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Across Australia, Artists are Disrupting the Colonial Mindset

How is contemporary Aboriginal art challenging an exclusive historical canon?

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By Paola Balla



In the Australian art world, ‘decolonization’ has become a buzzword in academia, galleries and museums, yet our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists have been calling for decolonization and asserting sovereignty for decades. The process of decolonization requires ongoing work and our peoples have created generational legacies of storytelling about surviving colonization through art, theatre, literature and community activism. Sovereignty is central to the identity and well-being of Indigenous peoples in our fight for justice. The arts are an accessible and engaging way of discussing these complex issues in a country where white colonial and patriarchal narratives dominate public spaces. In recent years, a social-media revolution has been mobilized by Indigenous scholars, artists and activists who descend from a lineage of Aboriginal resistance through letter- and petition-writing. There is also an emerging Aboriginal podcast culture: *Wild Black Women*, for example – hosted by the academic Dr Chelsea Bond and the comedy writer Angelina Hurley – is a sharply funny and politically astute programme that takes racism, whiteness and the patriarchy to task.

FORT GANSEVOORT



Welcome to Country, smoking ceremony performed by Uncle Jimmy Smith, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 21st Biennale of Sydney preview, 2018.

Courtesy: Biennale of Sydney; photograph Levon Baird

A new wave of Indigenous artist and activist collectives has emerged in Melbourne, including Real Blak Tingz, This Mob and Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance (WAR). Australia Day is celebrated on 26 January, but to Indigenous Australians it's known as Invasion Day, since it commemorates the landing, in 1788, of the first fleet of British ships and the declaration of British sovereignty over Aboriginal lands. This year, WAR organized a march through Melbourne, which attracted 60,000 people, demanding that Australia Day be abolished. (Some media reports confused this with other demands that the date be changed to a more inclusive day.) The protests also marked the 80th anniversary of the meeting of Aboriginal leaders in Sydney to request a national Day of Mourning in acknowledgement of the loss of Aboriginal lives during the country's colonization and to speak out against their ongoing mistreatment. WAR have also created iconic protest banners that call for decolonization, land rights and the rights of Aboriginal children and women. (The banners were featured in 'Sovereignty', the exhibition I curated in 2016 at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne.) The

FORT GANSEVOORT

initiative of Aboriginal women is prominent in this movement; Aboriginal matriarchy is a driving cultural force.



Real Blak Tingz (Gabi Briggs and Arika Waulu), *Gwen Brooke*, 2017, giclée print, 119 x 84 cm.
Courtesy: the artists and Koorie Heritage Trust, Melbourne

Some arts organizations, art schools and independent galleries are attempting to decolonize their spaces in various ways. The first step is usually to honour the Aboriginal peoples who are the original owners of Country (land/s) either through spoken acknowledgments at exhibition openings, by installing plaques that name the traditional lands a building is constructed on, or by inviting Elders from traditional owner groups to conduct Welcome to Country ceremonies and to speak. These acknowledgments might also appear on gallery websites and in catalogues or other publications. Decolonization also calls for Aboriginal artists to remind the public that they are continuing to resist colonization and racism by speaking about trans-generational traumas, rebuking colonial narratives in public spaces and addressing institutional whiteness and privileges.

Other inclusive practices include inviting Indigenous artists, curators, writers and activists to join museum boards, speak at events and write for publications. Recently, for example, the art magazine *un Projects* published two issues edited by Indigenous writers and the not-for-profit

FORT GANSEVOORT

publishing organization The Lifted Brow launched an upcoming all-black women's edition. This work is crucial in Australia, a country whose mainstream media is still dominated by white representation. Take, for example, the immensely popular television show *Neighbours*, which has been on air since 1985 and still prevails with its vanilla version of suburbia: an area that, in reality, was founded on the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples and which is home to generations of migrants and people of colour. Non-white voices and faces are usually only seen and heard on non-profit broadcasters, such as National Indigenous Television, the Special Broadcasting Service and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

In many galleries and museums, the majority of senior curatorial roles are held by non-Indigenous people. This has led to calls for a decentring of whiteness, similar to the Decolonize This Place movement in the US. In Melbourne, where I live, many artists and collectives work independently of mainstream galleries. Organizations such as the Footscray Community Arts Centre, which was established in 1974, have now had ten years of Indigenous-led programming and projects.



Dale Harding, *Wall Composition in Bimbird and Reckitt's Blue*, 2018, installation view at Tate Liverpool, Liverpool Biennial.

