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# The presence which is absence. Urban Aboriginal artists and the motive of the body

Salomé Moreau

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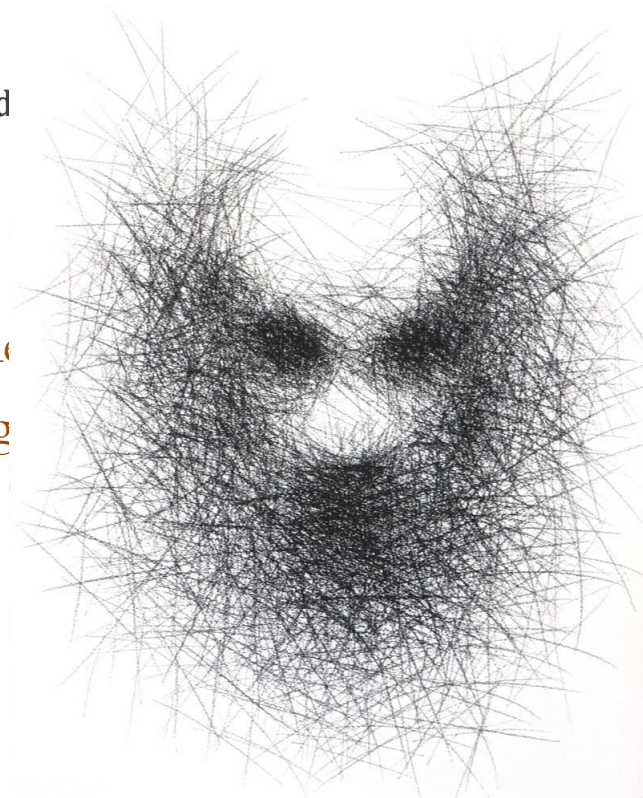
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hones

'The  
Urban Aborig

body



Salomé MOREAU

*Prepared under the direction of Mrs Sandrine  
TOLAZZI*

*~ 2012-2013 ~*





*The history of Aboriginal people in this country, Australia, has been a history of always becoming human.*

**Vernon Ah-Kee<sup>1</sup>**

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**Cover illustration:** Vernon Ah Kee, *Unwritten* (detail), 2010, charcoal on paper, 56.5 x 76.5cm, Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

**Cover quotation:** Veronica Brady, *The presence which is absence*, in Graham Duncan, *Being whitefella*.

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Mead, Interview with Vernon Ah Kee, on Mona blog, accessed 18 May 2013: <<http://monablog.net/2012/08/08/interview-with-vernon-ah-kee/>>

**Illustration:** Vernon Ah Kee, *Unwritten*, 2007, pencil on arches paper 56x76cm, Georges Petelin Gallery.

## ~ Acknowledgements ~

Writing an essay in just one year and on a subject one does not master is a strange yet fascinating project: my knowledge and my passion for the subject I have chosen have grown side by side, and I have discovered as much as I have tried to convince. Most of my time was spent in the library and at home with books or in front of my computer, and this essay is mainly the result of a solo work; but it could not have been possible without the help of a few kind people who participated – directly or indirectly – to this huge labour.

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## ~ INTRODUCTION ~

*"How is that we have managed to turn so many Aboriginal Australians into foreigners in their own country?"<sup>2</sup>*

The question raised by Fred Chaney, former Australian politician and chair of Desert Knowledge Australia and on the Boards of Directors of Reconciliation Australia, is a rough statement about his society: Australia, this symbol of multiculturalism, cultivates an incredible paradox it has imposed (consciously or not) to its first people over the two hundred years of its still young existence.

Before Captain James Cook set foot on this land first neglected by the Dutch then by the French, the Old Continent knew nothing of the people who inhabited this hypothetical 'Terra Australis'. And after that, the Indigenous populations were simply never seen as who they were<sup>3</sup> and still are today: the original inhabitants of the continent. Dispossessed of their lands, of their children, they are nowadays still outrageously denied a place as the first people of Australia: if the need arises to protect or reclaim a part of the land that used to belong to an Aboriginal group, those Aboriginal people have to prove the existence of a continuous link between themselves and the land, when non-Aboriginal enterprises or individuals just need to pay for it.<sup>4</sup> However, those people offer a fantastic and colourful selling point when it comes to praise the incredible cultural and natural background of the country... And the situation really boils down to this: putting Aborigines up on a pedestal on the one hand, and "kicking them in the guts on the other."<sup>5</sup> As journalist Graham Duncan puts it:

The internal symbols of our culture have ranged from broad-rimmed hats to Vietnamese cuisine, our icons from Ned Kelly to Manning Clark. From all

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<sup>2</sup> Fred Chaney, "Too many mingy buggers," Being Whitefella, Ed. Duncan Graham (Fremantle arts centre press: 1994) 51.

<sup>3</sup> Wendy Brady, and Michelle Carey, "'Talkin' up Whiteness': a Black and White Dialogue," Race, Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand, Ed. John Docker and Gerhard Fisher (Sydney N.S.W.: University of New South Wales Press, 2000) 271.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Markus, Race: John Howard and the remaking of Australia (Allen & Unwin: 2001) 38.

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Gilbert, Because a White Man'll never do it (1973; Fremantle arts centre press: 1994) 152.

these, Aboriginal people are either excluded or appear as fringe figures, exotic, dangerous, and most certainly impossible to comprehend. Meanwhile Australia is promoted overseas through celebratory television commercials applauding dot paintings and corroborees!<sup>6</sup>

The case of land rights is just a minor example of the ambivalent treatment of Aborigines in Australia, but still a very explicit one, which reveals the deepest and most hidden racial and paternalistic feelings of this society. Australia has agreed on a Native Title Act, but imposes conditions that are very difficult to fulfil and take no account of the colonising process, which, most of the time, has broken the continuity of occupation<sup>7</sup> by dividing the tribes “from each other as individuals were forcibly transported to strange areas where they had no tribal affiliations or spiritual landmarks.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, it means that an Aborigine displaying body paintings, playing didgeridoo or carving boomerangs deep in the outback is fine. But an Aborigine fighting for his rights with the weapons of the white society is troubling and unexpected, although assimilating to the Western society is what Aborigines have been urged to do for the last decades.<sup>9</sup> This 1993 piece of legislation thus highlights the fact that what Australia wants to protect is something that does not exist anymore, or very scarcely: an image, a pure creation of our modern minds seeking for the reassuring face of people who are ‘not like us’ and represent an ideal we think we have lost, if it has ever existed.

For the whole story of the ones we call Aborigines is that of imposed identities shaped by fantasy, ideology, or even fear, and these identities constantly move along a continuum ranging from visibility to invisibility. The concept of Terra Nullius, which contrary to what people generally think does not mean ‘empty land’ but ‘land belonging to no one’ (the difference is subtle but no less important), symbolizes best the ambiguous and already false relation between the first European settlers and the Indigenous populations of Australia: the British did acknowledge the mere *presence* of populations on the land, but since the Aborigines’ conceptions of land ownership did not match theirs, they simply considered them as primitive savages, almost animals, barely

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<sup>6</sup> Graham 19-20.

<sup>7</sup> In the movie *Exile and the Kingdom*, by Frank Rivajec, Aboriginal people tell how they have been moved to other territories which they had no link with, which disrupted their very strict rules of relationships, land occupation and marriages.

<sup>8</sup> Gilbert 5.

<sup>9</sup> Diana Simmonds, “Finding the heart’s home,” Graham 79.

worthy of any attention beyond curiosity (even if those ‘savages’ were at first their only hope to survive as the first Europeans had absolutely no idea of what to eat or how to get it<sup>10</sup>). The first explorers soon realised the Aborigines were not aggressive people,<sup>11</sup> on the contrary, and the prospect of a difficult seizing of the land (as was the case in New-Zealand, where the Maoris proved to be a very skilful people when it came to war matters) was quickly rejected.

Later on, as more settlers arrived and their activities demanded more workforce than was available among the European population, Aborigines were seen as valuable workers (used for example as slaves for the pearl trade<sup>12</sup>) and were actually an integral part of the land: when parcels were sold, the number of ‘blacks’ was the most important factor in settling its value, before the numbers of acres and fences.<sup>13</sup> Men and women existed only through their bodies, because of their physical aptitudes<sup>14</sup> or for sexual intercourses.<sup>15</sup> Such bodies were sold, used, abused, and always seen from a white point of view. What is more, they were even *transformed* according to white values: missionaries soon took up the task to convert the ‘heathen’<sup>16</sup> locals in order to make them “in their own image”:<sup>17</sup> if the first arrivals of Europeans had terrible consequences because of the diseases and violence they brought,<sup>18</sup> this “second onslaught” was as destructive as the first,<sup>19</sup> even if it was far more subtle and perverse, because the social, economic and cultural context of the time made the Aborigines accept more and more changes in their lives in order to simply survive.<sup>20</sup>

Aborigines experienced a completely different situation from that in New-Zealand for example, where the Maoris have been held in high esteem since the colonisation of the land: attending a conference in Rotorua, an important centre of Maori

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Hughes, The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia, 1787-1868, (Vintage Books: 1987) n. pag.

<sup>11</sup> J.C. Beaglehole, ed., The Journals of Captain Cook on his Voyages of Discovery: Part 1: The Voyage of the Endeavour 1768-1771 (Sydney: 1962) n. pag.

<sup>12</sup> Exile and The Kingdom, dir. Franck Rivajec, 1993.

<sup>13</sup> Rivajec.

<sup>14</sup> Xavier Pons, L’Australie et ses Populations (Editions Complexe : 1983) 34.

<sup>15</sup> Gilbert 6.

<sup>16</sup> Gilbert 5.

<sup>17</sup> Bain Attwood, The Making of the Aborigines (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989) 1.

<sup>18</sup> Attwood 2.

<sup>19</sup> Attwood 1.

<sup>20</sup> Attwood X.

culture, Australian journalist and art critic Diana Simmonds was amazed at seeing the Governor-General asking the group of elders present at the meeting permission, in “what seemed fluent Maori,” to hold the conference in this place, which was theirs.<sup>21</sup>

Suddenly I was face to face with a gulf of behavioural expectations between that reality and the Australian experience. How could one imagine any eminent Australian speaking an Aboriginal language? Who could ask Aboriginal elders’ permission to hold a function?<sup>22</sup>

Diana Simmonds was not the only one to experience in such a direct and unexpected way the Australian paradox. Ted Egan, an Australian folk musician who also worked in the Northern Territory as teacher, hunter and was part of the first National Reconciliation Council, also realised (after seeing two soldiers from New-Zealand – one Maori, the other Pakeha<sup>23</sup> – singing a maori song in a tram) that his country had for now missed the chance to have a dual heritage, and wished for a country where the ‘whitefella’ “could be proud of the fact that there was a prior and ongoing Australian heritage to this land (...).”<sup>24</sup>

But Aborigines never really had the opportunity to suggest identities *they* would have created and shared with the ‘white’ Australians. Their image was for the most part created by Europeans. In the worst of times, they have appeared as savages and animals, being seen as “part of the peril of the bush, like snakes, bushfire and flood” and their weapons hung on the walls reminded the children of their dangerous nature, all the more treacherous as they were “an invisible threat, part of the wilderness (...).”<sup>25</sup> This invisibility of Aborigines, but also their appearance as people from a different world, is a recurrent motive in non-Aborigines’ testimonies: some admit that until very late in their lives they knew about Aborigines only through books,<sup>26</sup> and others, witnessing a church service and “watching neatly dressed Aboriginal worshippers,” suddenly felt “as if (they had) come to another country, (...), as if (they) were sitting in a prayer meeting in

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<sup>21</sup> Simmonds, Graham 87.

<sup>22</sup> Simmonds, Graham 87.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Pakeha’ is a Maori term used in New Zealand to refer to any New Zealander either from Anglo-Saxon or European descent, or more generally to any non-Maori person.

<sup>24</sup> Ted Egan, “Thinking in Australian,” Graham 70.

<sup>25</sup> Bill Bunburry, “A long, long Wait Time,” Graham 145.

<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey Bolton, “Portrait of the Historian as a Young Learner,” Graham 119.

America's deep south,"<sup>27</sup> a strange experience that is perfectly summed up by Bruce Petty when he states that " the most puzzling part for [him] is the response to Aboriginal Australia and the way [we] have so often treated Aborigines as foreigners."<sup>28</sup>

However, this perception of Aborigines is deeply contrasted by the relations that were established between them and the European scientists of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. They became specimens of scientific interest, bodies to study in order to place them in the pyramid of 'races', dominated by the white Caucasian one. The measuring, testing and describing that followed created the closest relationship the two people could have imagined, but it was certainly not motivated by respect: bones were shattered, bodies stolen from their graves, skulls displayed in front of amazed pseudo-scientists and visitors. Another form of curiosity was born, following the path of the freak-shows that were very much in vogue at that time in Europe:<sup>29</sup> science allowed its worshippers to violate further more the image and bodies of Aborigines as anthropology mixed up with entertainment.<sup>30</sup> Everybody now knew about Aborigines, either through skeletal remains or families displayed in human zoos,<sup>31</sup> but their identities still remained invisible, crushed by the terrible power of the colonisers who created what they thought was reality. Going always deeper in their paradox, while they studied, displayed and maintained physical evidence of their classification of races in Europe, in Australia they were trying to transform Aborigines with the help of missionaries, as stated earlier in this introduction. Once again, bodies became materials to shape according to white desires: not only were the Aborigines more and more confined in the missions, but their intimacy was also more and more reduced as the missionaries decided to control every single aspect of their bodily lives:<sup>32</sup> spitting, urination, defecation, bathing, everything was controlled by them. Sexual intercourse was of course one of their first concerns: they locked it in the bedroom, and took advantage of this transformation to impose a contradictory and unstable construction on Aboriginal women, who were taught the

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<sup>27</sup> Victoria Laurie, "Cry for the lost Chances," Graham 62.

<sup>28</sup> Bruce Petty, "Try Listening to Softer Voices," Graham 51.

<sup>29</sup> Sheila Collingwood-Whittick, "Indigenous Peoples and Western Sciences," ed. Susanne Berthier-Foglar, et al., Biomapping Indigenous Peoples: Towards an Understanding of the Issues (New York: Rodopi B.V, 2012) 33.

<sup>30</sup> Collingwood – Whittick 33.

<sup>31</sup> Nadège Piton, « Des Aborigènes aux Folies-Bergère », ed. Pascal Blanchard, et al., Exhibitions: L'invention du sauvage (Arles: Actes Sud; Paris: Musée du Quai Branly, 2011) 244.

<sup>32</sup> Attwood 16.

feeling of guilt and asked to be at the same time sexual and sexless, to “play the role of reproducers” and “maintain the moral order.”<sup>33</sup>

Those reminiscences of past treatments should not suggest that the Australian paradox has come to an end. It still lives on today, albeit under other forms. Nowadays Aborigines have become a colourful symbol for TV commercials, represented as “innocent paragons, in harmony with nature, free of materialistic values or aspirations”<sup>34</sup> but many live in awful conditions and would, as the London BBC television producer Bob Saunders stated, deserve the help of the Red Cross.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the vast majority of the Australian population have never had any contact with them,<sup>36</sup> and when, in schools, children are asked to depict Aboriginal culture, it appears “more foreign than the Italian or Greek heritage of several classmates,” thus emphasizing the underlying thought that, even if Aboriginal people are not strangers and belong to the same country, there is no blending of the two populations.<sup>37</sup>

Aborigines have always been seen through an ambiguous and antinomic prism, shifting from the noble savage to the worst of demons, and conveying feelings of awe as well as fear. For a long time, Aborigines were unable to control their own image. But that situation started to change in the 1960s-70s: the general mentality didn't improve radically, but a lot of events gathered to create a social and political flow all over the world in very different domains (anti-nuclear demonstrations, students' movements, and struggles for the recognition of Indigenous people<sup>38</sup>). This coincided with the official end of the Assimilation Policy in Australia, which had been motivated by the ideal of a uniformly 'white' population, in skin as well as in manners: Aborigines of mixed descent (reputed more intelligent and closer to the 'white race'<sup>39</sup>) had been encouraged or forced to assimilate in and blend into the European society that had colonised the

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<sup>33</sup> Attwood 39.

<sup>34</sup> Myrna Tonkinson, “Thinking in Colour,” Duncan 171.

<sup>35</sup> Gilbert 151-152.

<sup>36</sup> Fanny Duthil, *Histoire de Femmes Aborigènes* (Paris : PUF, 2006) 91.

<sup>37</sup> Laurie, Graham 67

<sup>38</sup> Asebe Regassa Debelo, “Contrast in the Politics of Recognition and Indigenous People's Rights,” abstract, available on the Nga Pae O Te Maramatanga, 2001, March 2013 <<http://maramatanga.co.nz/journal/volume7-issue3/article/contrast-politics-recognition-and-indigenous-people%E2%80%99s-rights>>

<sup>39</sup> Attwood 91.

country so that all remaining 'Aboriginal' characteristics would disappear within a few generations. With the end of this policy, Aborigines from the urban areas started to emerge as artists, claiming their independence from both the 'traditional' areas artists and Western culture, but using both to create very unique and powerful styles. Suddenly a chance was offered to those who had been voiceless and invisible: if Aboriginal artists from remote areas (such as the Papunya or Ernabella communities) had been brought to the forefront because of the traditional aspect of their works, very much in vogue among westerners, it was not the case for those living in the cities. The 'half-castes', as they were called, suffered even more from the paradox I have mentioned: visible because of their skin colour or way of living, they were nonetheless ignored<sup>40</sup> because not fitting the traditional image of the Aborigine or of the 'white' Australian. They were not 'authentic' and not 'true' Aborigines, only troublemakers stuck between two worlds they didn't belong to.<sup>41</sup>

These urban artists instantly grasped the political potential of their visual medium: they soon became the spokesmen and women of a community confronted with injustice, racism, and violence but determined to fight for its rights. The first generation of urban artists had experienced the removal of children, the fear of being taken away from their families, or had witnessed it. The second generation more or less inherited this turbulent past, but interestingly enough, there is an undeniable continuity between them all, a red thread running in almost all their works: the palpable impression that something terrible happened once, that something terrible is still happening. You don't often see such evidence of a strong background in contemporary works anywhere in the world today. All the works presented here have struck me in a way or another, because there is something behind it, under the layers of materials, that powerfully echoed in me, for a reason I didn't know at first because I knew very little about Australia's history. This does not mean that art needs tragedies to be interesting, but the suffering underlying these works has found a visibility that cannot possibly be ignored.

Looking at more and more artworks from urban Aboriginal artists, I soon realised that the body appeared as a recurrent motive. Tormented or peaceful, whole or fragmented, it appears too often not to mean something very strong and deeply

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<sup>40</sup> Veronica Brady, "The Presence which is Absence," Graham 133.

<sup>41</sup> Pons 35.



anchored in those artists' minds and personal experiences. Its complexity seems to have provided them with a tool to try and recreate an image that had not been theirs to develop since the early days of colonisation in Australia, an image of themselves and of other Aboriginal people, but maybe also an image of 'white' Australia, thus reversing the process of creation initiated by the colonisers.<sup>42</sup>

Immediately perceivable because extremely visual and often made obvious, violence is an important element in urban artworks. Associated to bodies, it is translated into mutilations, such as scars and wounds, and blood. They symbolise a great trauma, individual as well as collective, but also the need to express it: art becomes a hybrid form of testimony for past sufferings and present humiliation, a way of making visible – at last – those who have been neglected and the consequences of this neglect. Transformations and metamorphosis are also often depicted: the Aboriginal body is compared to that of an animal, or takes different forms that are not those of a 'healthy' person, expressing the difficulty of seeing and describing oneself after decades of colonisation.

But these depictions of bodies are also meant to assert the strong presence of Aboriginal people on the Australian soil and in the Australian society: as incredible as it may seem, they still have to prove they exist and share a vast cultural heritage, built throughout the centuries. What is interesting is the fact that when bodies are recognizable, they appear as quite 'traditional' Aboriginal figures: dark-skinned and wearing traditional clothes or body paintings. Urban artists are very diverse in styles, personalities and of course physical appearances, but there seems to be a gathering behind a symbolical black body: this concept, analyzed through the prism of struggle against stereotypes, may appear as double-edged, as we will see later on. Nonetheless, there is also a strong claim for self-determination in those artworks: the process of identity (re)construction takes place with the artist as creator, active and even main protagonist. For them this is the time to show that their bodies belong to no one but themselves, and all those years of forced obedience to white people, of dependence towards them, are now gone: mastering one's body in an artistic work symbolises a further step taken in the mastering of one's own life, and these urban artists not only

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<sup>42</sup> Duthil 91.

speak for themselves, but also and foremost for the entire Aboriginal community, who wants nothing more than act for the improvement of their lives.<sup>43</sup>

But this claim for power doesn't mean that they refuse any compromise or dialogue with the non-Aboriginal Australians, on the contrary. Simply, the way to mutual understanding implies that the 'white' population should accept to face Australia's history in its entirety. This is made possible by the use of bodies: depicted as main subjects of the works, they draw attention to a story Australians rarely want to be bothered about but which now appears closer to them. This coming closer between Aborigines and non-Aborigines through an acknowledgement of a common history now made entirely visible is then sometimes counterbalanced by an undisguised confrontation, not necessarily violent, but where the viewer's beliefs are challenged by the realization that Aborigines and non-Aborigines are not so different from each other, and that they are on the contrary two sides of the same coin.

There is no pretence in this essay to display an exhaustive list of contemporary works, or to find a strict explanation set in stone to those I have chosen to put together. Rather, it has been written in response to curiosity, interest and genuine questioning on my part. The study of the artists' works that appear in this essay has shown a pattern that was interesting enough for me to share and submit to the judgement of future readers. I have tried to highlight the very complex intertwining of history, art and social context in works of art created in a country struggling with racial issues<sup>44</sup> and its colonial past.

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<sup>43</sup> In the movie Nepabunna ou renouer le Fil, by Claude-Pierre Chavanon, the inhabitants of Nepabunna fight against the stereotypes of 'assisted' Aborigines by putting projects together in order to modernize the community and improve their quality of life as well as their autonomy.

<sup>44</sup> Markus 2001.



~ Remembering and unveiling the pain ~

(...)  
A REAL man stops children from dying  
A REAL man don't grog away money  
To let wolves of hunger come in  
A REAL man in old tribal custom  
Held to the law and its way  
He didn't starve kids – or his missus  
Not like the weak blacks of today!  
(...)

Kevin Gilbert, *Granny Koori*<sup>45</sup>

(...)  
*But they're NOT the free no longer, they're the chained and crippled now*  
(...)

Kevin Gilbert, *Grandfather Koori*<sup>46</sup>

*Looking at the treatment of bodies in urban artworks, it seems they reveal and echo the treatments Aborigines have experienced, either in the past or in the present time. With this first part I will try to show how deep runs the trauma of violence, may it be physical or psychological. Mutilations and transformations are means to depict a literally “broken race” which seems to struggle with its self-representation and, therefore, its identity.*

~ **The mutilated body** ~

The very recent history of Australia has left numerous scars and wounds in the minds of Aboriginal people, and their lives, as well as the lives of their children, will bear the marks of this trauma for a very long time. For even if the Australian government has put an end to some policies and injustices, the situation has not necessarily improved and the weight of the past is a terrible burden for Aborigines, who sometimes live in

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<sup>45</sup> Gilbert 183.

<sup>46</sup> Gilbert 183-184.

very harsh conditions despite the promises made by politicians. Anger often mingles with confusion, especially among the young generation,<sup>47</sup> and the various memories of past mistreatments blend into the sufferings of today. Colonisation had a terrible impact on Aboriginal people, and in his book Because a White Man'll never do it, poet Kevin Gilbert sums up the situation in terribly simple words:

(...) we suffered the destruction of our entire way of life – spiritual, emotional, social and economic. The result is the Aboriginal of twentieth century Australia – a man without hope or happiness, without a land, without an identity, a culture or a future.<sup>48</sup>

It is no wonder then that the image of Aboriginal bodies reflected by 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century artists is marked by pain, suffering and self-depreciation. From the very beginning, Aborigines were said to be “ignorant, heathen, savages without a technology, a government or an organization,”<sup>49</sup> their culture was depreciated at school and, slowly but surely, a deep feeling of “shame”<sup>50</sup> became part of their very identity, a shame that kept Aboriginal children away from a background that was put into pieces at school and that they didn’t want to be associated with, a shame that took hold of Aboriginal women who were employed by whites and were constantly repeated how stupid and clumsy they were until they believed it themselves,<sup>51</sup> a shame that pushed Aboriginal men into alcoholism because they found themselves powerless.

In this context, *Camouflage #4* (**Figure.1**) by Gordon Bennett appears as a perfect reflection of today’s Aborigines. The painting is obviously a portrait, but the character (as well as the title itself) is ‘camouflaged’ and, although it occupies more than half of the canvas, remains invisible. But we may wonder ‘who?’ confused this image: an obvious and simplistic answer would be that it was the painter. And it would be right: Gordon Bennett was born from an Aboriginal mother and a white father, and Aboriginality was never spoken about at home. Bennett learnt about his background and his culture at school, where it was considered barbaric, and spent years struggling with it, refusing to accept this heritage he had been taught to dismiss. This painting may appear as a symbol

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<sup>47</sup> Rivajec.

<sup>48</sup> Gilbert 2.

<sup>49</sup> Gilbert 5.

<sup>50</sup> Gilbert 5.

<sup>51</sup> Duthil 87.

of this terrible power white Australia had over its black population: the artist *himself* camouflaged his portrait, which stands before a background of regular motives reminding of Aboriginal shields and weapons – his own background, now only a tapestry on a wall –, by using a white and warlike technique, the military camouflage (and here its motives are clearly those of the Australian army)<sup>52</sup>. The dismissal of one's own identity that is at work here is quite violent and immensely perverse: the colonisers managed to lock up Aborigines in a circle of self-depreciation where individuals themselves end up rejecting Aboriginal culture, without white people needing to do much to achieve this result. Aborigines have



**Fig.1:** Gordon Bennett, *Camouflage #4*  
Acrylic on canvas  
182.5 x 152 cm  
Art Galleries Schubert, Main Beach, Australia

been taught to hate themselves, and this feeling is so strong that it is passed from one generation to the next: as Kevin Gilbert noted, “many are born, almost, with an inferiority complex.”<sup>53</sup> Gordon Bennett painted here the negation of one's own identity but also the colonial process of ‘simplification’ of any despised culture: with this Western camouflage, the Aboriginal figure in the painting appears only as a warrior, without any nuance brought into his identity. Moreover, this ‘camouflage’ may also symbolise the ‘Australian silence’ about Aboriginal history and the invisibility of Aborigines in their own country.

<sup>52</sup> Brad Turner, “Australian Disruptive Pattern Camouflage,” [Kamouflage.Net](http://www.kamouflage.net), 2004-2010, 5 March 2013 <<http://www.kamouflage.net/camouflage/00001.php>>

<sup>53</sup> Gilbert 129.

Painting is a way to depict those sufferings, this alienation from one's own body and identity, and some artworks go even deeper into this mutilating process. An early work by Gordon Bennett (**Fig.2**) shows a headless Aborigine inside a room that is clearly that of Van Gogh in his *Bedroom in Arles* (**Appendix 1**). While blood is spurting out of his neck and blends into a night sky that resembles Van Gogh's *Starry Night* (**App. 2**), the headless body seems to move his arms towards two sculpted heads lying on the bed.



**Fig.2:** Gordon Bennett, *Outsider*, 1988  
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
290.5 x 179.5 cm  
The University of Queensland, Brisbane

Bloody handprints cover the walls, as if the Aborigine had been trying to find its way to the bed, but now that he faces it, what can he do?

The title of this painting, *Outsider*, sets the tone of the work: the Aboriginal figure is clearly the alien in this place, where everything is built up from European symbols of art (Van Gogh, the two heads possibly from Greek or Roman statues). By desperately trying to 'fit in', or by being forced to do so, Aborigines suffer terribly. This man in the painting may be trying to find another head to replace the one that has been cut, but he can only choose between the two classic symbols

of white perfection, lying on the bed like simple clothes one can't choose from. Symbolically, Bennett depicts the assimilation to white society

imposed on Aboriginal people: violently introduced (as testified by the lying chair under the window) into a world they knew nothing about, cut off from their culture, psychologically mutilated by the white domination, they had to find a way into white Australia, not knowing where to go, blind, hoping to become whole again – but the only solution is to pick up white pieces to fill the gaps. And if Bennett only painted the

process, we can too well imagine the grotesque outcome of such a policy: a very 'traditional' Aboriginal body, decorated with body paintings, with a head from Antiquity on top of it. But did and do Aborigines have the choice? Can they stay 'outside' this white European room and still exist?

