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Artlink

Gordon Hookey : Flash Gordon's message - language is a virus

by Brenda L. Croft

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Curator, artist and South Australian School of Art lecturer Brenda L. Croft gives the lowdown on Gordon Hookey's really rude and loud art that uses language and Australian animals to put the boot into racism and lend a voice to the silenced.

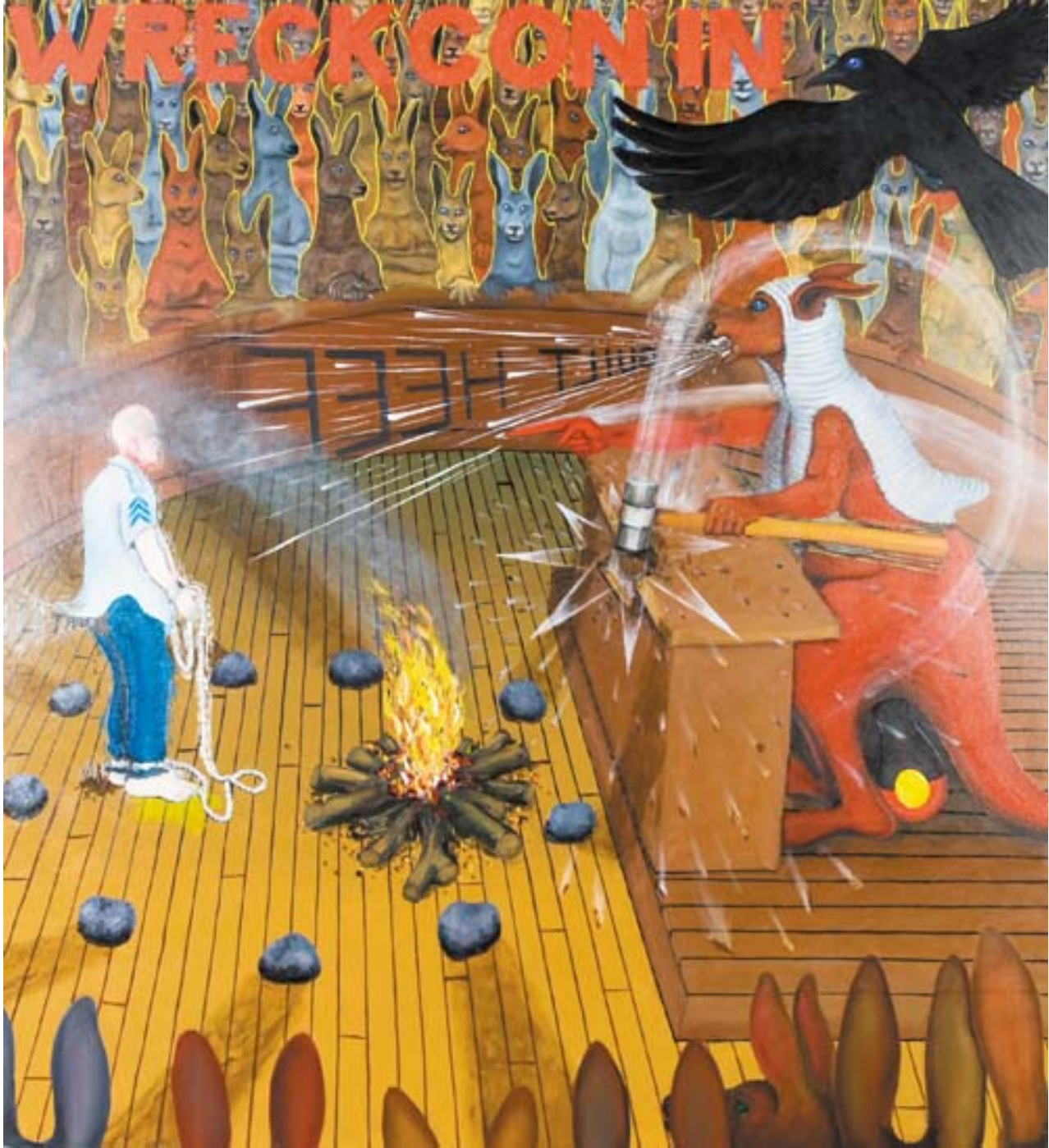


Gordon Hookey A painting for the underdawg 2005, oil on canvas, 133 x 250cm.
Courtesy the artist and National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

"It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under
Uh huh, uh huh
It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under
Uh huh, uh huh" [2]

Grandmaster 'Flash' Richie Bell may call himself the godfather gangsta rapper of contemporary Indigenous art (and with good reason) but his comrade-in-art and activism, 'FLASH' [3] Gordon Hookey, the HookStar, has rapped and rified his way through Aboriginal-Australian vernacular just as effectively, if perhaps not as ubiquitously as Bell. Along with Vernon Ah Kee, these three artists are the foundation stones, the wellspring, and the source of liberationist/activist artists' collective proppaNOW. [4]

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Gordon Hookey Wreckonin 2007, oil on canvas 168 x 152 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery.

