



The Haunted and the Bad

Linden – Centre for Contemporary Arts



Nici Cumpston *Nookamka II* 2008, Giclée print on canvas, 65 x 177cm

The Haunted and the Bad

Julie Gough

Carried unbidden

The serial experience of Encounter brokers Australian history. The harrowing recurrence of forced movement and rapid change marks episodes of interaction between Indigenous and non Indigenous cultures. Recorded piecemeal they render undeniable the ill-fated beginning of this unreal antipodean "European" nation. The array of causes for the recent interventionist meltdown elude agencies more equipped to recognise colonialism's effects on Aboriginal people, intensified with each generation of transmission.

"When the individual's distress is connected to the trauma of a group, pathologies of memory take on a cultural and political significance, reflecting a society's inability to integrate with the present both traumatic experience and a pre-catastrophic lost past." Kathleen Brogan¹

Shared histories are difficult to manage. Between oppressed and oppressor resides scant dialogue; brutality and

disempowerment can be speechless bedfellows. Transmitted between and beyond families, often without intention or lucidity, invasion has transformed into countless outcomes carried by descendants, unwilling hosts to its infection.

The secret to the longevity of Australia's identity crisis rests in the invention and rigid endorsement of a particular "colonial history". Here, deftly rendered distinctive zones provided for cross cultural contact that was to be brief, of minimal impact, with occasions reported and files then closed. The Colonial Office in London preferred that difference remain distinguishable, and for this to be managed Australia was fabricated into two places, the "indigenous" outback and the "settled" coastal belt, demarcated by a "frontier" zone. Two centuries of pressure to conform to this untenable spatial identity has rendered Australia socially dysfunctional.

The Haunted and the Bad enlists the work of five Aboriginal artists, Tony Albert, Joel Birnie, Nici Cumpston, Andrea Fisher, Yhonnie Scarce that reveals within the longevity of history is retained the lingering, accumulating prospect of Indigenous redress. Revoking the notion of an



Andrea Fisher *Love Hate* 2008, colour photograph, 55.5 x 76cm

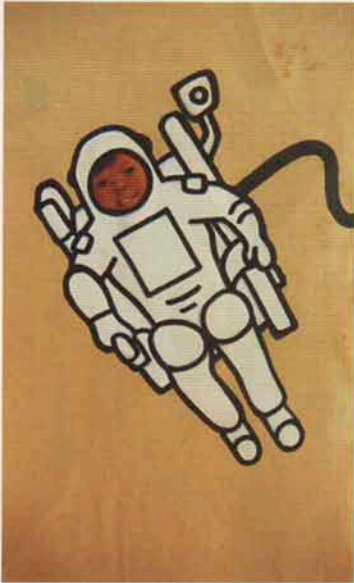


L.R. Fitzmaurice, 'Messrs Fitzmaurice and Keys dancing for their lives', London, Published by T. & W. Boone, 1846, Lort Stokes, J., 1846, *Discoveries in Australia with an account of the coasts and rivers explored and surveyed during the voyage of H.M.S. Beagle in the years: 1837-38-39-40-41-42-43 by command of the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty. Also a Narrative of Captain Owen Stanley's visits to the islands in the Aratupa Sea by J. Lort Stokes, Commander, R.N.* Vol 2, T. and W. Boone, 29, New Bond Street, London.

"aftermath" of invasion these artists situate themselves in an Australia permanently possessed by episodes of identifying, containing, representing and damaging 'difference'. By remodelling sites of encounter their works communicate the attendant, ongoing presence of confrontation between Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people. Some personal, some policy, some momentary, others ongoing – these occasions of interaction, often repudiated, continue to haunt us.

How to own our shared past

"Australia" has come to love its segregated stories: convicts, Anzacs, Aborigines, miners, explorers. Liberating then, albeit confusing, to come to this point in time where there is sufficient critical mass of people to publicly question what came before, to disclose previously illicit relationships. Art provides a different platform than text to challenge the domains we inhabit. Authorial authority isn't a rationale or ambition. Art relieves those within the structures it critiques, whether artist or viewer, from the imperative to do other than apprehend a version of something difficult and impenetrable.



Tony Albert *Launch 2008* (detail), mixed media



The experience of encountering art can facilitate change without forcing it. These works each embody something dark, from the strange to the fatal. They present enduring though extreme identities, places, behaviour.

Griselda Pollock suggests the survivor... "...of something traumatic who seems, by virtue of being still alive, to have escaped damage. Yet the survivor is precisely the site of the damage – mnemonic damage. Death hit somewhere else but it nonetheless has wounded those it just missed, leaving a world never again innocent of its reality. Death lives within the survivor as the just-missed encounter."²

Each work within this exhibition carries the mark of damage, of varied impact and dimension. However, keen questioning, rather than acceptance or resignation underpins each. The dynamic of this exhibition is to disclose the discomforting, to share-back what was borne from strangers arriving in [for them] a strange southern land. This exhibition registers the altered balance since that 'arrival' between people, place, inheritance into something alien, troubled and awry.