The answer to this question can be found in the works of other artists, such as Lin Onus. His *Girl Shattered* (Fig.3) violently reminds us of the destructive power of hatred.

A stone is being thrown at an Aboriginal girl holding yellow flowers and peacefully walking through the bush. The stone breaks her image into sharp pieces of glass, all pointing towards her



heart, where she was hit. This painting is the artistic depiction

**Fig.3:** Lin Onus, *Girl Shattered*, 1989  
Oil on canvas  
106 x 126,3 cm  
National Museum of Australia, Canberra

of the "broken race"<sup>54</sup> described by Kevin Gilbert. 'Broken' as a psychological result of colonisation, but also 'broken' because violence is still too real for them. Again, Kevin Gilbert noted this "Aboriginal's continuing fear of white violence,"<sup>55</sup> and the fact that he wrote this sentence in the 1970s doesn't change anything: as recently as January 2012, a

<sup>54</sup> Gilbert 94.

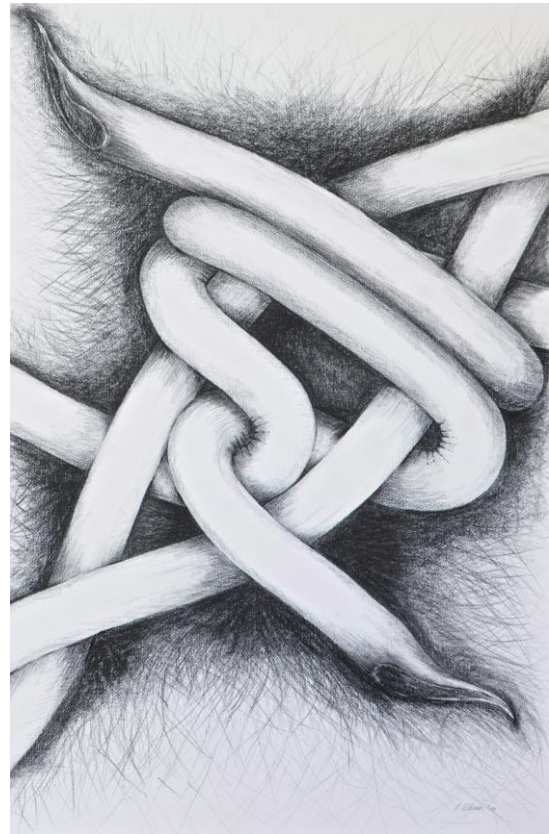
<sup>55</sup> Gilbert 36.

28-year old young man was killed by police officers after being taken into protective custody.<sup>56</sup>

The ghost of the 1980s deaths in custody<sup>57</sup> looms again, and the treatments faced by Aborigines are not just exaggerated by some activists trying to get some attention, for

Australia has been repeatedly condemned as racist in its treatment of its Indigenous population by the UN, whose human rights commissioner as recently as March 2011 compared its discriminatory policies to apartheid South Africa.<sup>58</sup>

But urban artists do not paint simply to illustrate a violent or racist daily life. Their works sometimes take the appearance of testimonies, created to exorcise a past that is still not completely acknowledged in Australia. Laurie Nilsen is an artist who has made barbed wires his distinctive signature: several of his works (like *Scar*, see **Fig.4**) depict pieces of this highly symbolical material. Not only does barbed wire reminds everyone of imprisonment and fencing, but it is also deeply rooted in Nilsen's personal



**Fig.4:** Laurie Nilsen, *Scar* (detail), 2010  
Mixed media on paper (3 drawings)  
Fireworks Gallery, Brisbane

experience: as a young boy, he had to run several times through barbed wire fences in order to escape armed farmers who did not want to see Aborigines fishing and hunting

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<sup>56</sup> Allyson Horn, "Coronial inquest: The death of Kwementyaye Briscoe," *Treaty Republic*, 4 January 2012, 29 March 2013 <<http://treatypublic.net/content/coronial-inquest-death-kwementyaye-briscoe>>

<sup>57</sup> In the 1980s, the rate of Aborigines dying in custody was so disproportionate that the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was established to investigate the issue. Although the Commission finally stated that these deaths were not the results of unlawful and deliberate killings (it nonetheless acknowledged that sometimes cultural differences were not taken into account by officers, who didn't realize that being held in custody could be much harder for Aborigines than for white people), it is still a very sensitive subject among the Aboriginal population.

<sup>58</sup> Emma Purdy, "Is there more behind 21 years of spiralling Indigenous incarceration rates?" *Treaty Republic*, 29 March 2013 <<http://treatypublic.net/content/coronial-inquest-death-kwementyaye-briscoe>>



on 'their' land.<sup>59</sup> The wire thus takes a double dimension: universal because it has become a symbol of oppression, but also very personal. What is interesting is that the title of *Scar* doesn't refer to the object itself, but to the consequence of that object on the body and the flesh. The 'scar' is also the trauma left by this object on the mind of Aborigines who, seeing it, will remember the wounds it has made and the geographical delimitations created by the colonisers – and as land was almost considered by Aborigines as an extension of their own bodies, seeing their very home being fenced might have been as painful as a physical aggression.

What is more, Nilsen doesn't only draw barbed wire, he also uses it in his sculptures (such as *Emu*, see **App.3**): working with this sharp material often results in cuts on his hands and body,<sup>60</sup> and what may appear as an artist's weird fancy is in reality another form of testimony, taken to another level. Indeed, by using this barbed wire (or rather *wires*, for he uses several of them and knows every variation of this object) and cutting himself, Nilsen reproduces the wounds he experienced as a young boy: past and present bodies blend into a timeless one. In a way, such a process is a means to dominate this past, because the cuts are now part of a process of creation, not of destruction or separation, and are more or less chosen by the artist. It is also a proof, if one was needed, that Aboriginal artists do not live in the past or think about creation as always referring to it. There is of course a huge amount of references to the period of colonisation, but it represents such a trauma among the Indigenous population of Australia that there isn't "any part-Aboriginal who is not in some way, however assimilated he may be, affected by what is behind him."<sup>61</sup> In these works, bodies appear mutilated, wounded, because Aborigines have been or still are mutilated and wounded, at least on the psychological level (discrimination has become a daily experience for them, and a part of their psyche<sup>62</sup>). Kevin Gilbert observed that "the punitive raids, massacres and mass poisoning (...) remain branded in the race memory of every Aboriginal today,"<sup>63</sup> and it is thus no wonder that, in a country where Reconciliation is still being discussed, such a trauma finds a way into works of art.

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<sup>59</sup> Hari Ho, "Laurie Nilsen: Birds on a wire," first published in *Australian Art Collector*, issue 42 October-December 2009: 149-154, *Art Collector*, 8 March 2013: 150 <[http://www.artcollector.net.au/Assets/395/1/42\\_nilsen.pdf](http://www.artcollector.net.au/Assets/395/1/42_nilsen.pdf)>

<sup>60</sup> Ho 150.

<sup>61</sup> Gilbert 161.

<sup>62</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, Docker and Fisher 96.

<sup>63</sup> Gilbert 2.

What is more interesting is to notice that this violence found in artworks such as the ones we just saw is almost always self-directed. Not a single painting actually shows animosity, in the form of physical violence, towards white Australia. Even *Blood on the wattle, blood on the palm* (see **App.4**) by Gordon Hookey still pictures Aborigines (symbolized, like in other works, by kangaroos<sup>64</sup>) in a defensive position, carrying their rifles up, surrounded by aggressive policemen armed with some kind of taser guns aimed at them. Yet there could have been more than one occasion or motive for the Indigenous people of Australia to act violently: colonisation in itself was sufficient to fill entire generations of Aborigines with anger and resentment, yet most of the time they prefer to shun those feelings. Australian folk musician Ted Egan tells in *Being Whitefella* his encounter with an old Aborigine who had seen his relatives massacred in 1923 in Conniston and who never got a pension after having participated to the war:

Why was he behaving in so friendly a manner to me, freely sharing of his knowledge and history when my culture had treated him so shamefully? Why wasn't he outraged, demanding justice, cursing all? His answer was mild, forgiving: "All right young fella. Some people make mistakes."<sup>65</sup>

The American movement of the Black Panthers even found its way to Australia, where "younger, more literate blacks began to search for their values in (their) literature,"<sup>66</sup> but it never had the same influence or power as in the United States. It has been said numerous times that "blacks in this country are historically a non-violent, peaceable people,"<sup>67</sup> and this may well be more than just a romanticized vision of Aborigines, but we also have to consider the percentage of population they represent: even if they had wanted to, they have never been numerous enough to rise against the European colonisers first and non-Aboriginal Australia afterwards. Many Aborigines admit the uselessness of violent actions against the 'white' Australians of today, since there would be "no sense in having blindrage reprisals against white people whose only crime is that

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<sup>64</sup> Gordon Hookey, interview, Carbon Media, 1 November 2012, 23 April 2013 <<http://vimeo.com/52658918>>

<sup>65</sup> Egan, Graham 107.

<sup>66</sup> Gilbert 102.

<sup>67</sup> Gilbert 106.

they happened to have been born with a white skin,”<sup>68</sup> and fear of reprisals is also at the core of their life, preventing them from taking any serious or violent action:

The white race has always been keen to turn to violence, especially if it is against blacks, so they wouldn't take much provoking to turn on the big guns against a troublesome black minority.<sup>69</sup>

We may then wonder whether the works of urban artists react to the current situation of Aborigines in Australia in terms of strength or, in contrary, in terms of



weakness. Refusing to depict the 'coloniser' of yesterday and today might appear as a proof of weakness, but no one must forget that there is still anger among Aborigines. Many dream of fighting for the land Europeans have taken from them, of making them pay for what they have done and are still doing to their country and themselves, but these feelings of rage are repressed and hidden, emerging from time to time, like for example in *Spears of Intervention* (Fig.5) or *Insight* (Fig.6) by Gordon Hookey, or in the poem *Tony (The Seeding...)* by Kevin Gilbert:

**Fig.5** : Gordon Hookey, *Spears of Intervention*, 2009  
Oil on linen  
300 x 200 cm  
Milani Gallery, Brisbane

<sup>68</sup> Gilbert 108.

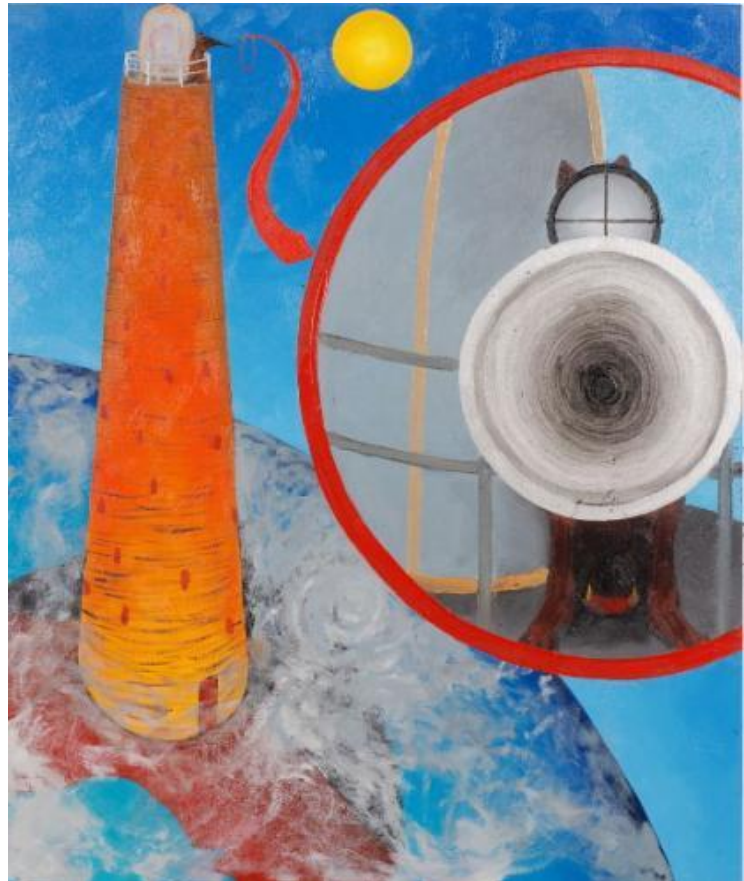
<sup>69</sup> Gilbert 106.

(...)  
 I'm gonna be a doctor when I grow up some day  
 Or a soldier – captain maybe and I'll fight for my black race!  
 Yeah, I'll fight 'em on my own some day so no one else gets hurt  
 And I'll shoot their soldiers – every bloody man  
 Until they know the wrong they do and why my mumma died  
 Yeah one day I'm gonna shoot right back –  
 I'LL MAKE them understand!!<sup>70</sup>

But even in such powerful cries of wrath, violence is aimed at soldiers, i.e. men and women bearing arms, able to defend themselves and counterattack. There is no mention of hurting civilians, maybe because Aborigines today have, most of the time, to deal with policemen and such other embodiments of order. Yet there is also this will to treat the 'enemy' as an equal: the young man of the poem wants to become a soldier to fight other soldiers. Kevin Gilbert doesn't want to deny the thirst for violence among

Aborigines, but it is brilliantly double-edged: while he warns white Australia against the anger boiling inside the young

Aboriginal generations (thus destroying – if it still existed – the illusive dream of a perfectly uniform Australia where blacks would be assimilated and would blend into the white society), he also makes them understand that, if it has to come to violence, Aborigines would not act like the European colonisers, who used to kill not only the men



**Fig.6:** Gordon Hookey, *Insight*, 2009  
 Oil on linen  
 107 x 89 cm  
 Milani Gallery, Brisbane

<sup>70</sup> Gilbert 101-102.

(i.e. the warriors) but also women and children without distinction. Gilbert is of course not trying to make Aborigines appear morally superior, he simply shows that Aborigines are not completely down, ready to do anything to gain their pride and land back: they have values, honour, and know that the white Australians of today can't be held responsible for the barbarities of the colonisation period. The soldiers of the poem work as a target for the young Aborigine to direct his rage, a target that would not be as morally reprehensible as the desire to murder civilians.

This often self-directed violence is exactly the “defensive role” that Aboriginal activist Paul Coe had predicted.<sup>71</sup> Rather than openly (i.e. violently) fighting for their rights, Aborigines prefer to rely on more subtle strategies. Urban artists do not accuse directly the (presumably) ‘white’ viewer in front of their works: the violence to Aboriginal bodies depicted in such paintings is meant to highlight a situation rarely known by Australians. The Aborigines’ pain is real, and even if these artists may not all have suffered physically themselves, they bear the psychological scars of past treatments and appear as the spokespersons of an entire community whose “psyche (was left) shattered, ripped, tattered,”<sup>72</sup> not only by violent actions against them and collective memories of those actions, but also by the accumulation of injustices and problems that have never been settled:

You’ve got to link up all the things together – bad housing, land rights, infant mortality, all the things we’ve bashed at for years while nothing was done.<sup>73</sup>

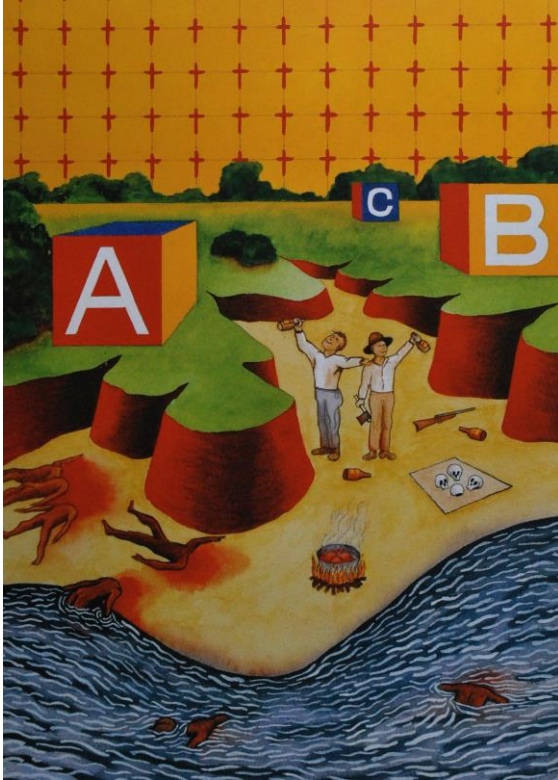
This is why urban artists do not only focus on the atrocities of the colonisation period: Robert Campbell Jr., for example, is known for his paintings of very contemporary issues, such as Aboriginal deaths in custody (see **App.5**). But bringing into the light the terrible violence of the colonisation period is a means to act more directly onto the viewer’s sensibility. Besides, not all works make clear references to a particular period, and most of them appear to be symbols of a timeless suffering, both past and present, as well as an embodiment of both physical and psychological wounds.

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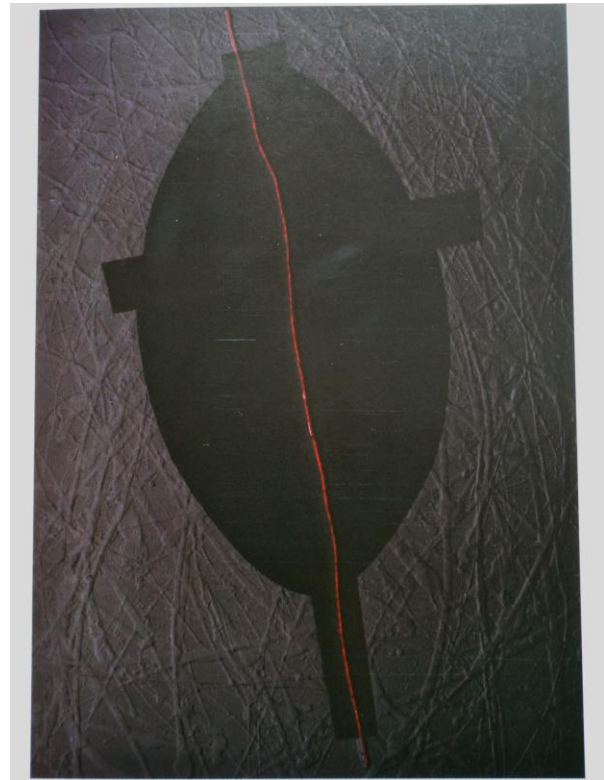
<sup>71</sup> Gilbert 108.

<sup>72</sup> Gilbert 6.

<sup>73</sup> Gilbert 32.



**Fig.7:** Gordon Bennett, *Bounty Hunters*, 1991  
Watercolour on paper  
37 x 27 cm  
Private collection



**Fig.8:** Gordon Bennett, *Wound*, 1994  
Acrylic and flashe on canvas  
92 x 65 cm  
Collection of the artist

To illustrate this, let's compare two works by Gordon Bennett: *Bounty Hunters* (Fig. 7) and *Wound* (Fig.8). If the first one can be said to refer to colonial times (by the presence of a campfire, a rifle, by the clothes the two men are wearing etc.), it nevertheless depicts the continuity of a murderous terror (illustrated by the slaughtered and beheaded Aborigines lying on the beach) through the use of children's cubes, which he often uses in his works: racism and violence are not only the work of drunken convicts and boozy pioneers who lived two centuries ago, but are also built by education and the entire society (among which is the Church, represented in this canvas through the red crosses in the background). This conception of education as a vehicle for racism has also inspired Tony Albert and his work *Daddy's little girl 2010 (after Gordon Bennett)* (see App. 6), where the artist focuses on the 'tradition' of name-calling in sports.

*Wound* works the same way as *Bounty Hunters*, even if it is more abstract in its construction: the red line crossing through the entire canvas looks like a deep cut in the flesh, and the timeless aspect of the violence involved is made clear by the superposition of a background reminiscent of Pollock's dripping technique (**App.7**) and a black silhouette that can be interpreted as a traditional Aboriginal shield. None of those two 'sides' of Bennett's background (which is also the background of many Aboriginal people in Australia) were able to protect him from violence. The wound depicted here is not a specific one, nor does it belong to any specific person: it can happen to anyone, at anytime.

### ~ *Transformations and metamorphosis* ~

Yet the trauma felt by Aboriginal people doesn't always appear under the form of direct violence: an important number of works shows whole bodies, but these are transformed or take other shapes than that of a 'normal' human being. Trevor Nickolls is one of those artists who use the motive of the body to assert the deep division that runs through the entire Australian society. In his series *Political, Spiritual*, human bodies are represented as divided and torn between two cultures, the European one and the Aboriginal one. In **Fig. 9**, the right side (from our point of view) of the human being, where the heart is, is painted with brown hues, as opposed to the white and grey left side. The two background parts are reversed in order to highlight the body, and the whole composition thus appears as a binary opposition: the grey and angular world of the 'white man', dominated by the symbol of money, stands in sharp contrast with the colourful and more sinuous representation of the Aborigine, where the two shapes of a bright sun and a pink heart blend into a luxurious vegetation. The title itself is divided between two concepts that we may see as irreconcilable: the political and the spiritual.

Nickoll's painting can be read in several ways, and in his apparently simplistic and Manichean depiction of white/black relations are hidden at least two levels of interpretation. The body depicted here can be seen as either a whole body, a single organism, or as two bodies. With the first interpretation, the painting would emphasize the difficulties Australia has encountered in trying to appear united while the differences and oppositions between the two predominant cultures were too strong to



**Fig.9:** Trevor Nickolls, *Political, Spiritual*, 1981

Synthetic polymer paint on  
canvas  
182 x 60 cm  
Art Gallery of Western Australia,  
Perth

be ignored. I have already mentioned that, traditionally, Aborigines made little difference between themselves and the land. This notion would be emphasized here, where the split body could represent Australia, struggling with its dual heritage, remaining desperately shattered, as well as the Aborigines themselves, torn between two directions they can't choose from (hence the question mark). This painting can thus also represent an Aborigine wondering where he belongs: he cannot appear as a 'traditional' Aborigine for the ways of white Australia have brought too many changes and are now part of him, but he cannot appear as a 'white' Australian either, since they are still parts of him that are definitely 'Aboriginal' (represented notably by the spear-like weapon beside him).

These doubts about identity can remind us of people from immigrant descent in European countries, such as France: many children of Tunisian or Algerian descent see themselves as 'Arab', dream of 'going back' to their families' countries and are sometimes rejected in France because they themselves reject this French identity, but these young men and women often don't even speak Arab and are seen in what they consider 'their' countries as foreigners and... French. The difference with Aborigines is that the latter are not immigrants in Australia, but have been made strangers and foreigners through 200 years of Australian history, and the two communities (Aborigines and non-Aborigines) seem to literally live in two different countries,

claiming two different identities that cannot blend into one another or mix without one



of the two having to be put aside. What Trevor Nickolls seems to suggest is that either choice (being an 'Aborigine' or an 'Australian') means losing something: if someone chooses to be part of the Aboriginal community, then he will be rejected by the Australian majority; if that person chooses to blend into that majority and put aside her Aboriginal heritage, then she will lose a part of her identity. As Howard Morphy analysed it, Aborigines could only survive in the interstices of the Australian society, and the choices they were given meant disappearance in either cases: being assimilated and becoming non-Aboriginal, or remaining Aboriginal but without having any status (for the period before citizenship was accorded to Aborigines) or being still considered as a foreigner.<sup>74</sup>

The second interpretation would make us consider this body as two distinctive human beings: the 'white' European and the Aborigine. Looking in two different directions, they stand in front of backgrounds which are not theirs and in which they don't fit. The bodies seem glued together, but there is no sharing, no real unification, as if they had been put together against their will, which is indeed the case. Whatever the interpretation, it will result in a dead-end, with little chance of the situation evolving to a mutual understanding: Australia is clearly divided between its Aboriginal and its European heritages.

*Machinetime and Dreamtime* (App.8) works the same way, and it appears that, in his works, Nickolls tends to give a positive image of Aboriginality, always depicting it with vivid colours and shapes that suggest a smile, a heart etc, as opposed to the more dull and sad-looking parts representing the European and Western culture. This goes against a certain tendency of self-depreciation among the Aboriginal community. As stated earlier in this essay, Aborigines were literally taught to dislike their own cultures, but they also ended up hating themselves, feeling ashamed of what and who they were and, as a minority, unable "to develop and maintain positive self-image, strong cultural identity, and self-esteem."<sup>75</sup> This difficulty of seeing oneself in a positive way is observable in many works of art through the use of body metamorphosis, the most obvious being the comparison with animals.

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<sup>74</sup> Morphy 362.

<sup>75</sup> Bunburry, Graham 173.

There are many cultures where animals have various meanings and are used as symbols for a lot of things (totems, periods of time etc) and usually they all have their qualities, even the ones we, in our Western culture, sometimes consider as repulsive or the embodiments of evil – such as the rat in the Chinese culture, which is a symbol of prosperity as well as ingenuity, or the spider in Native American beliefs, which represents the creator of the world. But here, in urban Aboriginal works, the motive of the animal is not meant to suggest a positive self-representation, on the contrary.



**Fig.10:** Sally Morgan, *Citizenship*, 1987  
Screenprint, edition of 30  
58.7 x 36.3cm

This echoes an observation made by Kevin Gilbert, who states that “it is not uncommon to hear Aborigines in the south refer to themselves as

‘the rubbish’,<sup>76</sup> or notes that poet Kath Walker, although feeling that her Aboriginal ancestors were not the idiot savages the Europeans were convinced to see, “struggles to identify herself with the underdog.”<sup>77</sup> A silkscreen printing by Sally Morgan reveals this very strong identification with animals: *Citizenship* (Fig.10) refers to the policy that allowed some Aborigines (the ‘half-castes’) to become Australian citizens in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Those people had to cut off all links with their tribe (except for close family) for two years, and would then receive a certificate of citizenship that they used to call ‘dog’s licence’.<sup>78</sup> Sally Morgan goes a little further in the self-depreciation by depicting a dingo,

<sup>76</sup> Gilbert 160.

<sup>77</sup> Gilbert 5.

<sup>78</sup> Roger Solomon, Rivajec.

which is known to have caused numerous problems to the European settlers and to bear very negative connotations (cowardice, thieving, treachery...); it is also regarded as an intermediary between civilisation and wilderness,<sup>79</sup> an image that perfectly fits the ones the Australian government saw as 'half-castes'. *Citizenship* is quite disturbing in the sense that it unites an animal with the human notion of citizenship: Sally Morgan didn't at all suggest that Aborigines were not worthy of belonging to the Australian nation, but illustrates the fact that this supposed 'honour' made them feel like animals, sub-humans. It also deprived them of their freedom and of part of their identity: the wild dingo has been tamed by white Australia and is now a 'dog' wearing a 'licence', a symbol of his imprisonment; to officially become an Australian means to forget this 'wild' and free part that can't fit in the new country that is being built.



**Fig.11:** Lin Onus, *Dingo Proof Fence*, 1989  
Wire and fibreglass  
Various sizes  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Lin Onus also uses this symbolic animal. His *Dingo Proof Fence* (**Fig.11**), six fibreglass sculptures, draws a parallel between this wild dog and the Aborigines: Onus painted them with stripes of black, white, red and ochre, which are the most common colours found in traditional Aboriginal painting, and he positioned them so that we may look at different stages of the dingo's life, which may bear a few similarities with the Aborigines' own lives when it comes to the experience of rejection. The dingo walking through a fence echoes the attempts of the Europeans to divide Australia into parcels of land, but also to protect some territories from invasive animals, such as the dingo or the

<sup>79</sup> Wikipedia, "Dingo," 23 April 2013: <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dingo>>

rabbit – with more or less success. Aborigines have also been parked into reserves and kept away from ‘civilisation’. The dingo trapped in a steel-jaw trap reminds the viewer that Aborigines have not always been considered as humans and have sometimes been shot down like simple dogs or game.<sup>80</sup> But it also refers to the false choice Aborigines were given when allowed to become Australian citizens: just as the tamed dingo in Morgan’s work, this dingo has been fooled by the ‘white man’ and caught in a deadly trap where it will lose his wild identity or be killed because of it.