However, reams of paper, gigabytes of hard copy, electronic and digital media and cybertext have been expended on Bell and Ah Kee in recent years, with Hookey arguably being overshadowed by his venerable bruthahs-in-arms, which is the way of the cannibalistic art world, always seeking ever-brighter supernovas.

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"A star is a massive, luminous ball of plasma that is held together by gravity. A star is a luminous cosmic body." [5]

This descriptor aptly evokes the work of all three artists and many contemporary Indigenous arts practitioners. Unfortunately, the desire to sight/site/cite shooting stars tends to miss the rest of the constellations; the galaxy that shines just as brightly and for much longer than perhaps an ephemeral soaring sphere of gas, light and solid matter, showering the skies in passing, far-distant sparks.

This essay is not intended as an academic treatise, but more as a rumination on the paradoxical work of an artist and activist, whose commitment to wordplay and wit, encapsulated in his painting, is at once provocative and conciliatory; blinding, yet illuminating; lurid but also seductive. His palette contains the full-colour spectrum and, like all clever visual satirists, his work entices, entertains, and elucidates on tough, often unpalatable themes, to disparate audiences.

Gordon Hookey, Waanyi man, originally hails from Cloncurry in northwest Queensland, Waanyi country. While his has been a peripatetic life for much of the past two decades, he has been anything but an itinerant, drifting wanderer. His journey, as an artist traveller on a lifelong quest, has been deliberate and methodical, wending his way south to Sydney in the late 1980s, like many contemporary Indigenous artists during a decade in which the foundations and lessons learnt from the radical 'Blak' 70s were built upon.

Coming of age under the restrictive, racist, corrupted and corrupting Big Brother regime of Queensland Premier Johannes Bjelke-Petersen (1968 - 1987), Hookey headed south, initially for work, and then to study visual art at the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales in the late 1980s, a time of heady cultural happenings nationally, but particularly in Sydney, the site of longest colonisation of Indigenous land, as the buy-sell-ennial ramped up for 1988. He always considered himself an artist, with his earliest positive recollection of school being access to coloured crayons, with which he became obsessed. This lifelong love of colour, and the freedom of uninhibited visual expression, is manifest in his large-scale oil canvases and installations, which are kaleidoscopic in content and composition.

Hookey uses language like a bittersweet lover, toying with its structure, punning, alliterating, pulling apart its signifying capabilities to confuse and challenge, to hit with a sucker-punch. He states firmly, plainly, loudly: "English is my second language; I just don't have access to my first". Why? Like many of his countrymen and women he was raised in a society where little if any value was placed on Indigenous culture; where Indigenous people were physically and psychologically punished for learning the ways of our ancestors. He uses the language that was not the King's English, but more that of the man/woman of the streets, the filthy alleyways, and also favoured by Shakespeare, so if it is good enough for The Bard, it is good enough for the public.

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More rough and ready in stylistic approach, Hookey's oils seem to be applied like acrylics, flatly and swiftly, possibly in disdain of the historical weight and authenticity with which such materials are imbued (unlike artists such as Daniel Boyd, Christopher Pease and Julie Dowling, whose use of the material is arguably more adept, or should I say classical?). Spelling mistakes – intentional or not – render Hookey perhaps more accessible than his collective comrades Bell and Ah Kee, as he re-employs a series of devices in his paintings, prints and installations.

Native animals and birds represent Indigenous peoples, introduced/exotic/feral species signify coloniser/settler cultures; his anti-heroes wear cheap, solarised sunglasses – the type bought at an outback truck stop – thongs, and always the Aboriginal flag, or its colours – sometimes flown upside down, as in the international signal of distress – in one case, as toilet paper, about to be employed by a former Prime Minister to wipe his bared arse in disdain of not only the flag, but all it represents.