We are what we make

Indigenous objects have been long collected by institutions. Formerly perceived as witnesses to ceremonies no longer performed, historic and contemporary Indigenous art is still approached with reverence and expectation that "something more" will be afforded the votive viewer – the replacement for the customary familial audience. Indigenous art stands-in for many (non Aboriginal) viewers as a surrogate relationship with Indigenous people. Disallowed muteness, inevitably, Aboriginal art carries the weight of communicating for silenced prior generations.

The responsibility of being an Indigenous artist occupies Joel Birnie. In describing his work "Maleetyé: blossom" 2007/08 Birnie asks "What would I be as an Indigenous artist without Fanny Cochrane Smith?" Birnie's most publicly famous Aboriginal Ancestor is Smith who passed away in 1905 leaving a large legacy of stories, recorded music, an extended family, and her proud-standing – evident in several publicly available photographs. Birnie is haunted by the spectre of Smith, whose presence, he fears, legitimates and



Joel Birnie *Maleetyé* 2007, clay, synthetic hair, natural fibres

fixes his artistic position in relation to her memory. Birnie works across mediums to create, and recreate digitally, settings, memory scapes, in which he seeks and queries access to cultural practices. His staging of re-enactments provide a sense of séance – compelling, poignant.

Tony Albert tenderly removes kitsch renditions of Aborigines from their usual lounge room framing devices. His 'austrALIEN' series reveals the results of his own performative disturbing of expected renditions of Aboriginality. Albert gives himself and the viewer space to reconsider the representation of extreme difference that was automatically accorded 'Aborigines' until recently. Albert has deftly produced a new terrain for these figures where they interact with aliens in a wallpaper of pop culture brotherhood. Their juxtaposition provides a counterpoint that reveals the still resonant effects of the segregation and objectification of Aborigines. Albert disturbs the status quo of urban Australia. He infiltrates and liberates the most common and most insidious device that has fixed Aborigines as mute manifestations in the multi-generational psyche of 'mainstream' Australia – interior décor.



Yhonnie Scarce *Family Portrait* 2008 (detail), found bottles, paper

Owning the devices that have held ancestors' and identities captive also preoccupies Andrea Fisher. Fisher makes afresh the physical constraints that bound Aboriginal people to desperate situations. There is a sinister beauty, confronting and discomforting, in Fisher's shackles: objects of slavery, forced labour, forced movement. These objects, and their use depicted in accompanying photographs, are strangely alluring. Because their identity is uncertain, their readings are multiple and cacophonous – can they really be bracelets/jewellery? What do new versions of taboo objects 'do' in the world?

Consciously repeating aspects of the traumatic past can allow for renegotiation and removal from its hold. These works offer a redemptive space for relationships to be rearticulated between people, and between objects and people. Fisher recognizes the complexity of owning identity and trauma. Her inscriptions on these shackles provide cryptic mottos, positions for the viewer and bearer to assume when in their grasp. Fisher contends there is a need to balance wit with seriousness, the presence of these texts relieve the work from

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4 July – 10 August 2008

Tony Albert
Joel Birnie
Nici Cumpston
Andrea Fisher
Yhonnie Scarce

Curated by Julie Gough
Assistant Curator Ben McKeown

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PRINCIPAL PARTNER



cover: **Andrea Fisher** *Just is our land* & *Always plotting* (both from *shackle* series) 2007, etched brass, bullet casing, patinated

becoming objects of debilitating incomprehensible terror.

"The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape; but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us."

André Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

The concept of mobility, or lack of, that these shackles raise encourages a viewer to contemplate their own active self-determination. The power of the Indigenous-made object combined with the simulation of an object of torture against Aboriginal people results in a work laden with tension. Always present in this piece is potential for access to multigenerational and multicultural psychometric readings from these objects themselves. The maker and the wearers' thoughts seem apprehensible, even ancestors' experiences seem accessible by holding these prohibited objects. This is the tension of this work – it is not only art. These along with other works in the exhibition stand in for Aboriginal experience, and are emblematic of the majority of cross cultural interactions globally since time immemorial. In lieu of much written evidence of frontier violence these shackles are uncanny reminders of what did happen. They are memory objects, not real and not unreal, phantom evidence of an unbalanced nation.