Entrapment can also be found in the works of Laurie Nilsen, who in some of his constructions transforms crucifixes into rat-traps, where elongated figure-looking mechanisms lie petrified (**Fig.12**). The Aboriginal body represents here, at the same time, two extreme and radically opposed symbols: the mouse (which was as big a



problem for European Australians as the rabbits or the dingoes) and Christ, the saviour of humanity. These works seem quite simple at first glance, but they reveal a very complex construction based upon history as well as social facts. Indeed, Christianity (symbolized in the *Entrapment* series by the cross) has played an important

**Fig.12:** Laurie Nilsen, *Entrapment*, 2007  
Various sizes and materials  
Glass Central Canberra

role during the colonisation of Australia: missionaries tried to convert Aborigines to the catholic faith and make them embrace the Western culture, notably through the change from a nomadic lifestyle to a more settled one. To achieve this aim, they soon realised

<sup>80</sup> Pons 29.

that they had to force Aborigines to stay in the missions: institutions based on incarceration and order (such as mental asylums, prisons, reformatories...) inspired a lot of missionaries, who believed in their “reformatory potential.”<sup>81</sup> The subversive tone of Laurie Nilsen implies that Aborigines were literally crucified by the Church – not to be saved, as the Church said to the Aboriginal children it taught in the missions – but rather in a sort of extermination of this “black nuisance,”<sup>82</sup> comparable to the extermination of pest by the means of traps or poisoned food (shepherds sometimes went as far as leaving poisoned flour in the huts for the Aborigines to take, when they used to come and spear sheep).<sup>83</sup> In this case, assimilation would be the piece of cheese to attract those little mice and trap them. Nilsen’s work can be linked with Yhannie Scarce’s glasswork *What they Wanted* (App.9), where blown glass black bodies hang from white threads and create the shape of a Christian cross. This work refers to Aboriginal deaths in custody, but above all to the terrible impact of Christianity which resulted in a loss of identity and informally worked to eradicate ‘Aboriginality’ by converting the Indigenous peoples of Australia. She also worked on the theme of imprisonment with another glasswork entitled *Shackled* (App.10), where traditional Aboriginal fruits are trapped in metal cuffs that are linked by chains: the fruits, made of blown glass, stand for the Aborigines and symbolise the fragility of those human beings who were taken away from lands that provided them with food and – therefore – made them independent and powerful.<sup>84</sup> Either represented by animals or fruits, Aborigines often appear as a natural element against the white domination of metal (the traps, the cuffs...).

*The annihilation of the Blacks* (Fig.13), by Fiona Foley, also draws a parallel between animals and Aborigines, yet here it is not their vision of themselves, but the vision of the white man, which is represented. Indeed, the black wooden puppets hanging from a branch evoke a traditional sculpture from North Queensland (see App.11), which represented fish that had been hung to dry. Just like Nilsen, who compared the atrocities done to Aborigines to the simple extermination of mice, Foley emphasizes the horror of the massacres perpetrated by white settlers by building a reference to a very harmless situation (fishing), creating – for the viewer who would

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<sup>81</sup> Attwood 18.

<sup>82</sup> Gilbert 4.

<sup>83</sup> Gilbert 4.

<sup>84</sup> Jared Thomas, “Art of glass,” *Artlink*, vol.30, n.10, 2010: 64.

know the work she had quoted – a shock of perception, and showing that such criminal attitudes were made possible by the fact that a lot of people at the time considered Aborigines as animals.

“I am a human being, not an animal,” claimed Connie McDonald in her autobiography “When you grow up,”<sup>85</sup> But it is obvious that many, including missionaries, did not share this opinion for, even if their intentions were good, they still couldn’t see Aborigines as people who could be like them. At the very successful mission of Ramahyuck that Friedrich and Louise Hagenauer established in 1863,<sup>86</sup> few Aborigines converted to Christianity, and the only ones who did were all men. For fear that these neophytes might not



**Fig.13:** Fiona Foley, *The Annihilation of the Blacks*, 1986  
Wood, synthetic polymer paint, father, string  
278 x 300 x 60 cm  
National Museum of Australia, Canberra

spread their new faith, they decided to find them “suitable wives” so that they could “establish a stable and self-perpetuating Christian community.”<sup>87</sup> The Hagenauers did a lot to convince the Australian government and the local settlers to ‘give up’ a part of the territory for this self-supporting mission, which allowed several tribes to survive,<sup>88</sup> but in the end Aborigines were seen as mere instruments for spreading the Christian faith among the natives, and the way they wanted newly converted Aboriginal women to marry their converted men is reminiscent of animal breeding, where individuals are

<sup>85</sup> Duthil 85.

<sup>86</sup> “History Wall,” Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation – Central Gippsland Aboriginal Health Service (Nindedana Quarenook), 24April 2013  
<<http://www.ramahyuck.org/index.php/history-wall>>

<sup>87</sup> Attwood 35.

<sup>88</sup> Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation.

carefully chosen in order to ensure the perpetuation of special characteristics (partisans of assimilation would also speak of 'breeding out the colour'). There was also an undeniable 'freak-show' dimension to this Christian generosity: the missionaries who were contacted by the Hagenauers used to have in their mission an Aboriginal girl named Elizabeth Flower, who wanted nothing more than being part of this white European community. She was a very talented girl and learnt fast, and she was deeply appreciated by the missionaries, but there was still an unbreakable wall between her and her protectors, a gap that couldn't be crossed and showed that she would never totally be considered as an equal: just like animals in fairs were shown doing a few tricks, "Bessy was often called upon to show off her ability on the harmonium and to lead the singing of the congregation,"<sup>89</sup> becoming, in the words of the missionaries, "clear proof that Aboriginals can be educated and made useful."<sup>90</sup>

Aborigines were lowered to the rank of animals, and the ambivalent relationships that were created between them and Europeans fuelled a chain of self-depreciation that became very hard to break. Urban artists remind us how man can put another man to the ground without stopping from smiling, destroying his self-image and self-respect to the point where that person can't think about herself without putting herself down. But could one expect something different from Aborigines? When Europeans began to apply the evolution theory of Darwin and the theories of sociologist Auguste Comte to people, in order to explain the differences between 'races', they started to consider people such as the Aborigines as "unchangeable":<sup>91</sup> they were thus studied as such by anthropologists, and never as human beings who would have followed a different path of evolution from Europeans. Even (or especially) school books referred to Aborigines as animals, or showed that they were closer to them than to other humans: in his Man Makes History, first published in 1952, Russel Ward writes that "their lives are almost as hard and dangerous as those of the animals, who also hunt to live."<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Attwood 38.

<sup>90</sup> Attwood 38.

<sup>91</sup> Attwood 87-88.

<sup>92</sup> Duthil 85.



**Fig.14:** Laurie Nilsen, *There goes my Neighbourhood II*, 2007  
Pastel and acrylic on canvas  
180 x 150 cm  
Fireworks Gallery, Brisbane

Yet, just as Aborigines didn't die out as predicted, urban artists have managed to turn those animal associations into something more positive, sometimes overtly political, sometimes more subtle. Laurie Nilsen uses the emu in many of his works. In *Their Goes my Neighbourhood II* (Fig.14), he painted the portrait of one of them. The delicate blue and grey, slightly contrasted with black and yellow, produce a very soothing effect on the viewer, soon disturbed by the title and the reflection of a barbed



wire in the eye of the emu. The title obviously plays with the ambiguity it creates: who is speaking? Is it the emu or the viewer? The expression could refer to the fear of seeing Aborigines, who are not always welcome and are often associated with troubles, moving in, and the construction with 'my' is very interesting: by reading it, aloud or silently, the viewer embodies that slightly racist thought; the portrait might thus represent the way racist people see Aborigines, as wild animals who have no place in a 'civilized' area. But the words can also be those of the animal itself, who saw the settlers arrive and invade its territory, fencing it and dividing it with barbed wire, reflected in the emu's eyes.

Nilsen painted the emu with incredible details and realism, and focused on its eyes. The viewer's gaze is drawn to the eyes of the animal, which appear incredibly human and full of emotions. With this painting, Nilsen encourages us to see beyond the first impression, the stereotypes and prejudices, and gives a very positive image of Aborigines through this emblematic animal, which stands before us with dignity and seems to look into us.

The reflection of barbed wire is the final link between Nilsen himself and the animal: as stated earlier, the artist was wounded several times during his childhood by the fences of farmers. But later on, as an adult, he witnessed the terrible effects of this material on emus:

They're not like the roos or wallabies that can either jump over or crawl under. They seem to just pace up and down the fence and then on the second or third day they make the decision to step through and a lot of them get caught up in the top two strands, they twist over and their leg just gets caught and they lay there till they die.<sup>93</sup>

This reflection in the eye of this animal is a memory of pain and persecution, deeply anchored in both the emu and Nilsen, which brings them closer to each other, especially since this bird is a traditional totem for his people.<sup>94</sup> Nilsen says it himself, these canvases work as family portraits,<sup>95</sup> and have obviously been painted with deep affection despite the tragic and negative background of the subject. All the pain and resentment is transformed into something more useful than just anger. Nilsen could have depicted injured emus, caught in barbed wires, unable to escape and doomed to die

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<sup>93</sup> Ho 150.

<sup>94</sup> Ho 150.

<sup>95</sup> Ho 154.

there, but he chose to honour them with close portraits that are usually used for humans, offering to the viewer another view of the animal and therefore of Aborigines, who may stumble, be caught into various traps (alcohol, diseases etc.) but will still stand up.



**Fig.15:** Gordon Hookey, *Terraist*, 2012  
Glass Central Canberra

Animals may be a means to get to the viewer and create a contact with him. Nilsen uses empathy with his emus' portraits, but other artists have more direct ways to make the viewer understand that there is something wrong in today's Australia. In *Terraist* (Fig.15), Gordon Hookey also painted the portrait of an animal, which is this time a kangaroo, another emblematic Australian animal since it appears, alongside the emu, on the Australian coat of arms, symbolizing the taming of the land. Standing in front of a city background, arms crossed and wearing sunglasses coloured with the Aboriginal flag, he seems to be waiting and observes the viewer. A conflictive situation arises, where the viewer and the kangaroo stare at each other, emphasized by the word "Terraist,"

which symbolizes the Aboriginal fight for land. Yet the word is of course close to 'terrorist' and signifies to the viewer that Aborigines are not going to give up their fight and will put all their strength in that battle. It also debunks the concept of Terra Nullius by placing the kangaroo (symbolizing Aborigines) in a dominant position before his background, which represents Sydney (with its Centrepoint tower), where the first ships carrying convicts arrived.

In an interview explaining the meaning of another work,<sup>96</sup> entitled *Terraist 2012* (**App.12**), Gordon Hookey explained that he uses the figure of the kangaroo as a symbol of resistance and of strength, as well as a symbol of Aboriginal people. This interactive work (a movie-like video showing the drawing process to the sound of a didgeridoo) is a little bit different from the previous one because it creates an unbalanced and uneven situation, the viewer facing a gigantic crowd of assembled kangaroos waving Aboriginal flags. Those kangaroos with their tents symbolize the camps of refugees that literally pop out of the ground when a country invades another: here when Europeans invaded Australia. But these tents are also a reference to the Tent Embassy that was erected in 1972 in front of the Australian parliament (which is also depicted here in the work, bright white against the darkening sky, as a symbol of the power of the Government) in order to protest against the Government's refusal to recognise Aboriginal land rights.

The person standing alone in front of the work is forced to react, and this is precisely what Gordon Hookey wants: a reaction. He doesn't focus on pain or suffering, contrary to the previous artists I have presented, but on this energy boiling on the thin frontier between the viewer and the artwork, where Aborigines and non-Aboriginal people meet.<sup>97</sup> Using an animal as a metaphor for a human being is a means to show the power of that particular person, not her deplorable psychological state or the trauma she is enduring. Hookey's work gives a voice to those who have been ignored too long,<sup>98</sup> and his 'mobs' of kangaroos (or his dogs, as in *A Painting for the Underdawg* – **App.13**) are vivid pictures of people who can fight back, are well and alive, and will never accept that colonisation that they consider is still going on.

The metamorphosed bodies depicted by urban artists echo the transformations experienced by Aborigines during the colonisation period but also in more recent times: 'Aboriginality' had, when possible, to be hidden from the pure white eyes of a country that refused to accept the peoples it had dispossessed, and be transformed: extermination and assimilation were seen as solutions to have all traces of Aboriginality disappear, and Aborigines were nothing more than pest or animals from which certain qualities could be taken and perpetuated to 'improve the race', or at least make it blend

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<sup>96</sup> Hookey.

<sup>97</sup> Hookey.

<sup>98</sup> Brenda L. Croft, "FLASH Gordon's message, Language is a virus – the King's English (not)," [Artlink](#): 52.

into the European one. Some artists use the figure of the animal to 'shock' the viewer: nowadays, nobody (or let's hope so) would consider any human being as an animal, a subhuman; but there was such a time, and in some ways the treatment of Aborigines in today's Australia, who are often plain ignored, can be reminiscent of that period. The message of these urban artists is clear: 'lest we forget', for such barbarities may not have completely vanished with the end of "colonisation"<sup>99</sup> (which never officially ended in Australia) and which still

surrounds us in the built and natural environment, in systems of communication, social structures, expressions of belief, interactions between ourselves and others, and within our bodies and minds.<sup>100</sup>

Yet painting an animal can also be assimilated to an act of resistance, because the animals chosen for that purpose are sometimes symbols of the Australian bush: their presence show that the land has not been conquered, that there still is an opposition to the imposed Western way of life, and that Aborigines are now proud to identify themselves with that land and that culture.

As we have seen, works of art can be a means to reveal a very painful past, as well as an even more painful present. Those hybrid testimonies, oscillating between art, history and social works, are necessary for Aboriginal people to heal and be at peace with themselves, but also to teach non-Aboriginal people about the past of their country, which has always been told from the point of view of the Europeans. History is not only made of conquests, discoveries of new lands, but also of massacres, violence, and the destruction of entire people, and such works of art sadly testify that the "modern Aborigine is sick, very sick,"<sup>101</sup> "psychologically (...) right down,"<sup>102</sup> that those people are "victims of a complex chain of social and historical circumstances that have made them cripples in the truest sense of the word, even though they may not literary be confined to wheelchair."<sup>103</sup> Urban artists, by depicting mutilated and transformed

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<sup>99</sup> Croft, [Artlink](#) 52.

<sup>100</sup> Brady, Docker and Fischer 272.

<sup>101</sup> Gilbert 11.

<sup>102</sup> Gilbert 35.

<sup>103</sup> Gilbert 39.

bodies, want to bring to the foreground that “the one fact on which all blacks – full blood and part-blood, tribal and detribalized – meet is the shared persecution by whites.”<sup>104</sup> This idea of a collective memory of pain is made palpable in Gordon Bennett’s *Bloodlines* (Fig.16): the title of this work refers to the red wounds depicted on the canvas, reminiscent of whipping, but also to the family line, as if pain was a heritage, transmitted from one generation to the next. In another context, American artist Art Spiegelman also illustrated this passing on of a harmful past (App.14) with a plate illustrating him handing out to his own son a gift-box containing the monster of the Holocaust, wearing the striped cap of concentration camps prisoners, the head of Hitler protruding from a mouth in its belly like an obscene tongue.<sup>105</sup> *Bloodlines* illustrates an Australian equivalent of the Shoah in terms of social relationships and relations to history: past and present tend to blend into a timeless space where the artist represents himself but also his relatives or any other Aborigine, the colonial past but also his day to day experience.

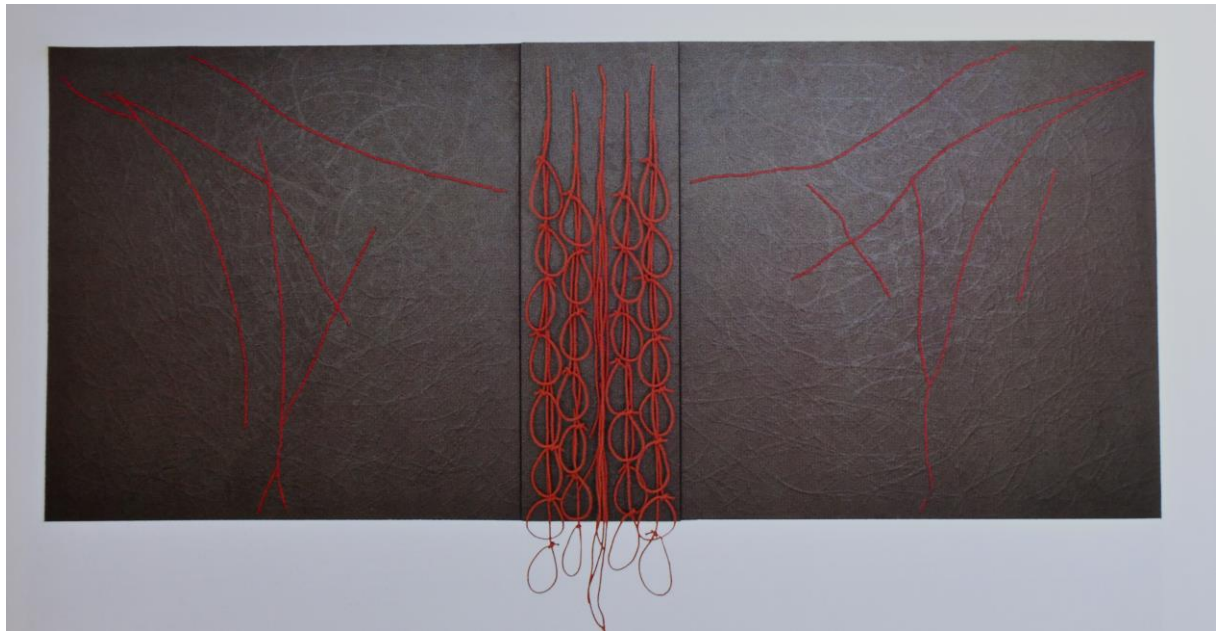
We may see in those depictions of bodies a difficulty to appear entirely or to apprehend one’s identity after a long period of colonisation and ‘being done to’, but there is also a clear unifying dimension in those works. The pain may be personal (such as in Nilsen’s works for example), but it somehow grows into a more collective remembering. As Marx put it, “History weighs ‘like an Alps’ on the shoulders of the present,”<sup>106</sup> and urban art is clearly influenced by the past. Moreover, it turns the invisibility of Aborigines round: they are now a ‘visible minority’ that has gained an important place in art as in society (the abundance of portraits testifies that new importance), but they don’t want to appear as symbols for tourism agencies. They are a part of Australia and want to be recognized as such, even if it is not to the taste of some people who would rather like to see the Aboriginal issue disappear. Most of the works we have seen so far represent Aborigines in a passive way (except for Gordon Hookey’s paintings), but this passivity is a way to convince people to take action before it is too late, whether they are Aborigines or non-Aboriginal persons.

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<sup>104</sup> Gilbert 7.

<sup>105</sup> Art Spiegelman was born in a Polish Jewish family, and his major work, *Maus*, is the transcription into a comic of his father’s testimony about his experience in concentration camps, which he recorded.

<sup>106</sup> Brady, Graham 138.



**Fig.16:** Gordon Bennett, *Bloodlines*, 1993  
Acrylic on linen, wood and rope  
182 x 425 cm  
Bellas and Sutton Galleries, Brisbane, Melbourne

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~ The affirmation of the black body as a physical, symbolical and political presence ~

*"Blacks must themselves seek to strip off the crippling burdens of apathy, ignorance and soul loss that have plagued them for so long."<sup>107</sup>*

*The first part of this essay dealt with 'negative' aspects of the Aboriginal experience: invisibility, physical and psychological violence... But we also noticed in the last works that there is a will to go beyond all of this, to offer a positive self-image or representation. This second part will go further in analyzing this process of positive (re)construction in a context of reinforcement of the Aboriginal presence in Australia: first by trying to explain why Aboriginal figures depicted in artworks are always black figures, and then by focusing on the empowerment aspect of art, which becomes a means to (re)build one's identity and 'impose' it.*

~ **A 'people' gathered behind the same black body?** ~

The more urban artworks I found to put into my essay, the more struck I was by the obvious fact that almost all the figures represented in those works were 'black'. It is a strange thing to notice, since a lot of urban Aborigines have fought to debunk the idea that the 'real' Aborigines were dark-skinned and lived in the outback, an idea that Australian folk musician Ted Egan admits he had believed in:

When non-Aboriginal Australians like myself eventually thought about Aboriginal people and their place in Australia at all, the initial assumption

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<sup>107</sup> Gilbert 40.

was that Aboriginal people, 'real Aborigines', were 'full bloods' and lived in the desert like Albert Namatjira.<sup>108</sup>

Journalist Duncan Graham also had a very precise image of what Aborigines should look like, and to him "the uppity urban blacks were not 'real' Aborigines, who were supposed to stand on desert rocks at twilight, one foot cocked against the other, and not speak out for their civil rights."<sup>109</sup>

This is of course a direct result of the colonisation process, which, through books and institutions, has spread this preconceived image of Aborigines and, most importantly, of what Aborigines *should* be or look like. And as the vast majority of Australians has never had any contact with Aborigines, even if those Australians have most probably seen some, all the information they can get is therefore indirect<sup>110</sup> and subject to modifications that cannot be verified. Besides, people such as Ted Egan or Bruce Petty (a famous Australian cartoonist and satirist) have themselves experienced those ideas in times when Australia had no problem dealing with its identity:

In the 1940s there was no problem with the Australian identity. We were friendly, brave, casual, fair go people with a sense of humour and a healthy disrespect for authority. National identity is largely self-assessment. We couldn't help noticing that we were white.<sup>111</sup>

Aborigines, who were not Australian citizens yet, were simply ignored and, at the same time, fantasized because of their difference, their invisibility, their 'wild' aspect etc. Nowadays, this idealisation of the 'black traditional Aborigines' has taken a new form but is still a product of Western civilization: while putting forward its ability to quickly evolve, adapt and master its environment thanks to brilliant new technologies that have been used – not so long ago – as evidence of its so-called superiority, it tends to think it has lost a part of its identity. There seems to be a common feeling that we Westerners

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<sup>108</sup> Albert Namatjira was an Aboriginal painter who 'specialized' in watercolour landscapes in the European style. His paintings made him extremely famous, and he was the first Aboriginal person to be granted Australian citizenship. His unique style created some controversy, being hailed by a majority of people who saw in him a great Australian artist, and criticized by others who believed his paintings were the result of assimilation into Western culture rather than his own creation. Ted Egan, *Thinking in Australian*, in *Being whitefella*, p.86.

<sup>109</sup> Duncan Graham, "No Questions Please, We're Australian," Graham 105.

<sup>110</sup> Petty, Graham 32.

<sup>111</sup> Petty, Graham 31-32.



are not whole, that we are missing something, and we often tend to transfer this to people we regard as fundamentally 'happier' than us because they have not experienced what we may see as a genuine 'expulsion from Paradise', and are thus "exempt from the pressures we feel"<sup>112</sup> (which can take the form of money, work etc). *Machinetime and Dreamtime* or *Political, Spiritual* (App. 8 and Fig.9), by Trevor Nickolls, are good examples of this: to represent the 'white' side of Australia, the artist uses the symbol of the dollar, which stands for almost everything negative we might think of the Western way of life.

Aborigines are thus seen as "simple children of nature,"<sup>113</sup> people in touch with natural elements, full of respect for their community, elders, the environment, and in a sense they are given all the qualities we would like to see among our own culture.<sup>114</sup> Indigenous people have always had an ambivalent status, from the 'noble savage' to the incarnation of pure evil, but there has always been an idealization of those people, because it may be reassuring to think that there is still a culture that has retained what we are now looking for.<sup>115</sup> Australia has built a popular image of Aborigines, and it can be glimpsed in many testimonies. In *Being whitefella*, Australian artist Robert Juniper thus remembers his first encounter with Aborigines as a child, during a corroboree in Merredin and the whole experience is described as near magical, with "sparks flying into the black sky and the tall glistening men stomping and raising the red dust in clouds."<sup>116</sup> He also tells how his mother "always spoke of Aboriginal people with a sort of awe and pride: 'Some are so black charcoal would make a light mark on them.'"<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Brady, Graham 139.

<sup>113</sup> Brady Graham 139.

<sup>114</sup> There is of course another type of discourse, in which Aborigines are accused of being alcoholics, of abusing their children and their wives, but it may precisely be connected to the idealization of Aborigines, or rather of 'ancient' Aborigines, before they met the first Europeans and before the loss of their 'innocence'. In the Northern Territory, alcohol and pornography (typical Western products) have been forbidden in order to 'protect' the Aboriginal populations: in the minds of many Australians, Aborigines must remain 'pure' and stay away from such 'temptations'.

<sup>115</sup> Brady, Graham 139.

<sup>116</sup> Robert Juniper, "Searching for a Black Ancestry," Graham 126.

<sup>117</sup> Juniper, Graham 27.

Commenting on Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer's photographs of Aborigines, Fred Chaney wonders at "men in the shape of warriors, women of beauty and cherubic children"<sup>118</sup> and, later, remembers

sitting with old men under a high neon light at Tree Station in the Northern Territory and being struck by their dignity and strength, as well as the beauty of the scene; (...) sitting on a blue groundsheet south of Aurukan on Cape York in brilliant moonlight, while old men sang (...) the songs of their country.<sup>119</sup>



**Fig.1:** Bindi Cole, *Wathaurung Mob*, 2008, from the series *Not Really Aboriginal*.

These experiences, full of poetry and beauty in the way they are told, reveal the 'magical' side of Aborigines, and any Indigenous person who would not fit that image can appear as very incongruous to some people: Bill Bunbury, a former Australian broadcaster and teacher, was once chatting with an Aboriginal colleague about Aboriginal identity. Marking the conversation, another teacher came to them and said to Bunbury's colleague: "But you aren't a real Aborigine. I mean, you dress like us and you read books."<sup>120</sup> Such a reaction was also experienced by artist Bindi Cole, who didn't 'look like' an Aborigine and was therefore not perceived as one, even when she said she was.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Chaney, Graham 57.

<sup>119</sup> Chaney, Graham 57.

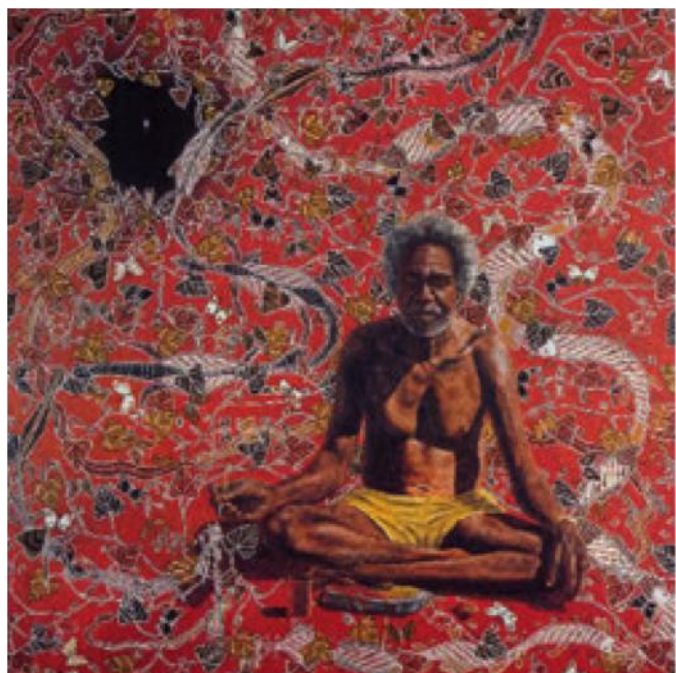
<sup>120</sup> Bunbury, Graham 149.

<sup>121</sup> Bindi Cole, "Not really Aboriginal," excerpt from *Aboriginal Art: Philosophy and Culture*, VEA Australia - New Zealand, 28 June 2012, 10 May 2013 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0wJzQFq1nTc>>

“Why, oh why can’t you whites learn that it is not only the full blood tribal people that are Aborigines?”<sup>122</sup> wrote Kevin Gilbert in the 1970s. But sadly these ‘unauthentic’ Aboriginal people, who ironically did not have the ‘chance’ to be born dark of skin, are often

considered ‘suspect’ by some whites, even media professionals, who refer to them with depressing regularity as ‘part-black stirrers’ or ‘not really Aboriginal’. Only tribal people, apparently, are worthy of respect; if they ‘compromise’ themselves by using a car or seeking access to social welfare benefits, they are criticised.<sup>123</sup>

In a word, they are “not black enough,”<sup>124</sup> and this led artist Bindi Cole to create her series *Not really Aboriginal* (Fig.1 and App. 15 and 16), where she took pictures of herself and her family – who are from Aboriginal descent but are light-skinned because they also have British descent – their faces coloured in black and with red headbands on that are traditionally worn by senior initiated Aboriginal men.<sup>125</sup> These photographs were a direct response to the racist and common view that Aborigines are necessarily black. Bindi Cole turned herself and the



**Fig.2:** Lin Onus, *Portrait of Jack Wunuwun*, 1988  
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
182 x 182 cm

members of her family into “this stereotype that everybody wants to see”<sup>126</sup> in order to better fight it but also to illustrate her love for her origins. Lin Onus, with his *Portrait of Jack Wunuwun* (Fig.2), also paid tribute to his family: in 1986, Onus travelled to Arnhem

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<sup>122</sup> Gilbert, 192.

<sup>123</sup> Laurie, Graham 66.

