 1980s, helping to spark off the development of a painting enterprise in the community. Warlukurlangu Artists of Yuendumu was one the first to join the acrylic painting movement initiated by the founders of Papunya Tula Artists at Papunya in 1971. Both versions of this painting portray the story of the *Crow, Possum and Dawn Dreaming*. As Paddy said: "This story is about the sacred earth created from the Dreaming. The crow itself is just a useless black bird." These artists' chosen subject matter and means of depicting it represent – as for any

artist - a deliberate choice, in their case a defiant turning of their backs on the world of their colonisers in order to strengthen their connections to the land of their ancestors on which, in living remotely, they chose to remain.

Indigenous history and culture is never far from us wherever we stand on this continent. The unearthing of thousands of remnants of a Gadigal stone-toolmaking workshop in April 2016 on the corner of Alison Road and Doncaster Ave - within easy walking distance of Sydney Boys High, should serve to remind us of this. Such archaeological discoveries might be expected from Australia's millennia of occupation by the ancestors of today's Indigenous Australians. No-one expected a powerful contemporary Indigenous art movement to emerge in the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and transform not only Australian Art but mainstream Australia's understanding and appreciation of the world's oldest living culture. But that is precisely what Aboriginal art has accomplished. Hence the relevance of this collection, not only to your studies in this place - of Geography, History, Religion, Science and Literature as well as the Visual Arts, but also to your lives as residents and citizens of this country.

© Vivien Johnson June 2016