"Ghosts are not the exclusive province of any single ethnic group; they figure prominently wherever people must reconceive a fragmented, partly obliterated history, looking to a newly imagined past to redefine themselves for the future".³

Yhonnie Scarce also remakes memory objects, in part to exorcise their control over her and her family's lives. The personal provenance of alcohol wreaked across generations is compiled by Scarce into a grievous genealogical chart. The ongoing tendency for trauma to be carried onwards in self destructive behaviour is undeniable given this brave, potent, transparent visualization of the personal. The beauty of glass as a medium is played against its deadly self administered contents. Scarce in remaking the container responsible for delivering her family's troubles could be seen as conjuring magic, willing an alternative outcome than what she is left to administer into art. Working closely with a material that connects her with generations of family members Scarce is literally left holding the bottle for those dead and absent, lost in the miasma of an recurrent affliction.

Nici Cumpston has found her place when it seems near to its end. Cumpston carefully renders Nookamka Lake, in the

Riverland district, into photographic portraits. Cumpston is drawn to the lake, her Barkindji family is connected to this region. It is apparent that what is occurring here, beyond documentation, is an ongoing relationship with a sentient place. A layering of interconnected stories are emerging from the deliberate drying of the lake, prevented from having Murray River inflow since last September. Cumpston is bearing witness to apparitions, the surfacing of artefacts and Ancestors as the waters dry. The lakeside trees, dead or dying, reveal coded messages in deliberately modified branches. Restrained generations ago by Indigenous guardians, these twisted limbs contain meanings now known to few. This drying lake seems to accord Cumpston a place to be there, to record what is happening. The subdued coloration of these works renders the scene timeless: a tributary measure. Cumpston's work communicates that Nookamka's remaining time as a lake is fleeting. Resilient, aged, scarred, yet the place in these images still promises longevity it has learnt to transform to survive.

Conjunctive across these five artists' works is their occupation of parallel worlds. Past and present overlap as do places and events. These accumulating scenarios encourage visual re-visitation and re-rendering of difficult stories. The explorative work of these artists forecasts the redemptive possibility of reconstituting inter cultural and cross cultural dialogue about the very things that obsess/haunt us. Awakening zones of disturbance, these works encourage shared interests to be expressed even further, beyond the pseudo-neutral terrain of a gallery. Given time, space and determination, our joint spectres might eventually rest.

Julie Gough is a Tasmanian Aboriginal artist living in Hobart, and a lecturer in Visual Arts at James Cook University, Townsville. Gough is currently on long term research leave thanks to the award of a Visual Arts Board Fellowship in 2006 from the Australia Council for the Arts.

1. Kathleen Brogan, 1995, 'American stories of Cultural Haunting: Tales of Heirs and Ethnographers', *College English*, Vol. 57, No. 2, Feb. 1995, p.157

2. Griselda Pollock, 2005, 'Dreaming the Face, Screening the Death: Reflections for Jean-Louis Schefer on La Jétée', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 4, 287, p.29

3. Brogan, 1995: 164

Artist Biographies

Tony Albert is a Brisbane based artist whose family comes from Cardwell in the rainforest area of Far North Queensland. Albert is a member of the proppaNOW Aboriginal artists collective, a dedicated group of individuals whose urban expression questions the position that is ascribed to Aboriginal people and culture within Australia, Albert is from the Girramay language group.

Born in the Adelaide hills in 1980, **Joel Birnie** began his artistic career as a teenager producing book covers for his mother's literary work. Birnie is of mixed heritage and belongs to the Palawa/Pinteraier groups on the North and South East of Tasmania, he is mostly known for his work relating to his Great Great Great Grandmother Fanny Cochrane Smith, a cultural icon, of whom he draws much inspiration.

Nici Cumpston is a Barkindji artist who lives in Adelaide. She is a photographic artist, teacher and curator. Her work is held in numerous public and private galleries both nationally and internationally.

Andrea Fisher was born and is based in Brisbane. Andrea is from the Birri – Gubba people of Central Queensland. Although specialising in jewellery, Andrea is primarily a visual 3D artist interested in applying a sense of Aboriginal history conceptually to the materials and aesthetic of jewellery making, object and installation. Fisher is a member of the proppaNOW Aboriginal artists collective.

Yhonnie Scarce was born at Woomera in South Australia in 1973. She belongs to the Kokatha and Nukunu peoples. At the South Australian School of Art she majored in glasswork, and graduated with a Bachelor of Visual Arts (Honours) in 2004. In 2008 she is the recipient of the QANTAS Encouragement for Contemporary Art Award.

List of Works

Tony Albert

Launch 2008

Joel Birnie

Maleetyé 2007

Nici Cumpston

Cultural Landscapes 2008

Andrea Fisher

Shackles 2008

Yhonnie Scarce

Family Portrait 2008