<sup>124</sup> Daniel Browning, “The politics of skin: not black enough,” [Artlink](#) 22

<sup>125</sup> Stephen Gilchrist, “From Tiwi with love: Bindi Cole,” [Artlink](#) 74.

<sup>126</sup> Cole, “Not really Aboriginal”.

Land in order to learn traditional art. He met artist Jack Wunuwun,<sup>127</sup> who adopted Onus and taught him stories that he would be permitted to paint, according to the traditional artistic custom.<sup>128</sup> This experience was a turning point in Onus' life, and he described it as "profound and cathartic change."<sup>129</sup> His painting is full of respect and love for his adoptive father, and it may of course be seen as another form of idealization of the 'traditional' Aborigines, this time from the part of an Aboriginal person. But it is nevertheless linked with gratitude and genuine love for those people, whom Onus has met and lived with.



**Fig.3:** Bindi Cole, *Made for Each Other*, 2008  
Pigment print on rag paper  
110 x 60 cm

Just like Bindi Cole, many urban artists seem to emphasize 'blackness' in their works in order to tell something to the viewer about his own society, but also to manifest their identity: *Girl shattered* (p.20) by Lin Onus and *Outsider* (p.19) by Gordon Bennett are good examples of this, as their figures, appearing in violent settings, reflect both a racist attitude to the viewer (who witnesses violence against figures that are those of typically 'traditional' Aborigines) and also a deep love and respect for a part of their own heritage (the Aboriginal culture) they refuse to deny.

*Made for Each Other* (Fig.3) and *Koorimite Kid* (Fig.4) also play with stereotypes and icons: the first poster subverts the poster of a 1939 American movie called *Made for Each Other* (App.17), and the second one parodies the Australian food paste Vegemite,

<sup>127</sup> Jack Wunuwun was an Aboriginal painter from Arnhem Land and the ceremonial leader of his clan. He painted on bark but also tried to innovate and experimented various techniques: to him, his art could bridge the cultural gap between Aborigines and non-Aborigines.

<sup>128</sup> Donna Leslie, "Coming home to the land," Eureka Street, 20 April 2006, 11 May 2013 <<http://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=256>>

<sup>129</sup> Morphy 392.

which was declined in several spreads, including the Aussiemite.

*Made for Each Other* is a work playing with 'black' humour, since the two 'characters' are the Aboriginal counterparts of the movie's characters: in the movie, John and Jane's union is being disapproved by John's mother, who wanted his son to marry another woman. In Cole's poster, "Half-Caste Joe" and "Koorie Candy"<sup>130</sup> symbolise the ban imposed on 'half-caste' people to marry 'full-blood' Aborigines for the purpose of 'breeding out the colour': progressively, children born from couples composed of a 'half-caste' and a 'white' Australian would become white, preventing the 'regeneration' of the 'black race'. Indeed, the baby of Cole's poster is depicted with a black painted face and a traditional red headband, symbolizing the continuance of Aboriginal culture but also the difficulties faced by Indigenous people: this baby indeed refers to the child in the movie, who is ill with pneumonia but finally saved after a pilot took incredible risks to deliver the serum. Unfortunately, the same situation translated into the Aboriginal situation would end with the baby dying without having been taken care of, just because he wasn't 'white'. So Cole's work is at the same time the symbol of a 'renewal' of the Aboriginal culture and a denunciation of the injustices that have been inflicted on Aborigines.

As for *Koorimite Kid*, it transforms Aboriginality (here the Koori identity) into a food product, a "concentrated black extract": identity appears as something that is 'assimilated' (and the word is more than appropriate in this context) by the body, something scientifically proven. Through this poster, Cole asks the question 'what makes our identity'? Is it something that we build, something that we are? Is it a physical feature? Or is it made of how we behave? The sentence "rich in these 3 vitamins your body can't store up" is also a reference to the fact that colonisation and the forced assimilation (especially of children from the Stolen Generation) have broken the links between the old and new generations of Aborigines, preventing elders to pass on their knowledge and culture to children. But it may as well refer to a certain stereotype, in which Aborigines should have this "black goodness" that some 'whites' imagine in all black people (who are supposed to be 'cool' and always happy), the "culture" of their ancestors, mythology and country, and be 'spiritual' (this 'sacred' aspect being here symbolised by the name "Bunjil," which is the name of a creator deity in Aboriginal mythology).

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<sup>130</sup> The Koori are an Indigenous group who lived in modern day New South Wales and Victoria.

The question of identity, even if – individually – the artists perfectly know who they are, is at the core of urban art. It was already hinted in the works presented in my first part, where the body reflected this difficulty of representing oneself – or the community one belongs to –, because identity is basically the product of how we see ourselves, but also how others see us. When Europeans settled in Australia and began dominating the country and its people, they disturbed the pattern of identity that Aborigines had created: by removing children from different areas and putting them together in missions, by forcing some Aboriginal groups to move to another territory which was not theirs, the colonisers destroyed the variety of cultures that existed before their arrival. The ones they called ‘Aborigines’ had many different names (Murri, Noongar, Koori...) and were divided in many groups with different languages and customs. These people were then all labelled under the name ‘Aborigines’, which resulted in a blending of all differences in the great colonial stereotype. Adding to the fact that ‘half-castes’ were often dismissed, the construction of identity for Aboriginal people simplified itself and built itself on an opposition: *I* or *we* versus *them*. Not belonging to or not accepting the white community<sup>131</sup> meant being



**Fig.4:** Bindi Cole, *Koorimite Kid*, 2008  
Pigment print on rag paper  
110 x 150 cm

<sup>131</sup> Most of the time Aborigines are rejected by the white society, which leaves them with no choice concerning their acceptance or not of this community, but light-skinned Aborigines have

Aboriginal. And being Aboriginal meant not being white, so therefore being black. But what does 'being black' mean, when decades of assimilation have given white skins to some Aborigines? Reading 'Fair Skin – Black soul' by Murri writer Ken Canning might shed some light on this:

Whitefella, you're not listening,  
I am not like you  
we are worlds apart  
with little in common.  
You look in wonder  
at my fair skin  
and think, AH he's one of us.  
Wrong again.  
You judge me on my pigmentation  
and not my inner being.  
For despite my fairness  
I am black,  
I am a Murri  
from the Kunja Nation.  
I am proud – spiritual  
and I resent the fact  
you think I am white.  
I didn't rape the land,  
the women.  
I didn't ask  
to be left pale of skin.  
But now I DEMAND  
my cultural respect.  
Whitefella, this is your doing,  
not mine.  
You have the problem,  
not me.  
You can only think  
in one dimensional terms.  
You see but don't feel,  
and whitefella you're wrong.  
I am black.  
I am a Murri  
from the Kunja Nation.  
And I stand proud.<sup>132</sup>

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this choice: Bindi Cole, for example, is white of skin but chose to identify with her Aboriginal side of her family, even if she doesn't reject her British descent.

<sup>132</sup> Burruga Gutya, "Writing for survival," Artlink, vol.10 n.1&2 (Landmark Reprint 1992): 49.

Being 'black' would therefore not refer to the colour of the skin, but to a particular behaviour and mentality, and the blackness of the skin in many urban works could then be seen as the pictorial representation of that mentality or "inner being." But just as a fair skin doesn't prevent anyone from being Aboriginal, a black skin isn't necessarily a sign of belonging, as we Westerners tend to think. Myrna Tonkinson, an anthropologist who has worked with Aborigines, was thus surprised that "in the few discussions [she] had with [the Mardu] people about this [she] was never able to persuade them that [her] skin colour [signified] any special link with them (...)." <sup>133</sup> It took her some time to understand that it was her who was referred to as 'whitefella', despite her black skin, <sup>134</sup> and "the word is not to be taken too literally. It means an outsider, an alien, someone whose presence should generate caution, for whitefellas too often mean troubles." <sup>135</sup> Indeed, just as being black means many things, being 'whitefella' is also a term to describe a particular "behaviour": <sup>136</sup>

Apart from such obvious differences in material conditions, being a 'whitefella' has other meanings. For the Jigalong Mardu, it implies a lack of cultural knowledge which renders most persons in that category unequipped to deal appropriately with certain situations. Being whitefella in Jigalong meant being protected, because of assumed ignorance, from the consequences of some actions and from many kinship obligations. It also excluded most outsiders from participation in the supremely important ritual life of the community. Those in the whitefella category were often assumed to have limitless access to resources and expected to be available at anytime to provide certain services such as medical assistance or dealing with the dead. <sup>137</sup>

Identity is therefore made very complex, as none of the three communities (Aborigines from remote communities, non-Aborigines, and 'urban' Aborigines) share the same views about the other's status, what is being expected from him, and the characteristics of belonging.

Painting a black body would therefore be more a symbolic act than the depiction of a physical reality, just as some writers changed their names to Aboriginal ones in the

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<sup>133</sup> Tonkinson, Graham 166.

<sup>134</sup> Tonkinson, Graham 162.

<sup>135</sup> Graham 23.

<sup>136</sup> Tonkinson, Graham 29.

<sup>137</sup> Tonkinson, Graham 167.



1980s as a sign of protest during the bicentennial celebrations of 1988: Colin Johnson adopted the name of Mudrooroo Narogin, and Kath Walker became Oodgeroo Noonucal. The controversy that surrounded such writers (Mudrooroo was found to have no Aboriginal relative and writer Gordon Matthews, after his claim of being of Aboriginal descent, discovered he was of Sri Lankan descent)<sup>138</sup> reveals the difficulty of claiming an identity today, at a time when DNA analysis can destroy a life-long self-construction. But still, the 'behaviour' prevails: when Mudrooroo learnt that he descended from an Irish family, he rejected this biological line, still claiming he was of Aboriginal descent. Such an attitude "met with little sympathy and understanding by many Aborigines,"<sup>139</sup> who then refused to acknowledge him as part of the Aboriginal community. The case of Matthews was different, for he didn't reject his biological descent when he discovered it, and his colleagues at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Indigenous Public Service sympathised with his change of ethnic status.<sup>140</sup> An Aboriginal leader even told him that he was still considered an Aborigine since "his life had been shaped by the assumption that he was."<sup>141</sup> Indeed Matthews had convinced himself that he was Aboriginal because some students had called him 'Abo' and 'Boong' during his years at Scotch College, and because an advocate of Aboriginal education had told him that he might have 'Aboriginal blood'.<sup>142</sup>

Clearly, Mudrooroo and Matthews had been 'made' Aborigines through their relationships with others, whose reactions and attitudes reinforced their beliefs. Their experiences can be linked in some way to the paintings of urban artists, whose works are always meant as an interaction between them and the viewers: through their works, they try to build or rebuild an Aboriginal identity based on pride and identification to a certain 'model' that they think corresponds to their vision of themselves and their community, but a black body (as in *Girl shattered* or *Outsider*) should also be taken as a symbol, visually striking and quickly understandable by the viewer as being 'Aboriginal'. Most importantly, it is also a claim, a means to make Aborigines visible again by putting

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<sup>138</sup> Wayne King, "Gordon Matthews," "Aboriginality and Impersonality: Three Australian Indigenous Administrative Memoirs," Australian Political Lives: Chronicling Political Carrers and Administrative Histories, Australian National University, 9 May 2013 <[http://epress.anu.edu.au/anzsog/auspol/mobile\\_devices/ch10s02.html](http://epress.anu.edu.au/anzsog/auspol/mobile_devices/ch10s02.html)>

<sup>139</sup> Docker and Fischer 97.

<sup>140</sup> King.

<sup>141</sup> King.

<sup>142</sup> King.

forward their skin colour, which has so many times been the subject of racism or has been dismissed by the process of assimilation. Such works thumb their noses at the not so ancient and widespread thought that Aborigines would die out: there are still Aboriginal people today in Australia, who want to maintain their culture and are proud of their identity. This tendency can be seen in the fact that more and more people are now identifying as Aborigines: in 1947 they were 87 000, while in 1996 they were 386 000.<sup>143</sup>

Nevertheless, these bodily symbols can have ambivalent meanings, just as the Aborigines themselves have experienced ambivalent representations (from the noble savage to the incarnation of evil wilderness). Two collective paintings, by proppaNOW<sup>144</sup> artists Vernon Ah Kee, Gordon Hookey and Laurie Nilsen, depict two famous Aboriginal sportsmen: boxer Elley Bennett and cricketer Eddie Gilbert. Both experienced racism and the forced dependence that was meant by being 'under the Act':<sup>145</sup> Elley Bennett had all his earnings withheld and was never able to regain his winnings, estimated to be more than £25,000, and Eddie Gilbert saw one of his performances durably questioned and was dropped from his team two years after that, after having suffered abuses each time he entered a field.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Markus 11.

<sup>144</sup> This collective is the leading Indigenous arts collective in Queensland. Set up in 2003 in Brisbane in order to give a voice to urban Aboriginal artists, its works always offer a controversial perspective of Black Australia.

<sup>145</sup> The Aborigines Preservation and Protection Act, adopted in 1939 in Queensland, replaced the 1897 Aborigines Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act. Among other things, it excluded Aborigines from voting in state elections, forbid them to possess alcohol and limited their movement.

<sup>146</sup> Vernon Ah Kee, "About the Black See," The Black See Education Kit, (KickArts Contemporary Arts, 2011, 20 February 2013) 4.



**Fig.5:** Vernon Ah Kee, Gordon Hookey and Laurie Nilsen, *Does He Bowl or Does He Throw*, 2011  
Acrylic and charcoal on canvas



**Fig.6:** Vernon Ah Kee, Gordon Hookey and Laurie Nilsen, 2011  
*Boxer's Earnings Withheld*  
Acrylic and charcoal on canvas

*Does He Bowl or Does He Throw* (Fig.5) and *Boxer's Earnings Withheld* (Fig.6) are both based on two photographs of the sportsmen, and the titles are reminiscent of newspaper outlines, emphasizing their reality and rooting them in the present. Just as the name of the collective, proppaNOW, suggests a constant “reacting to now,”<sup>147</sup> the construction of these two works underline the timeless aspect of the sportsmen’s experiences, made of racism and forced dependence. This reaction lies in the very questioning and denunciation of such experiences, which are still very common in Australia today as a report by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) showed it in 2007.<sup>148</sup> Moreover, the two works were part of an exhibition entitled *The Black See*: the ‘See’ can either read as an attempt to destroy ignorance and make people ‘see’ this daily racism in sport, or as ‘C’, a letter taken from the insult ‘black

<sup>147</sup> Gordon Hookey, quoted in Ah Kee, *The Black See Education Kit* 5.

<sup>148</sup> “What’s the Score? A Survey of Cultural Diversity and Racism in Australian Sport,” *Australian Human Rights Commission*. 16 October 2007. 10 June 2013  
<<http://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/whats-score>>

cunt'.<sup>149</sup> Almost all the works presented in this exhibition were related to this term and, linked with the title of the exhibition, sadly appear as a genuine mark of identity:

If you talk to any Aboriginal person who plays sport in Australia, they can readily tell you that it's the excitement and passion that draws you into the game and out onto the field. The sense of combat, victory, and defeat are what we taste in our mouths and feel in our muscles and bones. But equally, any Aboriginal will tell you that the most common experience for Aborigines in sport is not the winning or losing, it is not the camaraderie, and it is not the sense of belonging to a club or team, it is name-calling. And a term most commonly fired at Blackfellas playing sport is, of course, 'Black C\*\*\*'.<sup>150</sup>

The exhibited works are thus very ambivalent: on the one hand they denounce racism and the verbal violence aimed at Aboriginal people, but they also highlight the 'colour' of Aborigines, which is not hidden here, on the contrary. Racism is therefore not fought by trying to standardize people, but by emphasizing the differences, so that they can be acknowledged and respected by all.

In a very different way, Michael Riley also shows us the pride of being black. His series *A Common Place: Moree Murries* (Fig.7 and 8) is full of tenderness for the Aboriginal community of Moree, and his portraits emphasize the individuality of the 'models' (who chose themselves their poses).<sup>151</sup> Riley considers this series a very important work because it allowed him to show an Aboriginal community:<sup>152</sup> far from the stereotype of the "dirty, lazy, unreliable, bludging, shifty little 'Jacky',"<sup>153</sup> these people are shown as they really are and their portraits add to this 're-construction' of the Aboriginal identity which, after all, is not presented as being only about blackness, but as an opposition to the blackness imposed by the whites.

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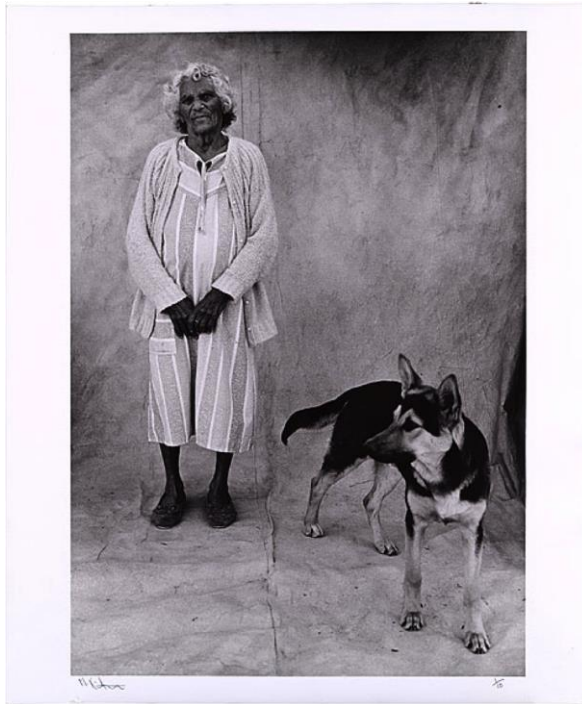
<sup>149</sup> Ah Kee, "About the Black See" 4.

<sup>150</sup> Ah Kee, "About the Black See" 4.

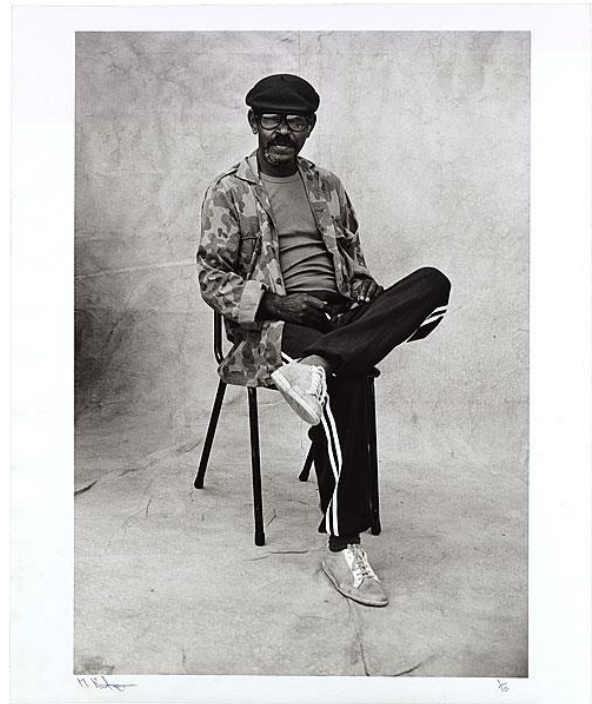
<sup>151</sup> Michael Riley, *A Common Place: Portraits of Moree Murries 1990*, Michael Riley, 9 May 2013 < <http://www.michaelriley.com.au/a-common-place-portraits-of-moree-murries/>>

<sup>152</sup> Riley.

<sup>153</sup> Gilbert 203.



**Fig.7:** Michael Riley, *Nanny Wright and Dog*, 1991, from the series *A Common Place: Moree Murries*  
Gelatin silver photograph, edition of 15  
55 x 39 cm



**Fig.8:** Michael Riley, *Kenny Copeland*, 1991, from the series *A Common Place: Moree Murries*  
Gelatin silver photograph, edition of 15  
55.8 x 39,8 cm

~ *Art as self-determination* ~

Opposing the notion and images of ‘blackness’ imposed by whites (from the settlers to today’s Australians) with a ‘new’ Aboriginality, is indeed quite common among the urban artistic community. Like Michael Riley, Fiona Foley has used the photographic medium to physically demonstrate her autonomy and power. Her series *Native Blood* (Fig.9) is made of hand-coloured black and white self-portraits, and illustrates this will to “state who and what we are, to self-identify.”<sup>154</sup> Indeed, these self-portraits are in fact appropriations of the old photographs that were taken by anthropologists at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In

<sup>154</sup> Daniel Browning, “Blakness is Really Important,” editorial, *Artlink*, 30 n.1 2010: 19.

those ancient pictures, Aborigines were told how to stand, how to dress, and what to do; they were not pictures of Aborigines but pictures of how the ‘white man’ saw Aborigines and how he wanted them to be seen. What Foley is stating in her work is that she has the power to decide how to pose, how she wants to appear: it is truly a statement of independence.



She poses half-naked, and plays with ambiguity and the viewer’s feelings: her body lies in a position we would expect to see in a classic European painting (such as Manet’s *Olympia* – **App.18**), yet it has the attributes of an Indigenous person

(vegetal skirt and

**Fig.9:** Fiona Foley, *Native Blood*, 1994  
Handpainted type C photograph  
40 x 50 cm

necklaces, which are traditional objects

made by Aboriginal women),<sup>155</sup> and she is wearing modern shoes which are coloured with the red, black and yellow of the Aboriginal flag.<sup>156</sup> The photograph therefore says several things: that she has chosen to appear like she does, and is proud of her Indigenous heritage (symbolised by the Aboriginal colours and traditional clothes), but that she also is a modern woman (illustrated by the platform shoes and the modern background, which has nothing to do with the real or fake natural environments used in ancient photographs of Aborigines). The fact that she is half-naked also echoes the

<sup>155</sup> Fiona Foley, quoted by Helen McDonald, “Re-visioning the Female Nude,” *Erotic Ambiguities: the Female Nude in Art*, 2001: 42, 12 May 2013 <[http://books.google.fr/books?id=-p2nzP8Uzm4C&pg=PA41&lpg=PA41&dq=fiona+foley+native+blood&source=bl&ots=fENeC88BYv&sig=Ls\\_Eaf1\\_YQEP1FcAcsRuvaT3JHw&hl=fr&sa=X&ei=6F2PUfl8Oqr00QWr7IHABQ&ved=0CDIQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=fiona%20foley%20native%20blood&f=false](http://books.google.fr/books?id=-p2nzP8Uzm4C&pg=PA41&lpg=PA41&dq=fiona+foley+native+blood&source=bl&ots=fENeC88BYv&sig=Ls_Eaf1_YQEP1FcAcsRuvaT3JHw&hl=fr&sa=X&ei=6F2PUfl8Oqr00QWr7IHABQ&ved=0CDIQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=fiona%20foley%20native%20blood&f=false)>

<sup>156</sup> Fiona Foley, quoted by Helen McDonald.

“powerful fantasies about the quintessential lasciviousness of ‘native’ women,”<sup>157</sup> which motivated white desire for what they called “black velvet”:<sup>158</sup> viewers are faced with an ambiguous feeling, where they are tempted to admire her body and beauty, but are somewhat prevented from doing so because of the links Foley implies with colonial attitudes, proving that she is now in total control of her own body, a power that Aboriginal women did not have during the period of colonisation.

Similarly, Bindi Cole has produced several photographs of drag artists Foxy Empire (Jason de Santis being his real name) or Ajay, who are part of the community of

‘sistagirls’, transgender males living and clothing like women on the Tiwi Islands.<sup>159</sup> Basing her work upon the photographs of ethnologist J.W. Lindt (App.19), just like Foley had based hers on similar images, Cole modified them in order to create a genuine representation of identity: the fake background was replaced by a real outdoor setting, which places the



**Fig.10:** Bindi Cole, *Crystal*, 2009  
Pigment print on rag paper  
105 x 70 cm

model in her own country and environment, and there was a real collaboration between the artist and the model, the first having agreed to what was created and being able to really participate to the project.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Collingwood-Whittick 38.

<sup>158</sup> Collingwood-Whittick 39.

<sup>159</sup> Gilchrist 74.

<sup>160</sup> Gilchrist 74.

But where Foley used a very sober black and white, Cole makes a great use of colours: *Crystal* (Fig.10) is full of an energy that illustrates the play around the stereotype of ethnographic photographs with a lot of bright and complementary colours, and a make-up that is at the same time part of Crystal's identity but also a means to remind us that portraits of Aborigines, at a certain time, showed an identity that was



**Fig.11:** Bindi Cole, *Ajay* 2009  
Pigment print on rag paper  
105 x 70 cm

false and, indeed, 'made up'. *Ajay* (Fig.11) still uses colours, but in a game of contrasts and echoes: the brown of the background blends into Ajay's skin colour and the blue paint echoes her lipstick and jewel. Her body stands between light and darkness,

revealing "the coexistence of male and female energy, the contrast of youth and decay and the internal contest between timidity and strength."<sup>161</sup> *Ajay's* portrait appears as a wonderful depiction of a human being whose story remains unknown to us but can still be glimpsed, "sensed rather than recalled."<sup>162</sup> She stands higher than us and her firm yet worried gaze is directed towards something we can't see, like "Candy Koorie's" gaze on the *Made for Each Other* poster: it makes us understand that, even if she stands "empowered and unconflicted,"<sup>163</sup> she (as a sistagirl) lives in a world where racism, violence, suicide and alcohol can "problematise an already hazardous existence."<sup>164</sup> But this can also apply to anyone claiming his Aboriginality or an identity considered as 'marginal' by the majority of Australians, and Cole's portrait is an extraordinary proof of

<sup>161</sup> Gilchrist 76.

<sup>162</sup> Gilchrist 76.

<sup>163</sup> Gilchrist 76.

<sup>164</sup> Gilchrist 76.



respect and love for people who accept what they are, are proud of it and make no apologies for it. As Stephen Gilchrist perfectly said:

(...) Ajay never solicits our sympathy. Her steely poise suggests a resolute self-belief that earns our profound respect and demonstrates the aching beauty and quiet dignity of being who you are.<sup>165</sup>

'Beauty' is a word that could also describe the work of Gary Lee. His photographs are in the same vein as Bindi Cole's, but Lee seems more interested in male depictions. Indeed, Lee is a gay Aboriginal man, and his photographs are as much about his identity as they are about male beauty,<sup>166</sup> which he always looks for in "the ordinary male," such as Indian body-builders (**App.20**).<sup>167</sup> And the fact that he was several times criticized for nude portraits of Aboriginal men says a lot about the white conception of Aboriginal bodies and sexuality: according to Lee, "white people mostly cannot deal with coloured men being photographed as beautiful or even sexy"<sup>168</sup> and his photographs have even suffered physical attacks by white men, who curiously enough find such images "threatening."<sup>169</sup> Such angry and violent reactions might be explained by several things: these photographed men are all very beautiful, perfectly shaped, and this raw beauty (Lee rarely uses post-production techniques)<sup>170</sup> might simply be a direct blow to people who might still have racist ideas about Indigenous people and think of themselves as 'superior'. These men pose shamelessly, proud of who they are, willing to offer their attractive bodies to the viewer. Their gazes may also be a reason for violent reactions: looking directly at the viewer, almost always smiling, they seem to invite us, and it may not be impossible that some white men have felt an attraction they usually hate or criticize. Even if Lee is gay himself, his models are not necessarily and are not photographed in order to represent homosexuality, but our society tends to always emphasize female beauty and nudity: we are not used to male beauty presented in such erotic depictions. *Shannon* (**Fig.12**) and *Shaba* (**App.21**) are associated with natural

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<sup>165</sup> Gilchrist 76.

<sup>166</sup> Daniel Browning, "Gary Lee: the Outsider" 78.

<sup>167</sup> Gary Lee, interview with Owen Leong, *Peril*, 5 June 2011, 14 May 2013 <<http://www.peril.com.au/2010-2011/edition10/interview-with-gary-lee-2/>>

<sup>168</sup> Lee.

<sup>169</sup> Lee.