Hookey shows neither fear nor favour – he has ridiculed and attacked politicians and their pawns of the day – with no-one untouched by his scorched earth approach: bare-arsed, rutting, postulating, posturing pollies and pigs; racist, slaving feral animals and faceless, numbered rednecks; leering bigots and busty bimbos; fundamentalist white terrorists of all creeds are confronted by 'Terra-Ists'; pink pigs in uniform are deflected, challenged or dispersed [6] by big-'cojoned', muscular dingoes, crocs and roos; only the black crow and white dove are equally venerated for their universal intent – messengers, 'Blak' and white, spirit carriers – all compete for space in Hookey's frenzied panoramas/dioramas.

Although his work has drawn the indignation of conservative critics, Hookey is one in a very long line of illustrious social commentators, dating back to ancient Roman times, from Petronius Arbiter (c. 35 CE – c. 66 CE) to contemporary Chilean-Australian artist Juan Davila, and the YBA [7] alumni Dinos and Jake Chapman in rebuking, challenging and provoking the unequal status quo, particularly in relation to the downtrodden, disenfranchised and dispossessed.

Somewhat bizarrely, members of Hookey's own family, of strongly Christian faith, were the most vocal denouncers of his work in the collection of the Art Gallery of Western Australia. 'Ten Point Scam' (1998) is an incensed and incisive response to the Federal Government's Ten Point Plan, which further disempowered the majority of Indigenous people in Australia who could not claim native title over land from which they had been forcibly removed. The mainly shocking pink canvas portrayed the-then Prime Minister John Howard being soundly and luridly 'serviced' by a sheep and uranium mining apparatus, while the USA's stars and stripes flies pompously and pointedly above the Australian flag atop Parliament House, and in the foreground, shut out from the political processes determining their futures, sits a group of native animals and a lone Aboriginal man, around a campfire, watching, waiting, resigned, biding their time.

The main complaint by the artist's family was the inclusion in 'Ten Point Scam' of explicit text referencing former US President Bill Clinton's illicit tryst with guileless White House intern

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Monica Lewinsky and the 'lack of respect shown towards the Prime Minister' through portraying him in such a manner. The artist's response: "they can't help it; they've just been well and truly colonised."

This was one painting that would never find a home in the National Portrait Gallery, but nevertheless revealed the ongoing injustices inflicted upon the First Australians by hypocritical powerbrokers and their pawns. Hookey does not reserve his blistering observations for non-Indigenous society, and turns his eye on all of us, confronting the demons within our own communities: horrific rates of youth suicide, alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence. The urgency present in his work seems to be a non-stop series of battle cries: WE ARE A PEOPLE UNDER CONSTANT SIEGE, FROM WITHOUT AND WITHIN.

Hookey's work has many admirers among those who may not often visit fine art galleries, as his paintings use the visual and verbal language of the street, or more appropriately, the dusty country towns, divided between Blak, white, and the 'mish'; and the long, empty highways connecting these little, brittle, bitter places. He gives voice and vision to those who have been silenced and blinded, ignored, derided and just plain neglected. He does so with vigour, fearlessness, ferocity, and 'FLASH'ness.

"Don't push me cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head, ah huh-huh-huh
It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under
It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under"

References-

1-With acknowledgments to British rock band Queen's lyrics Flash for the movie Flash Gordon (1980) and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's The Message released as a single in 1982 by Sugar Hill Records, USA.

2- Ibid.

3- 'Flash' is an Aboriginal colloquial term meaning 'good', 'authentic', and alludes to a love of bling, bright things, looking good, as in, 'You look flash!' It shares similar meaning to the terms 'solid' and 'deadly'.

4- Established in 2004, Brisbane-based proppaNOW Artists' Collective's current membership includes Vernon Ah Kee, Tony Albert, Bianca Beeton, Richard Bell, Andrea Fisher, Jennifer Herd and Laurie Nilsen.

5- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star>, accessed 31 December, 2009.

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6- 'Dispersed/dispersal' was used broadly throughout 19th century Australia as a euphemism for the widely accepted murder/massacre of Aboriginal people, a practice which continued into the third decade of the 20th century.

7- YBA – 'Young British Artists', a group of young mainly Anglo-British artists, who soared to prominence in the late 1980s and into the 1990s, including artists such as Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas, Sam Taylor-Wood, Gillian Wearing, Douglas Gordon and notably Black British artists, Chris Olifi and Steve McQueen.

8- Other artist-satirists include Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450 – 1516), William Hogarth (1697 – 1764), Francisco Goya (1746 – 1828), William Blake (1757 – 1827), Pablo Picasso (1881 – 1973).