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## The rowdy satire of Gordon Hookey: 'I don't take my art seriously at all'

By Steve Dow – Aug 22, 2022



'I do feel anger, but that somehow morphs into passion' ... Gordon Hookey in his Brisbane studio. Photograph: Rhett Hammerton/UNSW

In the paintings of Waanyi artist Gordon Hookey, armies of tough kangaroos and other native animals, such as possums, goannas, crocodiles and snakes, represent Australia's Indigenous peoples. Invasive species such as cane toads and camels, meanwhile, "represent the ugliness of invasive peoples to our lands, country and culture".

The 61-year-old's art is funnier than that might suggest and startling in its rowdy satire. Politicians are pigs in his paintings, which tend to be visual commentaries on land rights, deaths in custody and environmental degradation. English, to Hookey, is the colonisers' language, and he takes liberties on his canvases with playful puns and misspellings: "terrorists" become "terra-ists", invoking the colonial myth that Australia was an unspoiled *terra nullius*, or land belonging to no one.

"I don't take my art seriously at all," he says. "I have fun with it. I play. I'm silly."

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A MURRIALITY, on display in UNSW Galleries. Photograph: Jacquie Manning

Is anger ever a factor in his work? “Anger could destroy you from within,” he says. “I do feel anger, but that somehow morphs into passion. People can interpret passion and intensity of feeling as anger. But when you feel strongly about something, you’re able to articulate in a particular way.”

Genial and smiling, often bellowing with laughter, Hookey talks loudly – a legacy of apprenticing for four years as an industrial bricklayer from the age 16, cutting bricks amid the deafening concentrators and smelters of the Mount Isa mines. Much of his hearing “has been degraded over time” he says, meaning he struggles to hear higher frequencies. When his sons Josh, 11, and Leon, nine, speak to him, he often replies with “ay?”

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Hookey's Poohtin at UNSW Galleries. Photograph: Jacquie Manning

In his first career survey, *A MURRIALITY*, which is currently showing at UNSW Galleries and touring nationally in 2023, Hookey's concerns have gone global. He worries that Australia will follow the US lead and allow rightwing zealotry to flourish. The survey includes a series of new works designed to look like protest banners; on one, Fox pundit "Tukka Cullsin" and "Don the Con" share a can of Kremlin Condensed KGB Shit, which resembles Campbell's soup.

"The reason why I'm doing all these works about Trump is because it's so unjust a bullshit artist is believed by so many people," says Hookey. To him, Maga means "Most Abhorrently Gullible Americans" and the "abhorrent things" they were saying during Trump's presidency, he says, changed conservative Australian politicians' way of speaking.

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Sacred nation, scared nation, indoctrination 2003. Photograph: Jacquie Manning

“You know how Tanya Plibersek called Peter Dutton Voldemort?” he says. “The true Voldemort is Rupert Murdoch. He who cannot be named – if you can’t be named, you can’t be responsible for the genesis of the harm that you’ve done through your propaganda.”

Born in 1961 in Cloncurry to a single teenage Waanyi mother, Rose, who also had Chinese and Javanese ancestry, Hookey was raised by his aunt Flo from the age of two. Both women have since passed away. His childhood was happy, if impoverished, growing up in corrugated iron humpies and tents in a fringe camp up the hill from Coppermine Creek, in north-west Queensland.

“The bush, the creeks, the spinifex, that was my playground,” Hookey recalls, sitting in the gallery of the University of New South Wales’ School of Art and Design in Paddington, where he studied in the 1980s, and where A MURRIALITY has just opened. “We had ultimate freedom.”