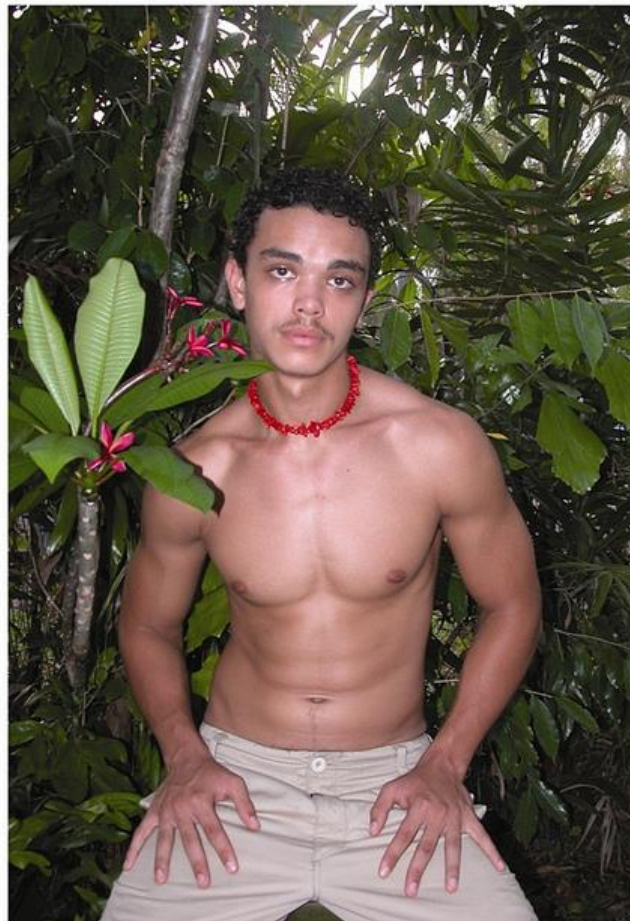
<sup>170</sup> Browning, "Gary Lee: the Outsider" 78.

elements that could make it easier for the viewer to accept their erotic aura (the setting sun, pink flowers), but Stephen, the *Darwin Boy* (Fig.13), has been portrayed in what seems to be his own shop: he could be a man you know, in whose shop you go regularly, and this kind of portrait emphasizes the fact that Lee's photographs are not only art, they are testimonies of real lives and real people, 'real' Indigenous people.

Lee goes against the widespread idea that Aboriginal men are only perverse, drunken and violent: just as Aborigines could not be trusted with their money (the passbook system prevented them to use freely what they possessed)<sup>171</sup>, they could not be trusted with their 'sexual appetite' either and the 2007 Intervention policy in the Northern Territory banned pornography on the basis that it had obviously lead to sexual aggressions and violence in the communities. Once again Aborigines had to be presented as savages with a "malign and uncontrollable" sexuality.<sup>172</sup>

But Lee's photographs of healthy and beautiful Indigenous bodies (App.22) go against such paternalistic and racist perceptions: his models are strong, proud,

independent, and most importantly they are visible. They depict what lies beneath the clothes and the indifference: the beauty of very lively people. Curiously, this visibility of Indigenous people is obtained by Lee's invisibility: if his 'models', men he met in the street, in shops etc, are so inclined to pose for him, it's because Lee has a physical



**Fig.12:** Gary Lee, *Shannon as Billiamook*, 2006  
Digital print on Hahnemühle paper

<sup>171</sup> Gilbert 22.

<sup>172</sup> Browning, "Gary Lee: the Outsider" 80.

appearance that makes him look like a Nepalese or an Indian. This “ethnic camouflage”<sup>173</sup> allowed him to gain the confidence of the people he met, since the discussion following the revelation that he was Australian aroused curiosity around him. This “fluid identity”<sup>174</sup> and this almost technique of “passing”<sup>175</sup> is, paradoxically, what allows him to take pictures that so naturally testify the visibility of his Indigenous models. Lee’s particularity is also a means to illustrate the unity there can be among ‘black’ people: when he first visited India and Nepal, Lee finally stayed for more than a year, feeling at home in a black country where people physically reminded him of relatives or of Aboriginal persons in general.<sup>176</sup>



**Fig.13:** Gary Lee, *Darwin Boy* 2006  
Digital print on Hahnemühle paper

The independence resulting from the description of one’s identity, which can be a marginalised one, stands in direct continuity to the 1970s movement of Black Power, when Aboriginal activists claimed that Aborigines needed to take care of themselves and not wait for whites to help them. There was an intense feeling of forced dependence on the side of Aborigines, who were constantly classified as “assisted”<sup>177</sup> and rejected because of that. Today, even contemporary artists are accused of claiming their Aboriginality (when they don’t ‘look like’ Aborigines – translate: they’re not black enough) to receive more benefits.<sup>178</sup> The 1972 Tent Embassy was the symbol of this will of independence: as Kevin Gilbert states, “from its inception to its demise, [it] was a totally Aboriginal thing.” Land rights were also part of this project to reject white

<sup>173</sup> Lee.

<sup>174</sup> Lee.

<sup>175</sup> Lee.

<sup>176</sup> Lee.

<sup>177</sup> Gilbert 20.

<sup>178</sup> Gilchrist, “From Tiwi with Love: Bindi Cole” 74.

assistance: it would give Aborigines financial means to help the communities organise themselves and work together.<sup>179</sup> Black Power also meant giving hope to generations of Aborigines, especially the young one, and creating a new positive image made of pride and dignity, for those “who have long ago lost the status of men.”<sup>180</sup>

The bodies depicted in urban works are therefore marked by this new empowerment, and Lin Onus’ painting *White man’s burden* (Fig.14) illustrates this growing faith in Aboriginality: turning over the colonialist concept of the white man’s burden, coined by British writer Rudyard Kipling in his eponymous poem, Onus uses an image of the past to reconstruct the present. At the time of colonisation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ‘burden’ of the white man was his ‘duty’ to go and take the ‘savage’ populations out of darkness and into the light of ‘civilization’. But here, the burden is a physical one: Onus depicted the Aboriginal warrior Musqito, well-known for the hard time he gave to the British colonisers, sitting on the back of a British soldier. After several years of guerrilla, he was finally captured and hanged in 1824.<sup>181</sup> Onus painted him as the symbol of Aboriginal resistance, but the portrait rather evokes a children’s game than the fights between



**Fig.14:** Lin Onus, *White Man’s Burden*, from the *Musqito* series, 1979-82  
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
161 x 74.5 cm  
Aborigines Advancement League Collection,  
Melbourne

colonial authorities and Musqito’s gang: a British soldier, standing on hands and knees like a father playing the horse for his son, carries on his back a smiling Musqito, whose green trousers and leafy greyish shirt could remind us of the figure of Peter Pan, a boy

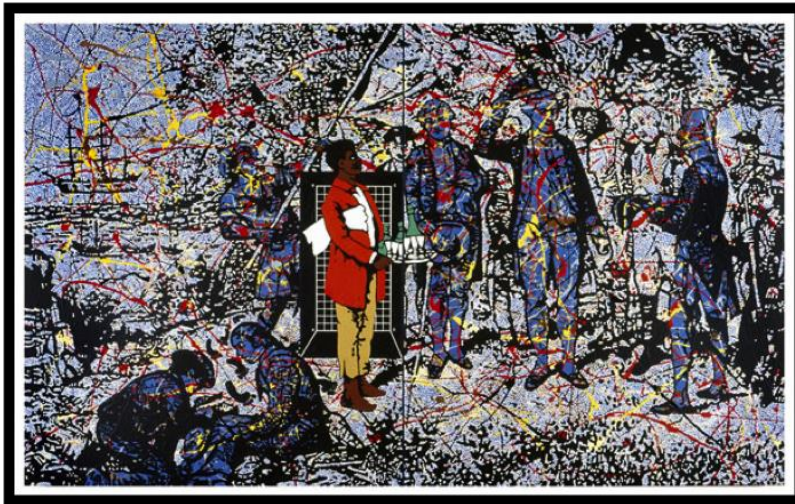
<sup>179</sup> Gilbert 40.

<sup>180</sup> Gilbert 104.

<sup>181</sup> Donna Leslie, “Lin Onus: Picturing Histories Speaking Politics,” [Artlink](#) 29.

who feared no one and not even death. Indigenous people have often been compared to children, and Onus may well have played with this famous figure of the untameable boy, leader of his gang, who would not surrender to the terrible Captain James Hook (whose name is quite close to Captain James Cook...). Musquito is depicted as in total control of the situation, “neither victim nor defeated,”<sup>182</sup> and looking with confidence at the viewer, as if he trusted him to carry on this constant fight for “liberation”<sup>183</sup> and social independence.

Similarly, Gordon Bennett has played with the colonial iconography in his painting *Possession Island* (Fig.15). The title of the work refers to a small island near the coast of northern Queensland, and Bennett used a reproduction of an engraving by Samuel Calvert, *Captain Cook taking formal possession of the Australian continent on behalf of the*



**Fig.15:** Gordon Bennett, *Possession Island*, 1991  
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
162 x 260 cm

Museum of Sydney on the site of first Government House,  
Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales.

*British Crown, AD 1770* (App.13). The original work is in black and white, and the composition is centred on James Cook, but Bennett transformed it in order to move the centre of focus to the Indigenous man standing next to him.

He has then given coloured clothes to this man, who now wears yellow trousers and a red jacket which, added to the black of his hair, are reminiscent

of the Aboriginal flag. All the comments I have read about this painting emphasized the servile attitude and inferior position of the Aboriginal man<sup>184</sup> (who stands with drinks on a tray), and the fact that the grid behind him makes him stand completely apart, a mere kitsch ornament among the fuzzy and unintelligible background and

<sup>182</sup> Leslie, “Lin Onus: Picturing histories speaking politics” 29.

<sup>183</sup> Paul Coe, quoted by Gilbert 111.

<sup>184</sup> “Gordon Bennett,” National Gallery of Australia, 13 May 2013  
<<http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/gordonbennett/education/04.html>>

surrounding.<sup>185</sup> Indeed, Bennett used grids and perspective lines in many of his works to illustrate the imprisonment of his figures in Eurocentric representations. But, to me, this Aboriginal man in *Possession Islands* is not imprisoned: his colours make him appear lively, he stands in sharp contrast with the rest of the painting, and his body is larger than the grid, it doesn't fit in, which makes me think that this image can be seen as a process of liberation.

Through their interpretations of two colonial events that ended quite dramatically for Aborigines (the death of Musquito and the colonisation of Australia), Lin Onus and Gordon Bennett question the construction of identity but also the possibilities we have to change it, just as an artist can take an image and modify it. They also encourage Aboriginal people to decide for themselves by showing that history can be different if they only act.

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<sup>185</sup> "Bennett versus Cook", [Miranda's Brave New World](http://mirandasbravenewworld.wordpress.com/tag/gordon-bennett/), 21 November 2012, 13 May 2013  
<<http://mirandasbravenewworld.wordpress.com/tag/gordon-bennett/>>

Linking the body with history is also what has motivated Judy Watson when she produced *Our Bones in Your Collections* (Fig.16). So far, depictions of bodies had dealt with the 'outer layer' of Aborigines, mainly their skin. With this work we get another perspective: Aborigines are not only 'outsides', they also are 'insides', and these insides also bear the marks of colonisation. Watson's print is a direct reference to the presence of Aboriginal remains in the collections of European museums. These remains were brought back to the old continent after various findings, but most of the times they were literally stolen from tombs or taken from freshly massacred bodies to be sent to "the 'scientific' idiots of the time."<sup>186</sup> This was the ultimate violence inflicted to Aboriginal bodies, because it attacked the very "last unit to break down following death,"<sup>187</sup> the most solid and intimate part of any body. Today, numerous Aboriginal associations try to claim these remains in order to get them back to their people and buried sites, but they face an incredible opposition from some scientists, who can't understand the motivations of Aborigines when these remains represent such a "unique and

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<sup>186</sup> Kim Beazley, "Oppression Doesn't Need Another Race," Graham 114.

<sup>187</sup> Louise Martin-Chew, and Judy Watson, *Blood Language* (Melbourne University Press: 2009) 68.



**Fig.16:** Judy Watson, *Our Bones in Your Collections*, 1997

Etching with chine collé, edition of 30  
Platemark 30 x 21 cm

Sheet 40 x 27 cm

Printer: Basil Hall, Northern Editions  
Charles Darwin University

irreplaceable resource to advance knowledge for current and future generations.”<sup>188</sup> Beyond the controversy around the repatriation of Aboriginal remains, what is at stake here, in Watson’s print, is again the independence that is being taken by Indigenous people. By using the possessive pronouns “our” and “your,” Watson creates a unity among Aborigines, and an opposition between Indigenous people and what was before the colonial empire. Now that Indigenous remains can be found all around the world,<sup>189</sup> this symbolic

‘colonial empire’ has become larger: the Aborigines’ actions are therefore even more important, as they stand and face institutions that have literally shaped our world and

knowledge. These repatriations, or at least the requests for repatriation, appear as an incredibly powerful move from the Indigenous populations of Australia who, through them, claim their Indigenous identity and even position themselves in another apprehension of the world, of what is personal and what is public, which can be very different from our point of view.<sup>190</sup> Moreover, they indicate that, if Aborigines – or more

<sup>188</sup> Tim Elliott, “Jealous Keepers of the Sacred Bones”, *The Age – National*, 13 March 2012, 12 March 2013: 2 <<http://www.theage.com.au/national/jealous-keepers-of-the-sacred-bones-20100312-q48m.html>>

<sup>189</sup> Elliott 1.

<sup>190</sup> Paul Turnbull, “Ancestors, not Specimens: Reflections on the Controversy over the Remains of Aboriginal People in European Scientific Collections,” *The Electronic Journal of Australian and New Zealand History*, 16 October 2007. 10 June 2013: 3 <<http://www.jcu.edu.au/aff/history/articles/turnbull.htm>>



generally Indigenous people – want to have power over their own bodies, they need to go back historically and try to have power again over the bodies of their ancestors: again, as we have seen it in the first part of this essay, there is a very important link between past and present, and the bodies of today’s Aborigines need to be built or rebuilt from a sane base, that base being for example the remains of ancestors that can be found in European museums. Requesting that they be taken back to Australia is a way to assert one’s power over one’s past, to claim that one has enough will and means to rebuild an identity that has been shattered.

This controversy over Aboriginal remains can also be linked with the controversy that has arisen after several scientists suggested to study the DNA of Indigenous peoples around the world: the memories of racial classifications and the fear of medical abuse<sup>191</sup> brought together with a tendency to refuse the help of whites when it is seen as paternalistic, have made this project a difficult one to carry since “Indigenous peoples thus tend to consider DNA analysis as a threat to their self-identification, their existence, as well as their sovereignty.”<sup>192</sup>

Art thus appears as the best alternative to claim an identity, because it is very personal and can make more visible the links between different generations of Aborigines. Gary Lee has, for example, chosen to pay tribute to the beauty of Larrakia women, but also to his family. His diptych *Mei Kim & Minnie* (**Fig.17**) indeed features his great, great grandmother Minnie Duwun and one of his nieces Mei Kim, reunited through the juxtaposition of their portraits, separated by more than a century and produced under very different circumstances. Re-appropriating a 1887 colonial photograph by Paul Foelsche that he found after a lot of research,<sup>193</sup> like the Aboriginal remains lying in museums which finally came back to their families, Lee has been finally able to put a face to the name he had known for so long. Choosing one of his nieces to create the diptych, Lee gave her the same pose and clothes and took the picture in Darwin, where Minnie’s photograph was also taken, in order to make them “come back today as one.”<sup>194</sup> The black and white of the colonial picture stand in contrast with the

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<sup>191</sup> Berthier-Foglar vii.

<sup>192</sup> Berthier-Foglar ix.

<sup>193</sup> Lee.

<sup>194</sup> Lee.

bright colours of Lee's photograph but the diptych nevertheless illustrates a continuity of identity and a will to show it with pride, from the point of view of the Aborigines and without the interference of white people.



**Fig.17:** Gary Lee, *Mei Kim and Minnie*, 2006  
Untitled Portrait (1887) Paul Foelsche (South Australian Museum collection)

Pride, unity and independence thus stand at the base of urban art, which, through very personal creations, illustrates the Aborigines' will to appear again as an important part of Australia. The process of rebuilding of the Aboriginal identity has led Aborigines to naturally consider themselves as a united community, and not as several social entities as it could have been the case before the arrival of the European settlers two hundred years ago. Therefore, urban artists seem to use black-skinned figures in order

to stress even more the united aspect of Aboriginality, which is nevertheless still questioned, discussed and created within their works, for the concept of 'Aboriginality' is a difficult thing to define. Yet it seems that, if it is indeed complicated to illustrate what it is, urban artists rather use what it is not: stereotypes and preconceived ideas are debunked one after the other, sometimes with a lot of humour, sometimes through very serious accusations. The construction of 'blackness' in Australia has to be done in opposition to the vision of blackness that has been constructed by the white coloniser and perpetuated by generations of Australians, and urban works seem more to be motivated by love and respect for the people depicted than by resentment for those who have imposed a false identity on Aborigines.

This affirmation of a new pride in Aboriginality goes alongside with a movement of social independence, where Aborigines want to break the circles of dependence on white Australia that have led so many of them to poverty and despair. Claiming an identity through a work of art is a means to protest against the incorporation of Aborigines within the multicultural Australian nation:<sup>195</sup> they want to be seen and accepted as the first occupiers of the land or as the descendants of those people, and they demand that they can themselves choose how this identity is to be portrayed.

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<sup>195</sup> Docker and Fischer 30.



~ Creating a dialogue with the 'white' Australian ~

*"It really gets into their guts. But why not, man? Why not get into their guts?"<sup>196</sup>*

*One day, Kevin Gilbert heard a man say: "I guess we have to face the fact that the gubbah is here to stay."<sup>197</sup> Aborigines have long since accepted that Australia is now a land they have to share with the non-Aboriginal population, especially since the merging of the two communities has made the notion of Aboriginality permeable. The main problem faced by the country today is the construction of a healthy relationship between the two communities. 'Land rights' and 'Reconciliation' are terms that are often discussed and debated today. In this context, urban Aboriginal artists appear as an important group to bring together Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people since they usually know and understand quite well both cultures. I will therefore focus on how their works act as a dialogue with the non-Aboriginal population of Australia by revealing the Aboriginal version of the country's history, and by using physical confrontation to build this new relationship.*

**~ Another history ~**

Urban artworks unveil the sufferings and pain of Aboriginal people, but they also unveil hidden parts of Australia's history. Indeed, what Australians have usually been taught is "the history of colonisation,"<sup>198</sup> and never the "history of the dark-skinned wandering tribes who hurled boomerangs and ate snakes,"<sup>199</sup> as a 1917 schoolbook read. The development of Aboriginal art, in its many forms (literature, music, painting

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<sup>196</sup> Kaye Belleair, quoted by Gilbert 45.

<sup>197</sup> Quoted by Gilbert 26.

<sup>198</sup> Gordon Bennett, The art of Gordon Bennett (Craftsman House: 1996) p.21.

<sup>199</sup> Bennett 21.

etc...), reveals the need to re-appropriate the past and offer, after decades of this 'Great Australian Silence', as Professor William Edward Hanley Staner has coined this "collective loss of memory,"<sup>200</sup> the Aboriginal version of the country's history.<sup>201</sup> But before re-appropriation can actually take place, artists must seek the transmission of knowledge: the history of their people, their own history, will be accepted and acknowledged only if it is first taught and brought to non-Aboriginal Australians, for many 'white' Australians rarely realise what has really happened and why the situation is so difficult for Aborigines today.<sup>202</sup> Here again the motive of the body is of great importance: it makes history physical and allows the viewer to feel directly concerned because the works address the intellect as much as the feelings.

Many viewers would indeed not feel indifferent to the depiction of bones, immediately associated with death and massacres. With *Evidence* (Fig.1), Judy Watson tackles the popular representation of Australia's colonisation as non-violent and bloodless,<sup>203</sup> and more particularly "to those who claim that the massacres of Aboriginal people in Australia never happened."<sup>204</sup> The diptych, like "two rolls of a testament on Australia's history,"<sup>205</sup> depicts white bones in rows, methodically put there as if they were going to be studied: the analogy with Aboriginal remains in European museums would be relevant, but

**Fig.1:** Judy Watson, *Evidence*, 2001  
Diptych, pigment on canvas  
each canvas 155 x 61 cm



<sup>200</sup> Duthil (my translation) 83.

<sup>201</sup> Duthil 81.

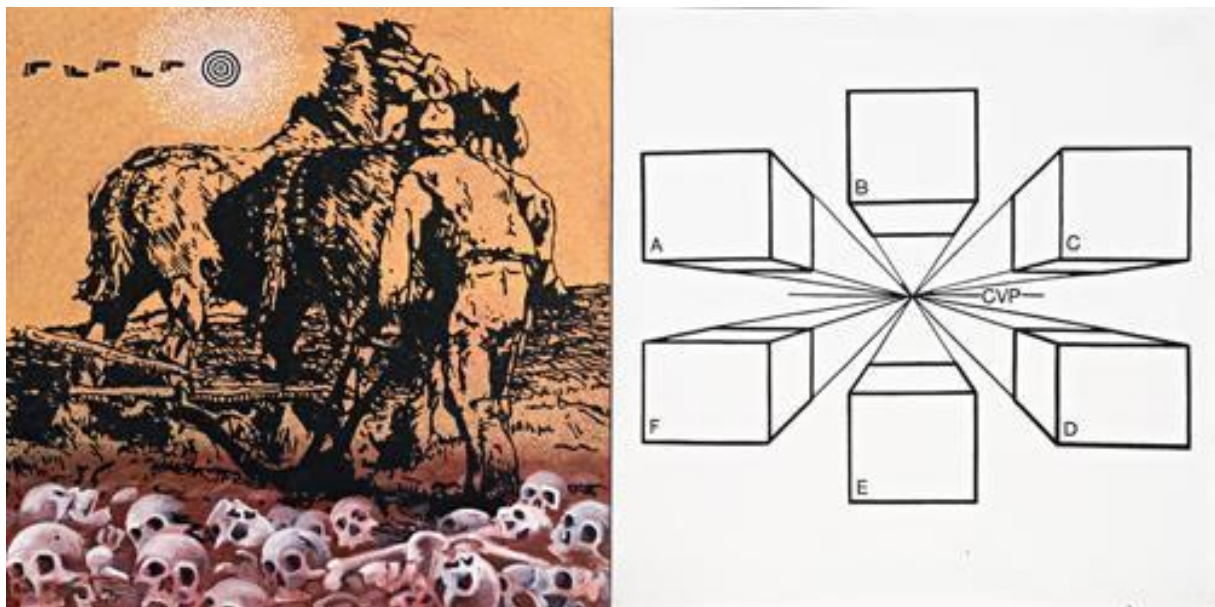
<sup>202</sup> Pons 98.

<sup>203</sup> Duthil 83.

<sup>204</sup> Watson 183.

<sup>205</sup> Watson 183.

Watson probably wanted to draw the viewer's attention to the regular aspect of Aboriginal killings. These crimes were not the results of chance or simple arguments between the Indigenous population and the settlers, they were premeditated and if they were not officially encouraged, no significant punishment was taken, which led to the quasi genocide of Aboriginal people. Watson's style is often abstract, but here the bones are easily recognisable and the hazy aspect of the background emphasises the uneasy feeling we may experience: the almost magical rendering of the land is disturbed by the rigid organisation of the bones, but the two blend together, as if history had put its mark in the soil and the latter could not be seen as a 'pure' element anymore but only as defiled by the repeated violent and unnatural deaths.



**Fig.2:** Gordon Bennett, *The Plough*, 1988  
Oil and acrylic on canvas  
130 x 260 cm  
Private collection

Land is also present in other urban works dealing with the resurgence of Australia's criminal history. *The Plough* (Fig.2), by Gordon Bennett, is particularly interesting because it plays with a very subtle symbolism. The left panel of this diptych depicts a farmer ploughing his land, but the white skulls and bones Bennett has painted beneath the earth disturb this pastoral and quiet scene. The soil seems to be full of those

human remains, and the land takes the form of a huge cemetery. Of course the remains are those of Aborigines, and Bennett opposes the popular image of the brave European settler to the darker side of the settlement. This image is even more powerful when linked to the personal experience of Kevin Gilbert:

As a child of fourteen, I remember how my guts twisted as I dug the skeletons of black women and children out of the sands of the Murrumbidgee and examined the squashed and bullet-riddled skulls.<sup>206</sup>

What is made visible is the physical killing and massacres of Aborigines that have taken place in the early days of colonisation, something the contemporary Australian society wants to hide and forget, but also – on a more symbolic dimension – the psychological destruction of an entire people under the weight and pressure of the European civilization, which destroys and transforms things and people which had managed to attain a supposedly perfect balance before its arrival (this oppression is symbolized by the right panel, which represents a perspective diagram, an illusion that Bennett dislikes, and that he uses – along with grid patterns – to symbolise imprisonment within particular rules).<sup>207</sup> To come back to a very ‘physical’ interpretation of the painting, the plough can also be considered as a very violent action, as opposed to its common fertile connotation: ploughing can be seen as a genuine rape of the land, a symbol of the masculine domination of (the Western) man over the earth. The deeper into the soil the farmer will go, the more virile he will become, violently imposing his domination over Australia’s ground just as he may have done with Aboriginal women.

Besides, on a more rational note, plough means agriculture, and agriculture is considered by some as the symbol of human evolution, the “alpha”<sup>208</sup> of civilization and a “necessary transition”<sup>209</sup> for any human group who would like to evolve. This is a concept that has been opposed to the Aboriginal culture – which did not develop agriculture and evolved in a different way – ever since Aborigines have been discovered. Basing their judgement on Eurocentric views, some people (politicians, scientists etc)

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<sup>206</sup> Gilbert 10.

<sup>207</sup> McLean, The Art of Gordon Bennett, p.19.

<sup>208</sup> Pons 21.

<sup>209</sup> Pons (my translation) 20.

came to the conclusion that a people that had not invented the wheel was obviously doomed to disappear:

At no stage did Aboriginal civilisation develop substantial buildings, roadways, or even a wheeled cart as part of their different priorities and approach... Rightly or wrongly dispossession of Aboriginal civilisation was always going to happen. White settlement of the Australian land mass was inevitable.<sup>210</sup>

There is an interesting association in this painting between the working of the land and the historical aspect of art, as ploughing usually brings to the surface objects that lie deeper in the soil (here: the skulls of Aborigines). This painting acts exactly that way: it brings to the surface buried facts and memories. It also means that if Australia is to acknowledge its ambivalent past (i.e. go deep in the ground that supports the country), made of brave pioneers as much as atrocious killings, it has to meet and face its Indigenous people, who will emerge and become visible again after they are given their rightful place in Australia's history. But if the country refuses to do this, then it will continue to plough an unfertile land and the country will not be built on solid foundations but on a sordid soil haunted by murder.

The Aboriginal symbol on the top left side of the left panel could indicate that there is indeed another way of seeing things: just as the perspective diagram denounced both the social rules that imprisoned people and the artistic ones that were taught in art schools as the 'dominant' way of depicting things, this symbol made of concentric circles (which stands in traditional Aboriginal art for important places such as sacred sites, water holes etc) and footprints illustrates the fact that we can see and tell history in a different way and from a different point of view, just like we can see and depict a landscape in another way than the classic one.

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<sup>210</sup> Tim Fisher (National Party leader), quoted by Markus 76.



Sally Morgan has also used the opposition between a wealthy, fertile and quiet 'surface' and a soil crammed with dead bodies. In her print *Another Story* (Fig.3), she illustrates the same thing as Gordon Bennett: Australia has built itself on a false and



**Fig.3:** Sally Morgan, *Another Story*, 1988  
Screenprint, edition of 95  
Printed image 60.4 x 32.7 cm  
Sheet 76.2 x 55.8

incomplete history that took no account of Aborigines<sup>211</sup> and their mistreatments. The print is separated in two uneven parts: the surface, where the nice Australian house is built, occupies one third of the picture, while the underground, full of black bodies, occupies the majority of the picture. The bodies, which still look like human beings and have not yet become skeletons, all look alike and have the same dynamic position. But while Bennett evokes the emergence of the bones through the movements of the plough, the presence of Morgan's bodies seems to be growing to such an intensity that they are deforming the ground above them, pushing the earth with such a pressure that it is taking the form of a dome, like a

volcano on the verge of exploding. The little house with its white fences and its nice little flower-like pokes of white smoke is no match against the powerful force coming from the underground.

Although Bennett and Morgan have treated this subject slightly differently, there is in the two works a common sense of urgency: in Bennett's work, the farmer doesn't seem aware of what lies in his soil, and the only human presence in Morgan's print is the

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<sup>211</sup> Duthil 85.

chimney's smoke, indicating that the inhabitants are inside, ignoring – or not knowing – the danger that lies under their feet. Both works imply that the situation is lethal: the farmer will never grow anything on such a land, and the nice house in Morgan's work will probably disappear when this dome beneath it will explode. Acknowledging Australia's murderous past is not just a question of ethics, or respect toward the Indigenous population of the country, it is (according to these paintings) almost a question of life and death, for the country will not 'survive' if such events are held secret any longer and are not taught to all the generations of Australians. Of course the situation is not that lethal, but these works are meant to shock: they must bring the viewer to the realisation that the relations between Aborigines and 'white' Australians will not evolve positively if nothing is done to acknowledge the wrongs of the past.