Courtesy: the artist, Liverpool Biennial and Milani Gallery, Brisbane; photograph: Thierry Bal

Asserting sovereignty and self-determination can also be described as 'non-colonial', a term coined by the Indigenous Métis artist and scholar from Canada David Garneau, who speaks of creating a 'non-colonial trophy keeping place' by transforming museum collections with Indigenous communities, not on our behalf, and constructing non-colonial spaces within museums.¹ This was achieved in 2013 with the redevelopment of the Melbourne Museum's First Peoples Gallery as the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre by Indigenous curators and community members. Earlier this year, Museums Victoria, which runs the Melbourne Museum,

FORT GANSEVOORT

appointed Genevieve Grieves as the first Indigenous head of First Peoples Collections in its 164-year history.

Contemporary political Aboriginal art is prolific and draws on more than 60,000 years of life and culture. In an article published in June in Artlink, Clothilde Bullen – the Indigenous curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collections and Exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia in Sydney – described decolonization as a contemporary process by which First Nations peoples ‘reframe their own structures of thought, understand the history of their colonization and re-invigorate tradition, language and cultural values and the simultaneous consideration of a new way of walking through the world’. Some good examples of this approach include the disruptive and poetic performances *Bound and Unbound: Sovereign Acts (Act 1)* and *(Act 2)* (2015) by Unbound Collective, which took place in the colonial precinct of the state gallery, library and museum in Adelaide in South Australia. (The collective comprises four Aboriginal women: Ali Gumillya Baker, Faye Rosas Blanch, Natalie Harkin and Simone Ulalka Tur.) In Melbourne, Vicki Couzens and Maree Clarke are senior Aboriginal women revitalizing traditional cultural practices, such as remaking possum-skin cloaks and creating memorials to honour lost Aboriginal lives. Brisbane-based Archie Moore creates immersive, sensorial works that invoke childhood experiences of black life as living memorials. Also in Brisbane, Dale Harding’s work pays homage to Aboriginal women’s labour through subversive craft and installation work taught to him by family members. His installations speak of familial knowledge of place and history across his Ancestral lands. (His work was included in the Liverpool Biennial in the UK earlier this year.)

FORT GANSEVOORT



Gordon Hookey, *Day of Mourning*, 1997, mixed-media banner, 70 x 120 cm (approx.).
Courtesy: the artist, National Museum of Australia, Canberra and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

There are also practitioners from the Pacific diaspora who are contributing to the complexity of this debate, including curator Léuli Eshraghi and artist Lisa Hilli as well as several white Australian artists. Eshraghi and Hilli are critically self-aware of their viewpoints as settlers who are also Indigenous. Their work attempts to make sense of their place on unceded, stolen lands and to create spaces of contestation and resistance. Megan Evans's self-reflective work concerning her white historical privilege emerges from her collaborations with Aboriginal artists such as Peter Waples-Crowe. Their 2016 exhibition 'Squatters and Savages' used humour and subversion to reflect upon the violence of the colonial frontier.

The white feminist female collective Soda_Jerk's *Terror Nullius* (2018) is a 55-minute film that collages iconic scenes from Australian cinema into a critique of white nationalism. It created controversy for its funders, the Ian Potter Foundation, which withdrew promotional support of the film just before its release, deeming it 'un-Australian' and 'a very controversial work of art'. The artists (Sydney-based siblings Dan and Dominique Angeloro) told *The Guardian* in March

FORT GANSEVOORT

that 'if "very controversial" is another way of saying that the work is willing to start uncomfortable conversations, then we'll happily wear it.'

Aboriginal art is a force that speaks back and blak – a phrase coined in 1991 by the artist Destiny Deacon – to white Australian narratives about history and identity. It shares the lived experiences of Indigenous artists who resist the ongoing colonial project with acts of disruption to a white-dominated public discourse. As Yorta Yorta curator, Kimberley Moulton, states: 'There is strength in challenging the status quo, rejecting the pattern that our art, bodies and culture are only noticed when recognized by the white centre. We do not need this: our First Peoples' ways of being and understanding surpass this. And we do not need to be defined within this canon as we can never fit within something that is constructed from our exclusion.'²

1. David Garneau, 'From Colonial Trophy Case to Non-Colonial Keeping House', Museums Australasia Conference, 16 May 2016

2. Kimberley Moulton, 'Sovereign Art and the Colonial Canon: Are We Lost Until We Are Found?' *Sovereignty*, 1995, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, p. 31

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Main image: Soda_Jerk, Terror Nullius, 2018, film still. Courtesy: the artists and ACMI, Melbourne

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