Morgan's print can, in some way, be related to a painting by German painter Paul Klee, *Arrow in the garden* (**App.23**). Sixty years and several thousands kilometres separate the two works, yet they can be linked together by their compositions: the arrow in Klee's painting points to a very precise location in the 'garden', and Morgan's omnipresent dead bodies seem to move upward to the little house in the upper part of the print. Both artists seem to have wanted to draw the viewer's attention to a single point, or rather to make him aware of the relation of this precise point with its environment. Eran Dorfman, a French philosophy researcher, considers that the arrow in Klee's painting, right in the middle of the composition, represents our place in the world: tiny and limited, but surrounded by a multitude of lines crossing the painting, which reveal an incredible variety of plants and natural elements.<sup>212</sup> "Is this happiness?"<sup>213</sup> does he ask. Unfortunately not, for our thoughts and imagination, which created the garden in which we stand, "instead of enchanting us, always reflect our tiny place, our powerless position, limited and finite."<sup>214</sup> What Klee seems to tell us, or rather what this interpretation seems to tell us, is that whatever we might build, physically or with our minds, it won't compensate for the fact that we are just a small part of the world. Sally Morgan has (consciously or not) adapted this to her own society: Anglo-Celtic Australians have created a country where they sit at the top of the hierarchy,

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<sup>212</sup> Fabrice Bourlez and Lorenzo Vinciguerra, *L'œil et l'Esprit: Merleau-Ponty, Entre art et Philosophie* (Reims : Épure, 2010) 61.

<sup>213</sup> Bourlez and Vinciguerra 61.

<sup>214</sup> Bourlez and Vinciguerra (my translation) 61.

comfortably living in perfect houses. But they must “learn to see themselves as just one ethnic group among many,”<sup>215</sup> not as the ‘natural’ rulers of a country that has been taken by force, or what they have built will crumble and fall apart.

Of course, this process of seeing oneself as a fraction of something rather than the thing itself means changing one’s perception quite radically. The controversial Reconciliation process is a huge blow to the perception Australians have of themselves: indeed, until now, the Anglo-Celtic population of the country had experienced the construction of Australia as a genuine expulsion from Eden.<sup>216</sup> Ann Curthoys, a researcher in Australian history, developed this idea and explained that the ambivalent basis on which the Australian society is constructed is the original rejection by the mother country, England, and at the same time the “exodus from the British Pharaoh’s shores.”<sup>217</sup> Therefore, Australians cannot see themselves otherwise than as victims, a wandering people that has found a land to rebuild itself through years of suffering and hardship.<sup>218</sup> The Reconciliation process forces them to see that they have also been victimisers and have inflicted terrible hardships and sufferings to those who appear as the Canaanites: the Aboriginal people of Australia.<sup>219</sup> This is something the majority of Australians cannot cope with: this acknowledgement of “a history of land-taking, massacres, and child removal,”<sup>220</sup> as well as the much debated ‘native title’, suggest that “white occupation is illegitimate, and Aboriginal land claims are taken as leading to either a literal or a metaphorical loss of land.”<sup>221</sup>

‘White’ Australians can have a really possessive relation with the land,<sup>222</sup> and right-wing politician Pauline Hanson sums up their attitude quite well when it comes to acknowledging the darker side of Australia’s history:

I am fed up with being told ‘This is our land’. Well, where the hell do I go? I was born here, and so were my parents and children... I draw the line when

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<sup>215</sup> Docker and Fischer 29.

<sup>216</sup> Docker and Fischer 9.

<sup>217</sup> Docker and Fischer 9.

<sup>218</sup> Docker and Fischer 9.

<sup>219</sup> Docker and Fischer 9.

<sup>220</sup> Docker and Fischer 9.

<sup>221</sup> Docker and Foscher 9.

<sup>222</sup> Docker and Fischer 33-34.

told I must pay and continue paying for something that happened over 200 years ago. Like most Australians, I worked for my land, no-one gave it to me.<sup>223</sup>

Yet, if such a reaction can be understandable (just like German people, especially the younger generation, can't stand being always reminded of the Nazis' atrocities), it has to be fought. Whatever Hanson may think, Australia has been 'given' to all those generations of Australians, because everything was done to prevent Aborigines from claiming anything. Of course no one is going to blame the people of today for what their ancestors did, but every Australian must acknowledge that, as Duncan Graham puts it, they are "the recipients of stolen goods" and "the beneficiaries of [their] foreparents' actions or inactions."

Sometimes land is precisely used to guide the viewer to the body and unveil tragic events: Fiona Foley, in her 2004 installation *Witnessing to Silence* (Fig.4), used ash and water (along with stone and bronze) to evoke the fire and floods which transformed Queensland landscapes in the course of the state's history. But another interpretation lies beneath what the viewer may see: indeed, Foley asked the help of a researcher to gather information about the massacres of Aborigines in Queensland. She had already worked on that subject with *Annihilation of the Blacks* (Fig.13, see p.35), which symbolised a massacre that took place on the Susan River in Queensland, and her work coincided with the so-called 'History Wars', during the years 2000, when Australian historians debated over evidence of such events. The researcher she employed for *Witnessing to Silence* found documents telling how, after the massacres, "the perpetrators would dispose of the evidence by either burning the bodies or dumping them into nearby water sources":<sup>224</sup> the ash and water used in Foley's work would therefore refer to the "silencing of history,"<sup>225</sup> and her intent is indeed stated on the plaque placed by the Queensland Government next to her installation.<sup>226</sup> Just as Gordon Bennett and Sally Morgan have illustrated the 'emergence' of the past from the earth, Fiona Foley also plays with the notion of natural cycle: the burning and drowning of

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<sup>223</sup> Pauline Henson, quoted by Docker and Fischer 34.

<sup>224</sup> Tess Allas, "History is a Weapon: Fiona Foley, History Teacher," *Artlink* 58.

<sup>225</sup> Allas 58.

<sup>226</sup> Allas 58.

bodies are associated with the land, of which they become part, and which, in turn, reveals the massacres.



**Fig.4:** Fiona Foley, *Witnessing to Silence* (detail), 2004  
Bronze, water feature, pavement stone, laminated ash and stainless steel  
Brisbane Magistrates Court, Brisbane

Strangely, “the systematic covering-up of these atrocities”<sup>227</sup> stands in contradiction with the cold and almost indecent public exhibition of Aboriginal remains I have mentioned in the previous part of this essay. Another form of approach may then



**Fig.5:** Judy Watson, *Our Skin in Your Collections*,  
1997

Etching with chine collé, edition of 30  
Platemark 30 x 21 cm  
Sheet 40 x 27 cm  
Printer: Basil Hall, Northern Editions  
Charles Darwin University

be needed to reveal history and teach it: Judy Watson created the series *Our Skin, Our Hair, our Bones in Your Collections* (Fig 5, 6 and 7) after her visit to several British museums, and her aim was to criticize those collections of Aboriginal remains and objects in overseas museums.<sup>228</sup> The three prints of the series represent drawings of Aboriginal artefacts she has chosen according to their geographical origins (the Gulf of Carpentaria, which was as close as possible to her own country), and then put under a piece of chine collé<sup>229</sup> in order to “set them back a bit.”<sup>230</sup> In her own words, the chine collé acts like a skin, so these objects “are not able to be too obviously ‘feasted upon’ by the viewer.”<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Allas 58.

<sup>228</sup> Watson 172.

<sup>229</sup> The chine collé is a printmaking technique where a piece of paper is glued onto the final print in order to add texture, colours...

<sup>230</sup> Watson 172.

<sup>231</sup> Watson 172.



**Fig. 6:** Judy Watson, *Our Hair in Your Collections*, 1997

Etching with chine collé, edition of 30  
Platemark 30 x 21 cm  
Sheet 40 x 27 cm  
Printer: Basil Hall, Northern Editions



**Fig. 7:** Judy Watson, *Our Bones in Your Collections*, 1997

Etching with chine collé, edition of 30  
Platemark 30 x 21 cm  
Sheet 40 x 27 cm  
Printer: Basil Hall, Northern Editions

The technique she used to create these prints is a way to give these objects, which “are not just objects, but pieces of [her] people,”<sup>232</sup> back to Aborigines, to repatriate them back to where they belong as a reclaiming of a culture.<sup>233</sup> But it also reveals (through the veil, paradoxically, of the chine collé and the drawing of artefacts and not bones) the raw atrocity of “the macabre practice of collecting human trophies.”<sup>234</sup> Veronica Brady (an Australian Religious Sister and a writer) wrote “a frontier is like a skin: it separates and holds together at the same time,”<sup>235</sup> and here the ‘skin’ of the chine collé acts as a frontier, keeping the viewer away from the objects Foley couldn’t touch herself, but also as “a protective gesture, an expression of tenderness.”<sup>236</sup> There is no animosity in this series of print, although they deal with a very painful subject for

<sup>232</sup> Watson 172.

<sup>233</sup> Martin-Chew 168.

<sup>234</sup> Martin-Chew 168.

<sup>235</sup> Brady, Graham 141.

<sup>236</sup> Martin-Chew 168.

Aborigines, but rather a will to softly put things back to their places: the non-Aboriginal viewer is reminded that there are things that should not and cannot be seen or made public because they are the very property of human beings, and in this case the 'skin-frontier' takes the form of the body of the 'other', the Aborigine; and the Aboriginal viewer finds himself, on the contrary, assimilated to this symbolic representation of an Aboriginal body, the 'skin' being permeable and allowing him to identify with the objects depicted and the history implied by the titles.

This is where re-appropriation can take place. Since "the work of art can be considered as a correction"<sup>237</sup> (in the sense that the artist is always rebuilding a perception he had,<sup>238</sup> but can also decide to transform what he has seen, experienced or learned about), urban artists can transfer the past into the present with the help of their own bodies. We have already seen such a process with the several appropriations of colonial photographs shown in the previous part of this essay, but another artist has taken this process even further: r e a, a media artist working with videos, photography and other digital media. Her 2009 work *PolesApart* (Fig. 8, 9, 10 and 11), includes a silent, high-definition video, four photographic triptychs and a Victorian gown specially created by a Melbourne dress designer. Since the work is not available on the Internet, I had to trust and base my reflection on the description made by Christine Nickolls, a lecturer in Australian studies who has worked on this artist:

In the video the protagonist, an apparently ageless, androgynous Aboriginal woman, runs through a bushfire-devastated forest. The woman wears a gown that situates her in an earlier time. The fire-blackened trees through which this anonymous woman soundlessly weaves her way are tall, stark and forbidding.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Bourlez and Vinciguerra (my translation) p.22

<sup>238</sup> Bourlez and Vinciguerra p.22

<sup>239</sup> Christine Judith Nickolls, "PolesApart by r e a: Re-Negotiating the Past through visual Art," The International Journal of Diversity in Organisations, Communities and Nations, Vol. 10, n. 1, 2010: 254.





**Fig. 8 and 9:** r e a, *PolesApart 1* and *PolesApart 2*, 2009  
 C-type photograph triptych  
 100 x 92 cm, 100 x 110 cm, 100 x 92 cm  
 Breenspace gallery, Sydney

In this very personal work, r e a embodies Sophie, her grandmother's sister, who managed to run away from the family she worked for and go back home.<sup>240</sup> Just like her sister Ruby (r e a's grandmother), Sophie had been taken away from her family around 1916, and the two girls were sent to the Cootamundra Girls' House, where they were 'taught' "the scrubbing, washing, ironing, and sewing that the Board did not want to pay anyone to do"<sup>241</sup> in order to be sent as maidservants to wealthy white people.<sup>242</sup>

<sup>240</sup> Nickolls 256.

<sup>241</sup> Nickolls 256.

<sup>242</sup> Nickolls 255.



**Fig. 10 and 11:** r e a, *PolesApart 3* and *PolesApart 4*, 2009  
 C-type photograph triptych  
 100 x 92 cm, 100 x 110 cm, 100 x 92 cm  
 Breenspace gallery, Sydney

By using her own body to perform her great-aunt, r e a “asserts her present-day self as existing within an historical continuum,”<sup>243</sup> but she also testifies that “the short history of Australia has been a constant repetition of government policies imposed on Aboriginal People”<sup>244</sup> in a cycle created by people who, ignorant of history, “are forced to repeat it.”<sup>245</sup> Teaching blends with politics, for if r e a’s work brings the reality of the past closer to the contemporary viewer, it is also motivated by, as I mentioned earlier, the rebuilding and transformation of this past. According to Christine Nickolls, *PolesApart* was shot near the city of Daylesford, in the state of Victoria, where the Heidelberg school, an Australian artistic movement, developed at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This movement is known for having operated a shift in the pictorial style, from a European way of depicting light to a genuine celebration of the Australian landscape,

<sup>243</sup> Nickolls 256.

<sup>244</sup> Gilbert VIII.

<sup>245</sup> Gilbert VIII.

in a nationalist context where an 'Australian art' was needed to build the new nation and cut off the links with England.<sup>246</sup> Strangely or not, their perception of this new landscape built itself on the rejection – or rather on the omission – of the Aboriginal presence: “The Heidelberg artists chose not to ‘see’ the Indigenous presence in that country – Indigenous people were simply invisible to them”<sup>247</sup> writes r e a, and indeed their voluntary blindness went so far as to entitle *The Australian Native* (App.24) a painting depicting a young white lady. It is therefore not surprising to realise that she appropriated the composition of some of the works by Heidelberg artist Frederick McCubbin’s, such as *On the Wallaby Track* (App.25) and *The Pioneer* (App.26),<sup>248</sup> by quoting the forest landscapes and the female characters wearing dresses. R e a’s work is a direct answer to their perception of a totally white Australia and of the concept of Terra Nullius, and she offers another example of how urban artists try to reverse the invisibility of Aborigines. They do not necessarily speak for themselves, for r e a doesn’t really want to be categorized as an Indigenous artist,<sup>249</sup> but for a community, and this emphasizes again the process of unification that has been going on among Aboriginal people in Australia and that I have analysed in the previous part of this essay. This reversing process is truly a historical act because, in the case of r e a for example, the artist recreates a certain context, a certain place, and modifies its structure.

Dianne Jones is a very good example of this transformation of history: like r e a, she used a work from the Heidelberg school (App.27) as the basis of her political message, and the reactions show that this kind of “intervention”<sup>250</sup> has a huge impact on the Australian public, as Clotilde Bullen (Curator of Indigenous Art at the Art Gallery of Western Australia) witnessed when she stood numerous times in front of *Shearing the rams* (Fig.12):

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<sup>246</sup> “Heidelberg School”, Australian Government, 24 May 2013 <<http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/heidelberg-school>>

<sup>247</sup> Nickolls 257.

<sup>248</sup> Nickolls 256.

<sup>249</sup> Nickolls 248.

<sup>250</sup> Clotilde Bullen, “Dianne Jones, A Little Less Conversation.” Artlink 67.

There is a visceral and often outraged response that variously dismay, bemuses, angers, astonishes and saddens me. The original beloved, iconically 'Australian' work, so familiar to Western audiences is a sacred cow of colonial art and this is precisely why Jones selected the work (...).<sup>251</sup>



**Fig.12:** Dianne Jones, *Shearing the Rams*, 2001  
Inkjet on canvas, edition of 10  
122 x 183 cm

Like *re a*, who uses her own body to interfere in history, Jones has introduced the Aboriginal body in a work – and thus, in a time – where Aborigines were ignored: her father, brother and nephew have been placed among non-Indigenous shearers in order to warn the viewers against “the cultural homogeneity of certain visual histories”<sup>252</sup> and to show that

Aborigines must be given their rightful place in Australia’s history and representations<sup>253</sup> because they are part of them. She would like if seeing Aboriginal faces became “normal,” and her work testifies that will: embodying Elvis Presley (**Fig.13 and App.28**), or portraying family members as Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* (**Fig.14, 15, 16 and 17**) she recreates a world – at least an artistic world – which allows the Aboriginal figure to appear. When some urban artists unveil history, Dianne Jones re-makes it: it is not so much a “re-appropriation” anymore, as Christine Nickolls named *re a*’s artistic process, but a genuine imposition of a fact that today’s Australia cannot ignore anymore because, as former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam stated, “[Aborigines] are a responsibility we cannot escape, cannot share, cannot shuffle off; the world will not let us forget that.”<sup>254</sup>

<sup>251</sup> Bullen 68.

<sup>252</sup> Bullen 67.

<sup>253</sup> Bullen 67.

<sup>254</sup> Gilbert 49.

~ *Construction through physical confrontation* ~

“I was always interested in iconic images and the effect they have on you.”<sup>255</sup> The basis of Dianne Jones’ work is indeed the reaction of a public in front of a famous image she has appropriated. Her most visually striking work is her series of portraits she has created from the famous *Mona Lisa* (App.29) by Leonardo Da Vinci: *Jeulisa*, *John*, *Kristy* and *Murray* are her nieces and nephews, and she had them pose before the background of Da Vinci’s masterpiece. The strength and power of Jones’ series comes from the questioning it implies: the *Mona Lisa*, like the *Bedroom in Arles*



*appropriated by Gordon Bennett (see p.17), is a symbol of Western art and, more generally, of the ‘white’ Western culture; replacing the figure of La Gioconda by several Aboriginal models (both men and women) is a way to question cultural identity.*

**Fig.13:** Dianne Jones, *A Little Less Conversation*, 2008

Archival digital print (premium gloss), edition of 5  
178 x 106 cm  
Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

*The viewer’s first reaction will be amusement or outrage, but the portraits will lead him to a reflection on the place of Indigenous people in the Australian society: Jones uses the already existing ambiguity of Da Vinci’s model (who could be, according to some theories, a man) to draw a comparison with the identity of her nieces and nephews: to*

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<sup>255</sup> Bullen 67.

what culture do they belong?<sup>256</sup> The artist offers no answer (or rather she hints that the answer is neither white nor black)<sup>257</sup> because the notion of identity is something people have to build together; the 'effect' that Jones is looking for is just the first step to "a challenge"<sup>258</sup> offered to non-Aboriginal people who can "re-direct and reposition their thinking about, and attitudes towards, Indigenous Australians and their place in the making of a nation."<sup>259</sup>



**Fig.14, 15, 16 and 17:** Dianne Jones, *Jeulisa, John, Kristy* and *Murray*, 2005  
Inkjet on canvas, edition of 10  
Each 79 x 51.5 cm

*The very fact that Jones created a series (and not just one portrait) is a significant detail: it desecrates Da Vinci's work in a manner the Dadaists<sup>260</sup> and Andy Warhol<sup>261</sup> would not*

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<sup>256</sup> Bullen 68.

<sup>257</sup> Bullen 68.

<sup>258</sup> Bullen 68.

<sup>259</sup> Bullen 68.

<sup>260</sup> Dada, an artistic and intellectual movement between WWI and the 1920s, based itself on the grotesque, the absurd and emphasised humour while rejecting reason and logic. This movement prefigured the surrealists and included artists such as Marcel Duchamp (who used himself the Mona Lisa for his work *L.H.O.O.Q.*), Francis Picabia or André Breton, among many others.

<sup>261</sup> American artist, founder of pop art, famous for his series of consumer products or Hollywood actress Marilyn Monroe.

have denied, but at the same time brings to the front persons who are observed and watched with all the attention people usually devote to painted characters, and therefore become figures one can identify with. Jones' models challenge the popular 'white' models, especially when she shoots herself as the black Elvis Presley (see **Fig.13**) or Audrey Hepburn (**Fig.18 and App.30**), but she is never aggressive. On the contrary, her works are always full of humour, even if the subject is very serious. Indeed, even if urban art is often about confrontation, it has a constructive purpose, because it addresses a public composed of people who can take part to the reconstruction of Aboriginality, as identity is basically made by the interactions with others and how people perceive each other.

In the end, the confrontation in urban art does not really come from the association or opposition of two very different physical entities, but from the realization that what has been thought different ('white' Australians and Aborigines) are very similar, or at least are indivisible. Lin Onus has illustrated this notion with his painting *Girl Shattered* (**Fig.3, see p.18**): the viewer is put into the shoes of the aggressor throwing the stone at the Aboriginal girl, since no other character is depicted. This violent gesture symbolises the refusal to accept Aborigines and the will to destroy them. But, as the painting shows us, this destruction leads to nothing: the Aboriginal girl's image takes the form of a shattered mirror, and the glass shards reveal only blackness and void. With

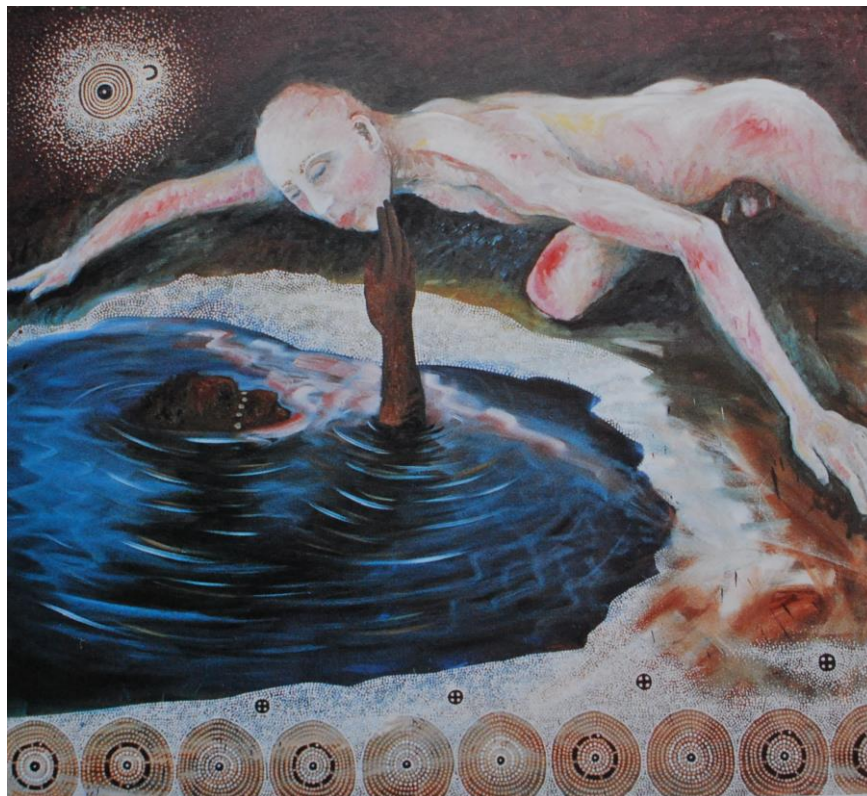


**Fig.18:** Dianne Jones, *A Little More Bite and a Little Less Bark*, 2008  
Archival digital print on photo paper,  
edition of 5  
122 x 90 cm

this painting, Onus goes further in the physical confrontation, as the image that is being opposed to the viewer appears as a reflection: what we see is therefore not in front of us, but part of us. Not only are Aborigines part of Australia, but they are also part of

Australians, and what urban artists are trying to do is to encourage non-Aboriginal people to see Australia's Indigenous people as a reflection of themselves, or at least a part of their culture and heritage: the reappearance of the Aboriginal body would therefore contribute to the very appearance of the Australian body, which should build itself on its dual heritage made of Aboriginal and European culture, among others.

Gordon Bennett has also worked on the image of the mirror in *Echo and Narcissus* (Fig.19), where he represented two figures of the Greek mythology: Narcissus, depicted here as a white man, was so beautiful that he fell in love with his own reflection and was finally punished by the gods who forced him to look at himself for ever; Echo, depicted here



as an Aboriginal woman, used to invent many stories to distract Hera and allow her husband Zeus to have love affairs. Hera punished the nymph by taking away her voice, except to repeat the words others would shout. The myth of Echo and Narcissus recounts that the nymph fell in love with the young man but could not tell him her feelings, since she was only able to

**Fig.19:** Gordon Bennett, *Echo and Narcissus*, 1988  
Oil and acrylic on canvas  
179.5 x 200 cm  
Private collection

repeat the last syllables of words that were said: Narcissus, only hearing his own words and only interested in himself, rejected Echo. The nymph, before she let herself die out of despair, invoked Nemesis (the goddess of vengeance) and asked her to punish Narcissus with a love he would never reach, his own reflection. Fascinated by himself, unable to kiss the face he saw in the water, Narcissus let himself die.



*The theme of Echo and Narcissus, already illustrated by European artists like John William Waterhouse (App.31) and Nicolas Poussin (App.32), always emphasised the impossibility for the two people to meet. Bennett modified the image and allowed Echo to reach Narcissus: Aborigines, who could only exist by repeating the white man's law, are here entitled to their independence, but most importantly Bennett uses the image of the mirror as a tool for reconciliation:*

*The metaphor of the mirror allows Bennett to implicate the one in the other without reducing one to the other. Rather than being totally separate laws, two opposed systems, non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Australians become figures of each other, but figures in which their differences are not foreclosed.<sup>262</sup>*

*The waterhole of his painting, instead of a place of separation, becomes "a place of purification: a place of dreaming, identity, and law making – as it is in Aboriginal mythology":<sup>263</sup> only through the recognition of their own foreclosure (the white man is imbued with himself and cannot see the 'other' as he really is; the Aborigine has been locked in a process of imitation) will the two communities be able to meet and be one with themselves and the 'other'; the reappearance of the black body thus allows, in turns, the appearance of the white body,*

*for the white man has enjoyed for three thousands years the privilege of seeing without being seen. It was a seeing pure and uncomplicated; the light of the eyes drew all things from their primeval darkness. The whiteness of his skin was a further aspect of vision, a light condensed. The white man, white because he was a man, white like the day, white as truth is white, white like virtue, lighted like a torch all creation; he unfolded the essence, secret and white, of existence. Today, these black men have fixed their gaze upon us, and our gaze is thrown back into our eyes.<sup>264</sup>*

*Allowing Aborigines to appear again, artistically and socially, will give the opportunity for white Australians to truly exist themselves, as their own images will be built through the relation they will have with Aborigines. If Australia wants to create its national identity, its people have to accept that their identities may be constructed by another gaze than their own, for this is what identity is made of.*

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<sup>262</sup> Ian McLean 86.

<sup>263</sup> Ian McLean 85.

<sup>264</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, quoted by McLean 77.

*Gordon Bennett and Sally Morgan deal with the emergency of acknowledging Australia's colonial history if the country is to literary survive: the works we have just seen are softer in their message, as they state that – without recognition – white Australia can survive, but it will not achieve much, doomed to only accept its own white reflection. Again, urban art proves to the non-Aboriginal society that reconciliation and recognition are not necessarily a matter of violence. Kevin Gilbert had predicted a future where blacks would violently impose their power over whites in a reversed colonial society in his poem *The Flowering*, in which he asks the white reader if his reaction, if he were to be freed from oppression, would be pacific and full of understanding:*

(...)  
In another time, another age  
If fate has reversed the play  
And a hard black boot pressed on your white throat  
When released – what would you say  
Friends and pals forever together in a new fair dawn  
Or meet like you and I shall meet  
With flames and with daggers drawn.<sup>265</sup>

*Jean-Paul Sartre, who may well have inspired Gilbert with his *Black Orpheus*, also doubted that the end of white oppression over blacks would stop anger and prevent violence:*

*What would you expect to find, when the muzzle that has silenced the voices of black men is removed? That they would thunder your praise? When these heads that our fathers have forced to the very ground are risen, do you expect to read adoration in their eyes?<sup>266</sup>*

*These visions can be glimpsed in the works of artists such as Gordon Hookey and Richard Bell (Fig.20), but their aim is not to threaten white Australians: their art is a warning against what is boiling inside the Aboriginal community (in the case of Gordon Hookey) or a reflection of their own violence and anger (in the Bell's works). When told that people tend to find his art angry, Bell answered:*

*People feed off my work – the anger they experience is their anger at themselves, and their anger may extend from the fact that I refuse to forgive them. The works themselves, they're not angry. I defy anybody to find a painting*

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<sup>265</sup> Gilbert 102.

<sup>266</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, quoted by McLean 77.

*that's angry. It might make people angry, it might appear angry, but I've put it there with the express purpose of it not being angry. The position that I come from is not angry – it may at worst be matter of fact.*<sup>267</sup>

*The work itself can also act like a mirror, and the only anger that can be seen is the*



**Fig.20:** Richard Bell, *UZ vs THEM* (still from video), 2006  
Digital media on DVD  
Milani Gallery, Brisbane

*one the viewer himself brings with him: this is what Onus' mirror, in *Girl Shattered*, reminds us. The stone that is being thrown is the result of the physical confrontation with the work depicting an Aborigine, and the person who threw that stone destroys herself while she thought she would destroy the 'other' in front of her. Onus tries to make us realise that what separates us, what has to be destroyed, does not lie in front of us like a frontier: what we see is also the reflection of what we are, and*

*Aborigines in Australia are not people who can be put aside or destroyed like a wall that would prevent non-Aboriginal Australians from moving forward. They are the forward. As the Austrian poet Willy Verkauf wrote:*

If the walls between us  
were made of glass  
we'd have shattered them  
long ago  
and we'd have walked  
over the pieces  
to each other.

But the walls  
between us  
are invisible.  
They are hard to penetrate  
since they run through  
our hearts and spirits.<sup>268</sup>

<sup>267</sup> Bruce Mclean, "Richard Bell: Matter of Fact," *Artlink* 41.

According to politician Theresa Millard, Australia was “the last country in the region to be decolonised, the place where the story didn’t end happily, where the colonisers didn’t go home.”<sup>269</sup> Colonisation did not leave the Australian minds either, and it can still be found in all aspects of life in Australia.<sup>270</sup> This is why professor Wendy Brady, from the Wiradjuri nation, states that both the Aborigine and the ‘white’ Australian must “decolonise their minds”<sup>271</sup> in order to build their own identities, freed from the colonial conceptions of ‘blackness’ and ‘whiteness’.

From the side of Aborigines, the decolonisation process can also take the form of a healing process. I quoted Richard Bell saying that he refused to forgive non-Aboriginal Australians, but there are artists – and, therefore, Aborigines – who consider that forgiveness is the key to Reconciliation. Bindi Cole has always been aware of her Aboriginal heritage, and has always identified as an Aborigine. The history of colonisation is her own story, but her works *I Forgive You* (**Fig.21**) and *Seventy Times Seven* (**Fig.22, 23, 24**) draw from very personal situations that are not necessarily linked with colonisation. At a time when she felt broken and traumatised (by the death of her mother, among other things), Bindi Cole slowly realised that forgiveness could play an important role in her personal healing.<sup>272</sup> This act of forgiving was directed both to herself and to others, who may have led her to traumatising situations (such as columnist Andrew Bolt, who accused her of using Aboriginal identity as an opportunist gesture – this accusation was even brought to the Court). She then wondered if this personal method of healing could work on a broader level and help put into motion a “really large-scale healing.”<sup>273</sup>

She talked about her project to Aborigines, and those who felt ready to forgive agreed to participate, allowing her to produce *Seventy Times Seven*, where Aboriginal people are filmed while repeating, like a mantra, ‘I forgive you’. This video is at the same time very simple and very effective. Cole says that, at some point, a shift occurs: crying,

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<sup>268</sup> Willy Verkauf, quoted by Brady, Graham 144.

<sup>269</sup> Theresa Millard, quoted by Docker and Fischer 32.

<sup>270</sup> Brady, Docker and Fischer 272.

<sup>271</sup> Brady, Docker and Fischer 270.

<sup>272</sup> Bindi Cole, Artist Talk, Contemporary Australia: Women. Queensland Art Gallery, Gallery of Modern Art, 8 May 2012, 28 May 2013 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7bL7mT54sU>>

<sup>273</sup> Cole, Artist Talk.

laughing,<sup>274</sup> whatever it might be, the viewer will react to those faces gazing at us and 'forgiving' us. Indeed, Cole also believes that what we see is often a reflection of ourselves, and her work will thus be apprehended in many different ways, depending on the viewers' "experience or whatever baggage they're carrying."<sup>275</sup>



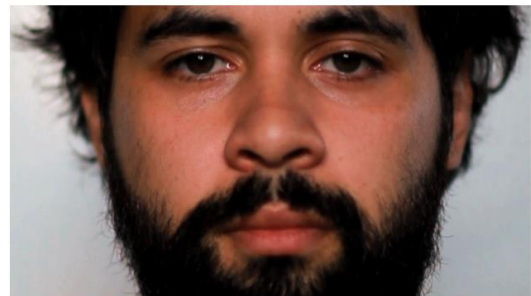
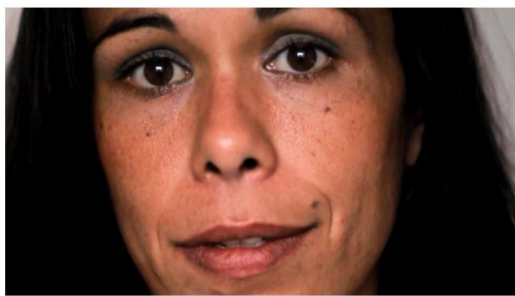
**Fig.21:** Bindi Cole, *I Forgive You*, 2012  
Emu feathers on MDF board  
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, courtesy of the  
artist and Nellie Castan Gallery, Melbourne

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<sup>274</sup> Kylie Northover, "Black Rage, White Guilt: Bindi Cole has had a Skinful," The Age – entertainment, 14 September 2011, 28 May 2013  
<<http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/black-rage-white-guilt-cole-has-had-a-skinful-20110913-1k7pk.html>>

<sup>275</sup> Northover.

*Seventy Times Seven* is meant to illustrate the empowerment allowed by forgiveness. As Cole said, people often think that forgiveness is about giving away a power already diminished by trauma: she wants to prove them wrong, for forgiving is not for the person who did you wrong, but for yourself. And this process re-empowers you, for as long as you refuse to do so, as long as you hold on to trauma, you cannot feel anything else but resentment, anger and bitterness; forgiving allows you to get rid of those feelings. But it doesn't mean that you have to accept or forget things that you consider unacceptable (such as colonisation): it means stating that you are no longer consumed by trauma, that you are no longer a victim, that you have taken your power back.<sup>276</sup> Cole's work is thus directed both at Aborigines and at non-Aboriginal people: by illustrating the process of forgiving, she allows Aborigines to regain their power, and non-Aboriginal people to face these people and try and understand their own reactions to Aboriginal Australia.



**Fig.22, 23 and 24:** Bindi Cole, *Seventy times seven* (stills from video), 2011  
10:21 mins

Urban art is clearly thought about in terms of reaction: this is what Aboriginal artists are looking for, but

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<sup>276</sup> Cole, Artist Talk.

these reactions are not gratuitous and, on the contrary, are meant to be constructive. If a reconciliation is to happen, it has to come from both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. Unveiling Australia's history and remaking it from the point of view of Aborigines is the first step to this process, for the understanding of one another cannot be possible without the knowledge of the other's history: Aborigines have finally the power and the possibility to tell their stories, which means that non-Aborigines can fully understand their present situations. Art becomes a dialogue that allows people to communicate and therefore create their identities, because urban artists tend to break what is left of colonial thinking: the notions of 'blackness' and 'whiteness' are being transformed, and the progressive empowerment of Aboriginal people will hopefully lead to an Australian society that will be able to base itself on its multicultural heritage to build its own identity. But this process will only be possible if Australia acknowledges its colonial past and if Aborigines accept to forgive and move on, freeing themselves from anger. Most urban artists have proven so far that they are perfectly able to move on and transform their resentment into a creative process that fits into a broader project than simply their personal development.

## ~ CONCLUSION ~

*"[...] this invisible wall we've built between us and our Aboriginal brothers and sisters [...] will tumble only when we learn to stand with them on the common ground of our humanity [...]."*<sup>277</sup>

Despite the international protest and strong criticism of the United Nations, the Australian Government has approved the continuation of the intervention in the Northern Territory through the so-called Stronger Futures legislation:<sup>278</sup> this extension of the intervention policy is presented as the direct continuation of colonisation by a publication by 'Concerned Australians', A Decision to Discriminate: Aboriginal Disempowerment in the Northern Territory.<sup>279</sup> The refusal of the Government to listen to Aboriginal views about this legislation and its effects on the Aboriginal communities of the Northern Territory proves that, after more than 200 years, the issue of invisibility for Indigenous people in Australia has remained crucial and topical.

Nowadays, even if Aboriginal artists have gained considerable attention, it would seem that the country only sees who it wants to see: the "better blacks,"<sup>280</sup> who make no trouble, don't live in poverty, and don't ask for land rights. But Aborigines are not only ignored politically, they also have to fight against a lot of prejudices that prevent them from attaining a complete visibility as who they really are. When I told a friend I was working on contemporary Aboriginal art, she exclaimed, genuinely surprised: "They have contemporary art?" Others would answer: "Oh, so you're working on shamanism?" Of course no one living in France can be blamed for not knowing the current state of Aboriginal culture in Australia (I have been as ignorant myself), but the simple fact that people still picture Aborigines as half-naked black people communicating with spirits reveals that there is still a long way to go before Aborigines can see the benefits of their re-appropriation of their own images through art. As we have seen through several testimonies, the media still cling on to racial stereotypes to depict them (mainly because

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<sup>277</sup> Brady, Graham 143.

<sup>278</sup> "About," Stand for Freedom, 2 June 2013 : <<http://standforfreedom.org.au>>

<sup>279</sup> "A Decision to Discriminate: Aboriginal Disempowerment in the Northern Territory," Concerned Australians, 2 June 2013 <<http://www.concernedastralians.com.au/>>

<sup>280</sup> Gilbert 175.



“bad news sell,”<sup>281</sup> and Aborigines are sadly still associated with incidents). Art, and especially urban art, is therefore the best way for them to impose an image that goes against those stereotypes and prejudices.

What is at the core of Aboriginal urban art is therefore not merely identity (most Aborigines today know or have come to know their background and are proud of their Aboriginal heritage), but a genuine construction of humanity. It is a terrible thing to observe that a society has managed to destroy so efficiently the self-representation of some of its people that they have to completely rebuild it, literally from scratch. The progression through the three parts of this essay has shown that the motive of the body holds a very important part in this process of rebuilding, not simply because it had proven a very useful motive to interact with the viewers, but simply because it is precisely the stake that motivates Aboriginal people today: finding a body again, revealing this body and having it accepted by the Australian society as human, and therefore equal.

This process appears as a difficult one as Australia itself is in the middle of its own construction: the country is trying to build its own identity at a time when people from all around the world come to settle there and while its Aboriginal population strives for recognition. After the infamous ‘White Australia’ policy and the quotas imposed on Asian immigrants<sup>282</sup> up until the 1970s, Australia needs to change the base on which it has built itself: its society, longing for a specific Australian identity, still remains close to an idealised white European heritage. The treatments of Aborigines in Australia suggest a large-scale belief that they are too different, that the gap between them and ‘white’ Australians is too wide for any understanding. This is what urban artists are trying to debunk, but it seems that the process of humanisation follows several steps, which have been analyzed in this essay: self-esteem, realization of belonging and unification with similar people, dialogue with the ‘other’.

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<sup>281</sup> Roger Solomon, Rivajec.

<sup>282</sup> “Burton to Heyes,” Australian Government – Department of Foreign Affairs and Trades, 1 March 1948, 12 June 2013 2013 <<http://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/historical/volume-14/historical-document-14-163.html>>

First, the body must attain a visibility for Aboriginal people themselves. In other words, they have to be at peace with their images: alcohol, suicides, malnutrition and despair have physically destroyed the Aboriginal body and self-representation, and these “malfunctions”<sup>283</sup> are precisely what the medias are keen to point at.<sup>284</sup> This first step of re-appropriating one’s body and image has two purposes, which cannot be separated: by accepting their own bodies and re-appropriating a humanity the colonisers had deprived them of, Aborigines allow themselves to grow stronger, both physically and psychologically, but they also change the image non-Aboriginal people have of them. But this process implies an exorcism of the past: indeed, almost all Aboriginal people are marked by the intergenerational trauma of colonisation and mistreatments, which is transmitted from generation to generation. Art appears as a perfect tool to eradicate this burden, and it can be somehow linked with the Dreaming, this Aboriginal mythology and Law that binds past and present through ceremonies and specific actions: urban art uses the motive of the body to link past and present and give pain a timeless dimension. These acts of creation are here to make the non-Aboriginal viewer understand that the situation experienced by Aborigines today is the same as, and is rooted in, the experience of colonisation, which, unsettled, cannot be put aside. Art in contemporary Australia has allowed Aborigines (who had until then been voiceless, or given the voice of others) to speak for themselves and show what their sufferings really look like: the omnipresence of violence, remembered or experienced, physical or psychological; the transformation of one’s body into non-human representations that testify the profound lack of self-esteem among Aboriginal people. These two aspects, depicted in very ‘physical’ ways, are direct consequences of colonisation and are the first steps into an understanding of the importance of art in the complex relations it has with society: they reveal the difficulties Australia is facing, as these depictions of physical pain bring to the forefront colonial memories the country wants to forget, and people it can’t deal with.

The power of these works make them impossible to ignore, and this is one of the key elements of urban art: its motives and inspirations are bound to the colonial and contemporary non-Aboriginal society, therefore, even if a subject might be very

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<sup>283</sup> Cole, Artist Talk.

<sup>284</sup> Cole, Artist Talk.

personal, it cannot simply be for the artist, or for the Aboriginal community; these works address the whole Australian society.

This phenomenon can be observed in the dual way the Aboriginal 'black' body reappears in urban art, which is the second step towards the complete reappearance of Aborigines: at the same time it answers a need for a renewed identity, made of pride and self-esteem, and it develops in opposition to the non-Aboriginal community. The first part of this essay has shown how unveiling pain might depict Aborigines as passive victims, but it appears that this 'victimisation' was necessary to move on and begin to create the Aboriginal identity. Gordon Bennett explained very well this use of physical pain in paintings that literary act like his own body in a martial art fight:

[...] I wanted not only to 'play the victim', but to take it further and use that energy to advantage by not resisting, or trying to display strength, but to show pain and how much it hurts, even to the extent of self-mutilation. [...] My interest in Taoism is also significant in the sense of utilising a strategy of least resistance, which uses an aggressor's energy by turning it to one's own advantage, rather than opposing a force directly, better to intercept obliquely, or roll with it turning the opposing energy around for your own advantage.<sup>285</sup>

The sufferings of the colonisation and contemporary racism have strengthened urban artists and many Aborigines. Now that they can freely develop their own image of themselves, now that they have found their humanity again, they use it to confront white Australia in a 'Black Power continuum', which is not to be restricted to the 1970s and 1980s only:

Expressed positively, Black Power means black men and black women speaking out and uniting to force the white man to acknowledge their humanity, rights, justice, dignity and right to self-determination. It is the voice of the dispossessed, victimized minority making a fair, human claim.<sup>286</sup>

The black bodies depicted in urban artworks are the symbols of a positive self-representation based on what had been denied to Aborigines since the early days of European Australia: the Aboriginal culture and 'blackness' as identity. To make those

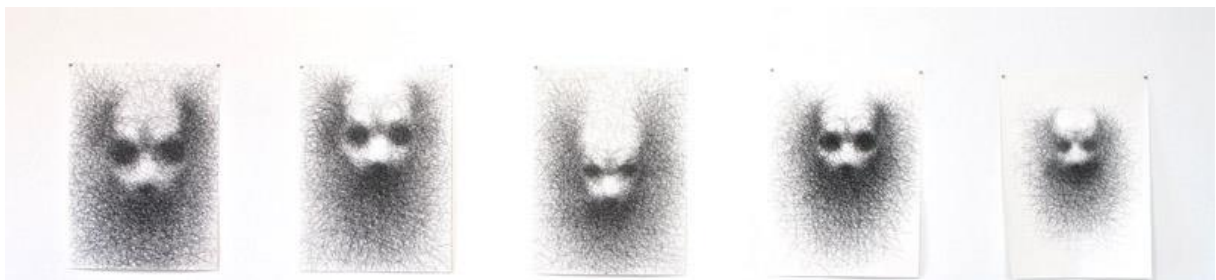
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<sup>285</sup> Bennett 50.

<sup>286</sup> Gilbert 104.

bodies visible means to make those characteristics visible as well, as the motive of the body appears as a springboard for the re-appearance of anything it is associated with. Several artists also use their bodies or any other Aboriginal body to reaffirm their empowerment, for becoming visible again means that one has the power to do so, and urban artists would certainly not miss the chance to take their revenge on history and the several governments who refused to see them as Australians, or simply as human beings perfectly equal to white Australians. With this power, Aborigines prove that they have managed to pierce the political and social 'cloth' that covered them: the artworks presented in my second part appear indeed as the extension and evolution of the Aborigines portrayed by Vernon Ah Kee in his *Unwritten* series (**Fig.1**), where faces without distinct facial features (no ears, eyes or mouth) seem trapped under an invisible barrier:

They looked like they were emerging, but being held back, tied back, and pushed back into the surface. So they're always becoming human, but never being allowed to be fully human, never reaching that point. The only aspects of humanity in the features are western.<sup>287</sup>



**Fig.1:** Vernon Ah Kee, *Unwritten*, 2010 (installation view)  
Charcoal on paper  
Installation view at Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts, August 2010

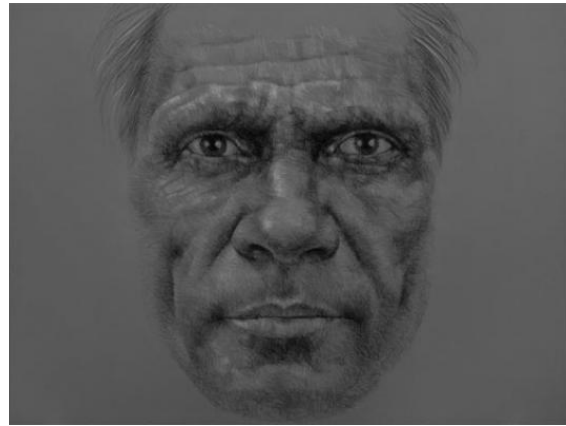
Many artists, including Ah Kee himself, now emphasize Aboriginal characteristics (the skin colour, physical traits), but not in a sterile purpose of ghettoization: their works question the boundaries of identity and the classifications of people as 'Aborigine'. Paradoxically, the unity resulting from the use of the black body is a way to unveil diversity, as in Ah Kee's series of portraits *What is an Aborigine?* (**Fig.2 and 3**).

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<sup>287</sup> Vernon Ah Kee, interview.



**Fig.2:** Vernon Ah Kee, *Annie Ah Kee/What is an Aborigine?* 2008  
Charcoal, crayon and acrylic on canvas  
180 x 240 cm  
The James C. Sourris Collection, Brisbane



**Fig.3:** Vernon Ah Kee, *Georges Sibley/What is an Aborigine?* 2008  
Charcoal, crayon and acrylic on canvas  
180 x 240 cm  
Milani Gallery, Brisbane

With works such as the ones presented in this essay, urban artists go against the opinion that “because white people have not yet attained their full humanity, blacks must, of necessity, draw together and attempt to re-create each other without them.”<sup>288</sup> On the contrary, and even if their purpose is not always understood, their works need this figure of the white Australian: the two communities both need the gaze and confrontation of the ‘other’ in order to build their own identities; the revealing of the Aboriginal identity leads non-Aborigines to question their own and the relation they have (or the society has) with Indigenous people. The dialogue created through the works allows a dynamism that benefits both the artists and the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.

This necessary and healthy confrontation is not always easy for, as we have seen it in the third part of this essay, history is a very sensitive topic in Australia and, at the same time, the subject where Aborigines and non-Aborigines have to meet in order to move on through a reconciliation process. Urban artists play the role of teachers by revealing Australia’s history from an Indigenous point of view, which had so long been

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<sup>288</sup> Gilbert 203.

silenced. Their aim is indeed to teach, and not to accuse, even if they sometimes use striking and almost shocking compositions: they believe that if one knows what has happened, it is easier to understand, sympathise with the cause of Indigenous people, and accept to question one's beliefs. It is also a way to free oneself from a uniformity of history and representations:

If I were to choose a single word to describe my art practice it would be the word *question*. If I were to choose a single word to describe my underlying drive it would be *freedom*. [...] Freedom is a practice. It is a way of thinking in other way to those we have been accustomed to. [...] To be free we must be able to question the ways our own history defines us.<sup>289</sup>

In other words, urban art teaches white Australians to be free through the questioning of their representations of others and themselves, to decolonise their minds. In the book analysing his art, Gordon Bennett remembered the omnipresence of the white culture and, therefore, the difficulty to imagine that something different is possible:

I had been taught to believe in this identity and its foundations; everyone around me seemed to believe it too, and everything I saw on television or read in the newspapers also reflected it.<sup>290</sup>

It took him time to realise that a questioning of this dominating white identity was possible. Now non-Aboriginal people have to follow the same way in order to build Australia, and get rid of the idea that the country will evolve without Aborigines anyway. "If you consider the future [of Australia] you must look at the Aborigines,"<sup>291</sup> said Australian painter Sidney Nolan. Urban art is the pictorial proof of that sentence, and it emphasizes the indivisible nature of Aborigines and 'white' Australians who must manage to build the country together if they want to be whole. White Australia "had the power to make [Aborigines] see and experience [themselves] as 'Other',"<sup>292</sup> but now the situation is evolving to the point where Aborigines have the power to see and experience themselves as an 'Other' who can benefit society, who can be part of it and still claim and preserve a difference.

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<sup>289</sup> Bennett 10-12.

<sup>290</sup> Bennett 23.

<sup>291</sup> Juniper, Graham 129.

<sup>292</sup> Bennett 34.

Analysing the motive of the body in Aboriginal urban art, it appears that, in fact, the quest for identity, visibility and recognition is not at all a 'selfish' process directed only towards Aborigines, but on the contrary a social creation that includes 'white' Australians as well and works as much for them as for Aboriginal people. In their lives as well as in their works, urban artists appear as the link between two very different communities that could live together but are separated by ignorance and fear: their art serves various purposes and is incredibly dynamic due to its social aspect.

In this context, Aboriginal urban art can truly be described as Australian art, because its effects participate to the construction of the country and the contemporary society: the constant fight for reappearance that is to be found in urban works has a double effect and allows 'white' Australians to (re)appear as well.

It will be most interesting to see how Aboriginal urban art will evolve: it is rooted in the social and political context of Australia, and bases itself on injustices and claims. If reconciliation happens, will the Aboriginal body disappear from the works, but this time because there will be no need to save it from oblivion? This question will remain unanswered, for there is still a long way to go before white Australia acknowledges the wrong it has done to its Indigenous people. Indeed, the violent reactions of some 'white' Australians in front of urban works reveal the reactions they may have in their everyday lives and the difficulties they may face to accept the reflection they see in those works. Many artists are accused of moralisation, of being disturbing, violent, angry, of feeding a 'guilt industry'. But as Gordon Bennett observed:

[...] perhaps some people, with misplaced feelings of guilt, rather than recognising the obvious alternatives of empathy, compassion and understanding, feel that they cannot 'handle' my paintings, or is it their own feelings, or the truth of a nation born out of near genocide, they cannot handle?<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Bennett 53.

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# Illustrations

~ Appendix n.1 ~



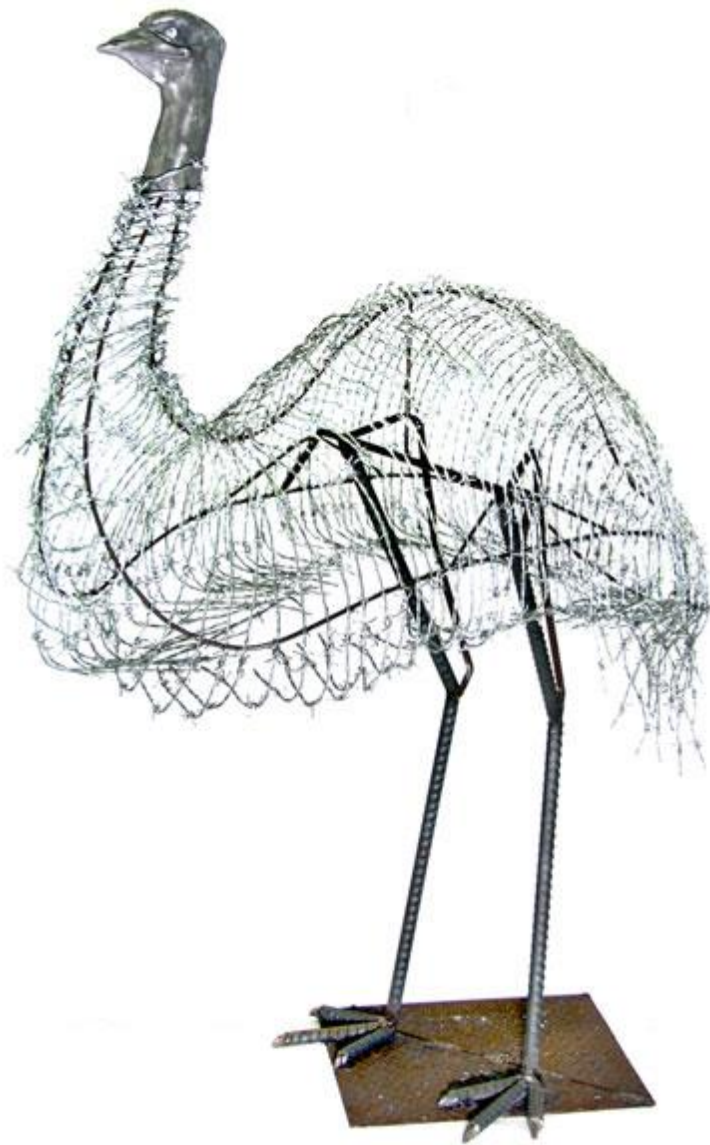
Vincent Van Gogh, *Bedroom in Arles*, 1888  
Oil on canvas  
72 x 90 cm  
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

~ Appendix n.2 ~



Vincent Van Gogh, *The Starry Night*, 1889  
Oil on canvas  
73.7 cm × 92.1 cm  
Museum of Modern Art, New York City

~ Appendix n.3 ~



Laurie Nilsen, *Emu*, 2007  
Barbed wire + aluminium  
170 x 180 x 60  
Fireworks Gallery Brisbane

~ Appendix n.4 ~



Gordon Hookey, *Blood on the Wattle, Blood on the Palm*, 2009

Oil on linen

285 x 500 cm

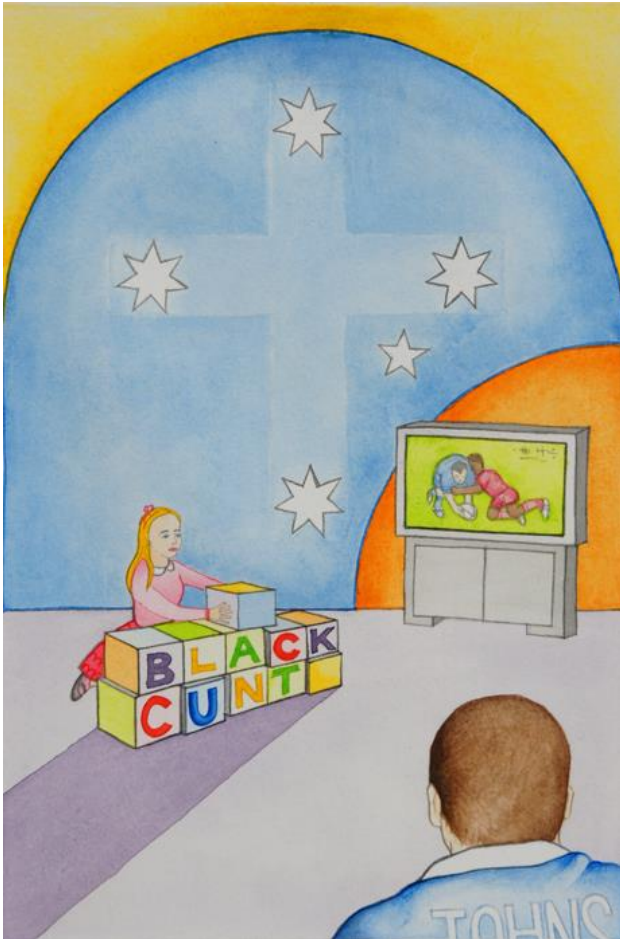
Milani Gallery, Brisbane

~ Appendix n.5 ~



Robert Campbell Jr, *Death in Custody*, 1987  
Acrylic on canvas  
Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

~ Appendix n.6 ~



Tony Albert, *Daddy's little Girl 2010 (after Gordon Bennett)* (detail), 2011  
Mixed media  
KickArts, Cairns

Tony Albert, *Daddy's little Girl 2010 (after Gordon Bennett)* (detail), 2011  
Watercolour on paper  
KickArts, Cairns



~ Appendix n.7 ~



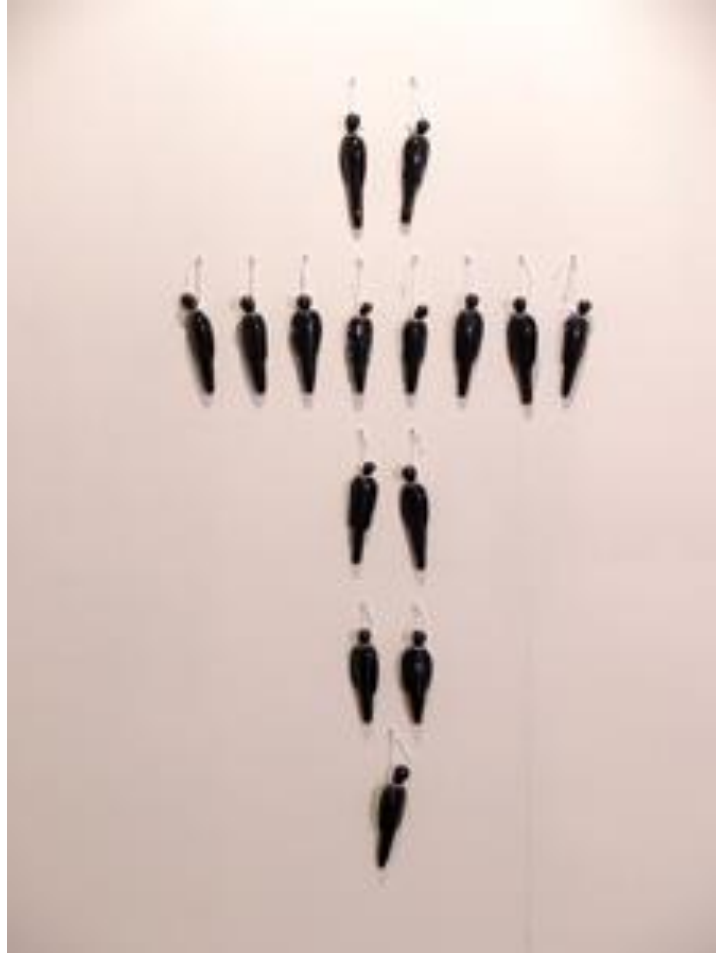
Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm (number 30)*, 1950  
Enamel on canvas  
266.7 x 525.8 cm  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

~ Appendix n.8 ~



Trevor Nickolls, *Machinetime, Dreamtime*, 1981  
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
122 x 60.5 cm  
National Gallery of Australia,  
Canberra

~ Appendix n.9 ~



Yhonnie Scarce, *What they Wanted*, 2007  
Glass and cord in 15 pieces  
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide

~ Appendix n.10 ~



Yhonnie Scarce, *Shackled*, 2006  
Sandblasted blown glass with metal  
8.5 cm × 70 cm × 20 cm

~ Appendix n.11 ~



*Fish Drying*, collected in 1962  
Paint on wood  
140 cm High  
National Museum of Australia, Canberra

~ Appendix n.12 ~



Gordon Hookey, *Terraist* (stills from video), 2012  
Milani Gallery, Brisbane

~ Appendix n.13 ~



Gordon Hookey, *A Painting for the Underdawg*, 2005

Oil on canvas

133 x 250 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

~ Appendix n.14 ~



Art Spiegelman, panel from *A Father's Guiding Hand, Soho, NYC, 2004*  
sequence  
India ink on bristol board



~ Appendix n.15 ~



Bindi Cole, *Warre Beal Yallock*, 2008, from the series  
*Not Really Aboriginal*  
ink-jet print  
150 x 125 cm  
Collection of the artist

~ Appendix n.16 ~



Bindi Cole, *Gnung Ok*, 2008, from the series *Not Really Aboriginal*

ink-jet print

150 x 125 cm

Collection of the artist

~ Appendix n.17 ~



Poster for John Cromwell's movie *Made for Each Other*, 1939

~ Appendix n.18 ~



Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863  
Oil on canvas  
130.5 x 190 cm  
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

~ Appendix n.19 ~



J.W. Lindt, *No Title (Aboriginal Man and Woman with Kangaroo)*, c.1873

Albumen silver photograph

19.8 x 14.8 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

~ Appendix n.20 ~



Gary Lee, *Exercise Boys*, 2000

~ Appendix n.21 ~



Gary Lee, *Shaba*, 2006  
Digital print on Hanemühle paper  
270 x 100 cm

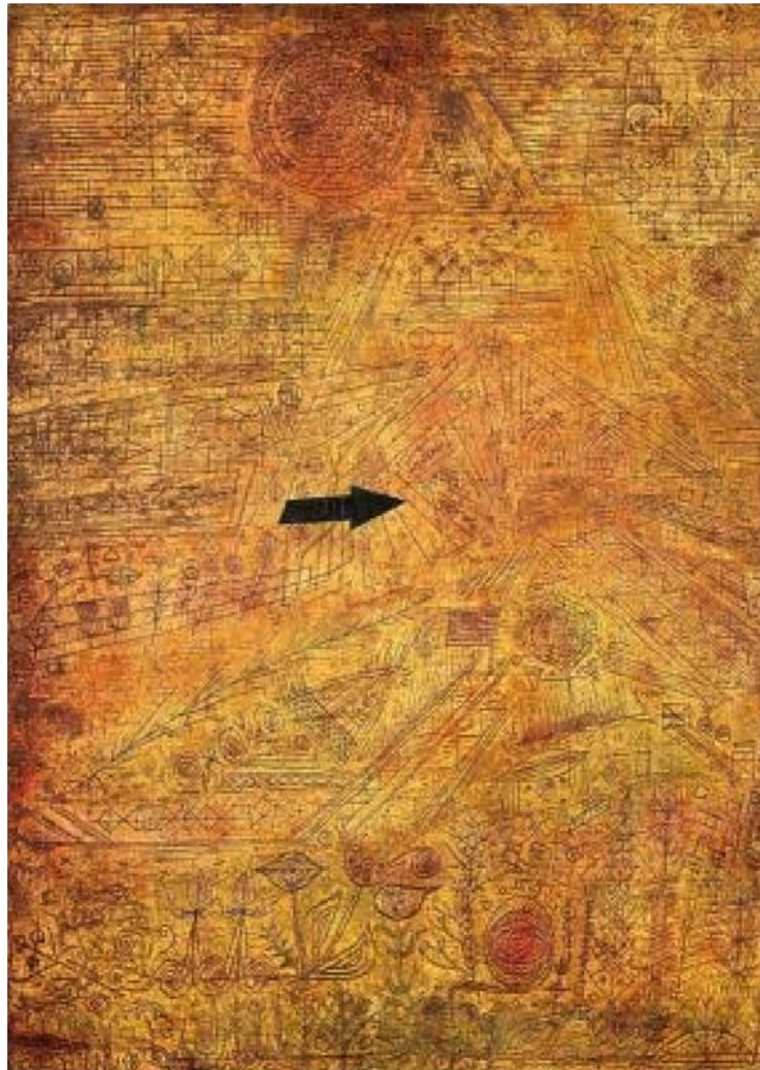
~ Appendix n.22 ~



Gary Lee, *Buffalo Boy*, 2006  
Digital print on Hanemühle paper  
42 x 56 cm



~ Appendix n.23 ~



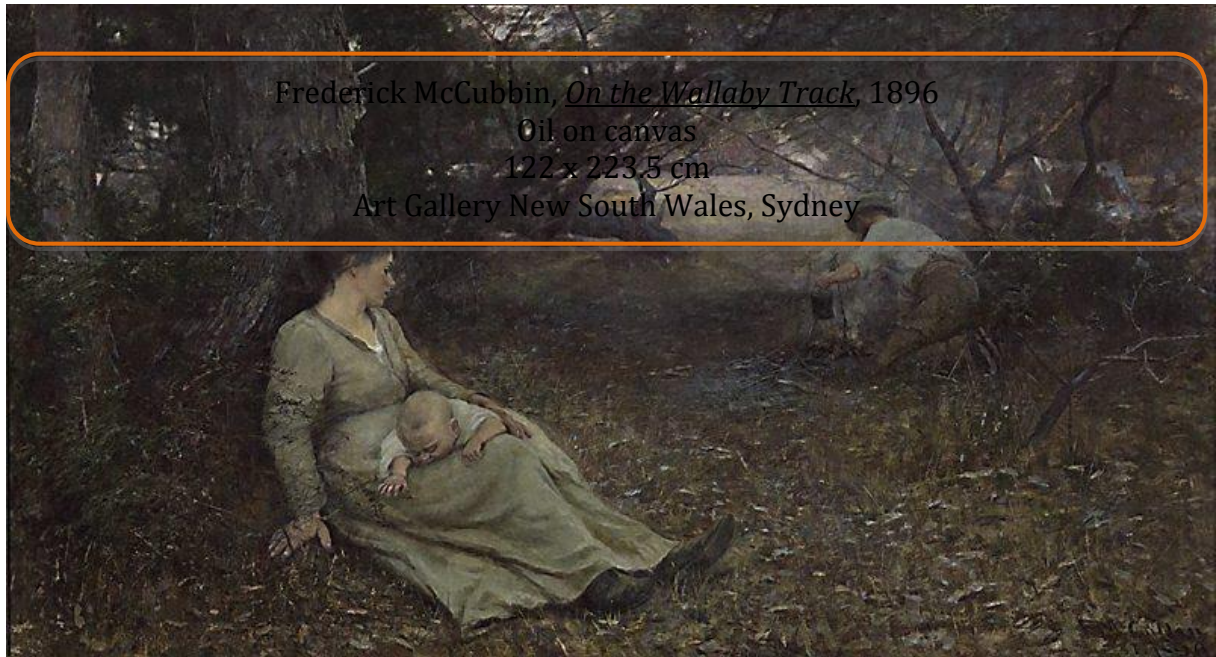
Paul Klee, *Arrow in the Garden*, 1929  
Oil and tempera on canvas  
70 x 50.2 cm  
Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

~ Appendix n.24 ~



Tom Roberts, *The Australian Native*, 1888  
Oil on canvas  
127.2 x 76.2 cm  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

~ Appendix n.25 ~



~ Appendix n.26 ~



~ Appendix n.27 ~



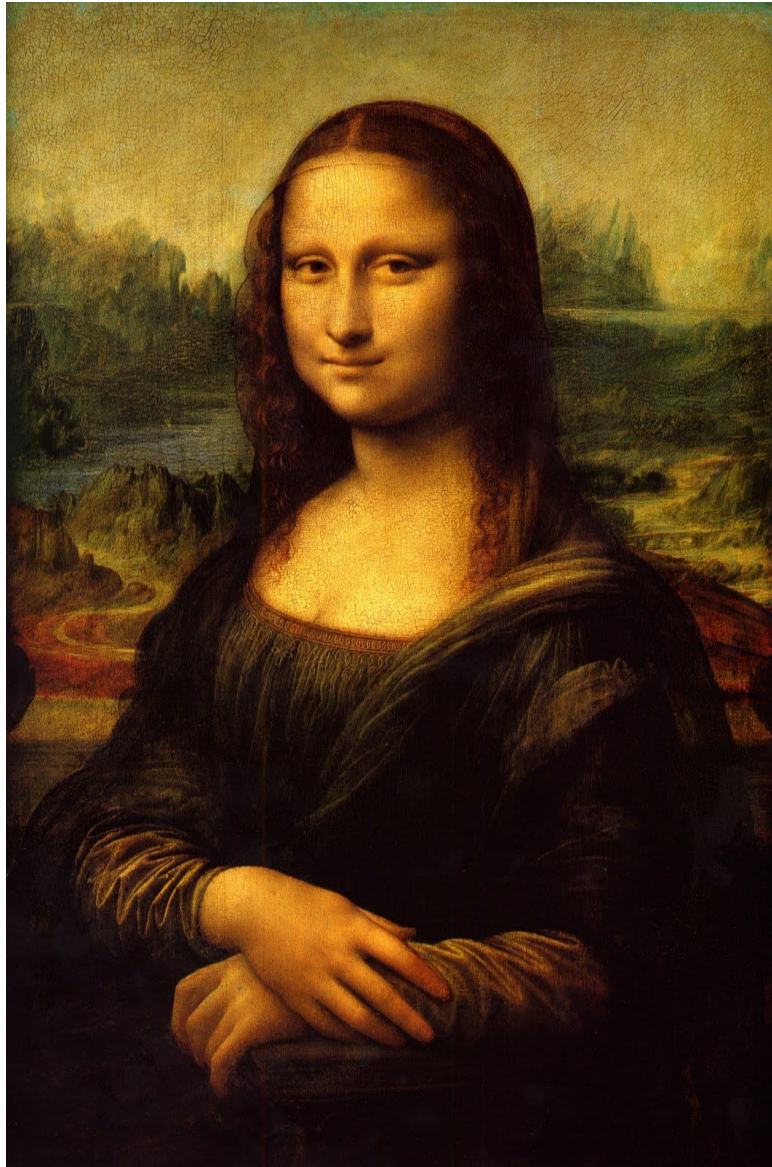
Tom Roberts, *Shearing the Rams*, 1890  
Oil on canvas on composition board  
122.4 x 183.3 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

~ Appendix n.28 ~



Elvis Presley in Don Siegel western  
movie *Flaming Star*, 1960  
Promotion picture

~ Appendix n.29 ~



Leonardo Da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, c. 1503-1519  
Oil on poplar  
77 x 53 cm  
Musée du Louvre, Paris

~ Appendix n.30 ~



Audrey Hepburn with Little Black Dress in Blake Edwards' movie *A Breakfast at Tiffany's*, 1961  
Promotion picture



~ Appendix n.31 ~



John William Waterhouse, *Echo and Narcissus* 1903  
Oil on canvas  
109.2 x 189.2 cm  
Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool

~ Appendix n.32 ~



Nicolas Poussin, *Echo and Narcissus*, c.1630

Oil on canvas

74 x 100 cm

Musée du Louvre, Paris

## Biographies of urban Aboriginal artists

~ Vernon AH KEE ~



Vernon Ah Kee is of the Kuku Yalandji, Yidindji and Gugu Yimidhirr peoples of the Innisfail, Cairns and rainforest regions of North Queensland and was born in 1967. A founding member of the Brisbane-based artists collective proppaNOW, he has been referred to as a “sovereign warrior” by an Indigenous academic, Aileen Moreton-Robinson. Indeed, his fighting spirit can be perceived in his works, which range from charcoal drawings and portraits to installations of texts and videos. His messages are always strongly political, and as an artist he questions various subjects, such as the concept of Aboriginality, the opposition between ‘remote’ and ‘urban’ Aborigines, colonial racism etc.

His artistic career began in 1986 when he attended a screen-printing course: Ah Kee was then employed as a commercial screen-printer and thus discovered all the aspects of the trade, from design to production. He then entered the Queensland college of art in 1990 and began to develop his drawing skills but was also under the influence of other Queensland Aboriginal artists such as Richard Bell and Gordon Bennett, whose political compositions included texts and images.

Lately, Ah Kee has been questioning and challenging the normative aspect of ‘whiteness’, and his work has become essential in bringing ‘white’ Australians to question themselves.

~ Tony ALBERT ~



Born in 1981 in North Queensland, Tony Albert is a Girramay rainforest man and now lives and works in Brisbane. The grandson of a man who enlisted in the army when the Second World War broke out, was made prisoner in Germany, escaped and got nothing in return, he decided to focus on the way people saw each other, and particularly on how Australians saw Aborigines: after a Bachelor of Visual arts in Contemporary Indigenous Australian Art, he started collecting “Aboriginalia” (a term he coined to describe objects that portray Aborigines in a very naïve way), and mixing them with music, videos and songs lyrics is part of his work. The results often question the human conditions by revisiting images in a way that, in his own words, “is empowering towards Indigenous people”. His works include drawings, paintings, photographs and installations.

~ Richard BELL ~



Perhaps one of the most well-known urban Aboriginal artists, Richard Bell is known for his strong political engagement and outspokenness. He was born in 1953 in Charleville, Queensland, into the Kamilaroi tribe, and came to the attention of the artistic community in 2003 after he won the Telstra [National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award](#) with his painting *Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell's Theorem)*, which was displayed with a text (*Aboriginal Art – It's a White Thing!*) explaining how Aboriginal art was exploited by the white-dominated artistic world, leaving Aboriginal artists unable to control their productions and creating a separation between 'remote' and 'urban' artists, who are not allowed the same funds on the basis of their 'authenticity'.

Bell's works are often provocative but never violent. They question things and institutions when no one else would have the courage or the will to denounce them so frankly. His style varies is extremely rich and varied, as he doesn't like to make the same thing twice and – in his own words – gets bored quickly: from Pollock-inspired paintings to cartoons *à la* Roy Lichtenstein, his paintings and videos allow his to deal with a lot of subjects.

Before he brought together the proppaNOW collective, Richard Bell was a member of the Campfire Group, another collective that lasted from 1995 to 2005 and was mostly composed of Queensland-based artists.

~ Gordon BENNETT ~



From Aboriginal and Anglo-Celtic ancestry, Gordon Bennett was born in 1955 in Queensland. He left school at fifteen and worked in a variety of trades before beginning formal art studies at the Queensland College of Art in Brisbane. It was only there that he learned about his Aboriginal heritage, for his father (although he had married an Aboriginal woman) wouldn't allow any conversation about it. Like his schoolmates, Bennett was taught at school that Aborigines had barbaric customs, were all dark-skinned and lived in the desert. Only later on, during his art studies, was he able to accept this part of himself. But many of his works bear the mark of a certain trauma: Bennett has experienced or witnessed racism in so many ways that his paintings sometimes reflect this difficulty of being an Aborigine in Australia.

Nevertheless, Bennett has never appreciated to be labelled a 'spokesman' for Aboriginal people: his influences and perspectives are indeed too broad to be restricted to Aboriginality only.

Influenced by artists such as Jackson Pollock, Piet Mondrian and Jean-Michel Basquiat, Bennett has also build a very complex and intellectual vision of his painting, where every detail has its importance.

## ~ Robert CAMPBELL JR ~

Robert Campbell Junior, a Ngaku painter and printmaker was born in 1902 and died in 1993. Despite his lack of formal art training, he gained national attention in the 1980s when he produced works illustrating the political and social problems of the period, such as the Aboriginal deaths in custody, the Aboriginal Embassy or the strikes for equal pay for Aboriginal stockmen.

His style stood between the Aboriginal tradition (his father was a boomerang-maker and allowed his son to decorate them with him) and the European one: his paintings, animated with vivid decorations, can remind of Keith Haring and his oesophagus-like red ties appearing on many characters recalls the x-ray technique of Arnhem Land rock painting.



~ Bindi COLE ~



Born in 1975, Bindi Cole is of Aboriginal and British descent. She is a Wathaurung woman and identifies as such. She has been raised by her mother and her paternal grand-mother, who told her about her Aboriginal heritage. She left school when she was sixteen but decided to come back to her love of photography in her twenties.

Her work, which can take many forms (videos, installations, photographs...) often criticises the way non-Aboriginal Australia see Aboriginality and impose their views on such an identity. She also draws from very personal experiences to create her artworks, and liked to include, as much as possible, hand-worked elements into her creations. Identity and Aboriginal visibility are of course at the core of her works (she has produced a calendar entitled *Men in Black*, which featured male Aboriginal sport stars), but she also illustrates the relations between past and present situations and has recently developed the theme of forgiveness. Her 2009 photographic work on the Tiwi transgender Sistagirls testify her will to communicate and show the pride of being Aboriginal, despite the cultural transformations that the different communities have experienced since colonisation and daily racism.

~ Fiona FOLEY ~



Born in 1954 in Queensland, from the Wondunna clan, Fiona Foley is known for her works dealing with Australia's history and the way it is transmitted. Through her sculptures, installations and photographs, her political messages are always very clear and striking (although they require some attention) as she explores the still hidden parts of her country's colonial past and the tensions between race, sex, history, and their constructions. In works dealing with recent events (such as the 2005 Cronulla race riots), her aim has been to give an Aboriginal point of view that was missing in the media reporting.

~ Gordon HOOKEY ~



Gordon Hookey is from the Waanyi people of Northern Queensland and was born in 1961. In The 1980s, he headed south to find work and ended studying visual art at the College of fine Arts, University of New South Wales.

The radical Blacks of the 70s seem to have inspired him a lot, and the virulence of his works is combined with an incredibly dynamic use of colours. Hookey also uses texts in his paintings, sometimes with spelling mistakes (intentional or not) that render his work more accessible as it uses the language of the street and stands apart from other urban works because of its violent compositions. Regularly criticised by the conservative critics, the most important denounciators of his work are the members of his family, who accuse him of lacking respect for the people he depicts (such as politicians of all tendencies). Indeed, Hookey never hesitates to depict his characters (real or fictional) in embarrassing positions.

Hookey often uses animals in his creations, and they usually are metaphors or symbols: the kangaroo always for the Aborigines and their strength, but dogs and birds can also be seen.

~ Dianne JONES ~



Dianne Jones is a Nyoongar woman and an emerging photo-media artist. Her work, always full of humour, deals with Indigenous identity and its place in history and society. She uses iconic images (photographs, paintings...) and inserts herself or family members in it in order to transform them and allow the Aboriginal figure to reappear, making it the principal object of the work.

She illustrates what many Indigenous people have experienced, mainly the absence of any Aboriginal 'reference' at school and in history books: her aim is thus double, for making the Aborigines reappear in the popular imagery also means to question the homogeneity of dominant representations.

~ Gary LEE ~



Born in 1962 and belonging to the Larrakia people, Gary Lee is a photographer but also an anthropologist, a curator and a writer. He has been an active promoter of Aboriginal art since the 1980s when he worked as a freelance fashion designer in Sydney. Lee studied at the Sydney College of Arts, where he majored in glass and painting, but he finally move back to the Northern Territory to work as a trainee Aboriginal arts advisor. After a few years back in the 'south' (where he worked, among others, as an intern at the National Gallery of Australia and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies), Lee went back to Larrakia country as an anthropologist and, while looking for a research position at the Northern Land Council, worked on a play.

In 1993 he began his photographic series *Nice Coloured Boys*, a project in Nepal and India. Several series followed, as well as many portraits, where Lee emphasised male beauty, connections with history, and family links.

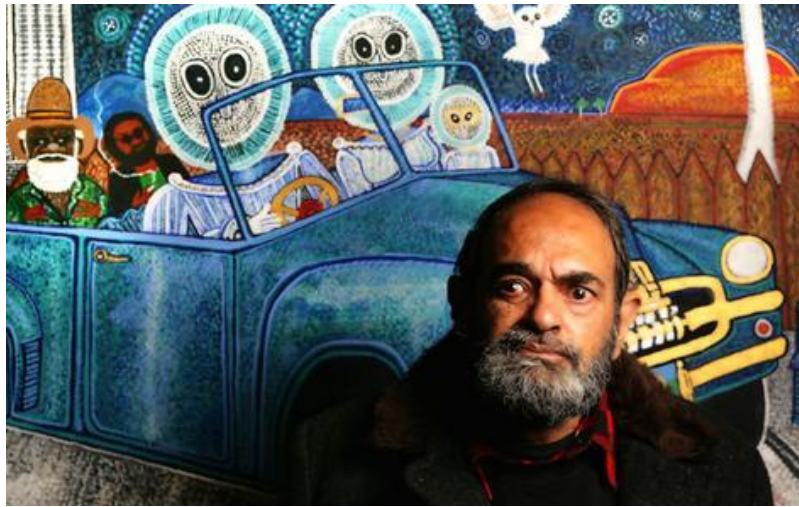
~ Sally MORGAN ~



Born in 1951, Sally Morgan is known for her 1987 multiple biography *My Place*, where she recounts her quest for identity, but she is also an artist and a professor at the Centre for Indigenous History at the University of Western Australia.

When she was fifteen she learned of her Aboriginality and that she was, as well as her sisters, descendant of the Palku people of the Pilbara. All this time, her mother had told them that they were Indian. This discovery of her true heritage has motivated her to produce artworks: full of colours, they represent her love for the land, the Aboriginal culture, and her very personal iconography is easily recognisable, although this bright and unconventional style was often criticised when she was in high school. She mostly creates prints, and was partly influenced by an uncle, a respected artists working on the edge of the desert, who convinced her no to give up her art and helped her gain confidence.

~ Trevor NICKOLLS ~



Born in 1949 in South Australia from an Aboriginal father and an Irish mother, Trevor Nickolls is a very famous urban artist who has influenced a lot of artists with his very complex iconography where the viewer can grasp several layers of meaning. The theme of the 'Dreamtime and Machinetime' is a very important one, and it symbolises the cultural transition (or division) between the traditional Aboriginal heritage and the world of technology and machines brought by Europeans.

Nickolls learned the theory of Western art, and it was only towards the end of his post-graduate study that he discovered Aboriginal art: the exploration of this art echoed the exploration of his own Aboriginality. Ancient and modern iconography blends into his works, producing a unique style that aims at synthesizing both cultures

~ Laurie NILSEN ~



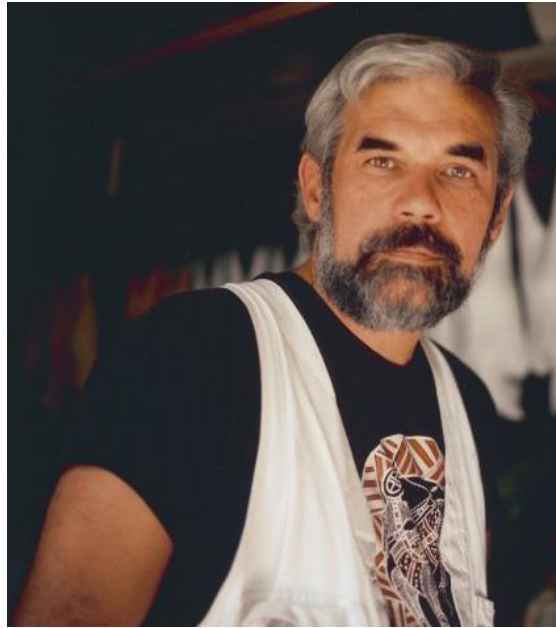
Born in 1953 in Roma (Queensland), Laurie Nilsen moved to Brisbane in the 1960s and trained in the graphic arts (certificate in commercial illustration; graduated in fine arts...). In the 1980s, he co-founded the Campfire Group (along with Richard BELL and other artists): this network of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists aimed at fusing contemporary Indigenous art and Western art and, in a broader perspective, creating a dialogue between the two cultures at a time when so many white Australians knew nothing about Aborigines.

He currently works with the ProppaNOW Collective, set up in the early 2000s to give the so-called “urban” Aboriginal artists a voice and propose an often provoking “black” perspective of Australia.

Laurie Nilsen’ major artistic characteristic is his use of barbed wires, which become subjects in his drawings and paintings, or medium in his three dimensional artworks. According to the artist himself, this very particular object is directly rooted in his own experience as a young boy when, after hunting or fishing on “his country”, his escape from farmers and their firearms through fences resulted in numerous scars.



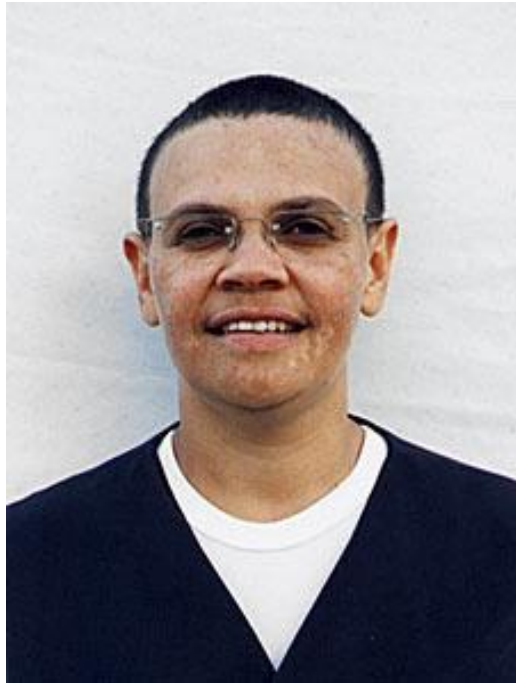
~ Lin ONUS ~



Born Lin Buralung McLintok, Onus (1948 – 1996) was of Scottish and Wiradjuri descent. His father, Bill Onus, was a political activist and businessman who founded the Aboriginal Advancement League, and together with his mother Mary McLintok Kelly, was politically active and closely associated with the Australian Communist Party. Onus was therefore raised in an environment that developed his social conscience and his will to fight for the rights of the oppressed.

He is considered one of the pioneers of urban art, ahead of his time, but was mainly a self-taught artist: discovering a set of watercolours in his father's shop (which produced tourists' artefacts), he began to paint and mounted his first exhibition in 1975 at the Aborigines Advancement League in Melbourne. He then became famous for his landscape paintings and photorealist works. In 1986 he had the opportunity to go to Arnhem Land and meet artist Jack Wunuwun, who adopted him as his son and taught him motives and designs to paint. This experience allowed him to expand his repertoire and find a distinctive style that mixed traditional and modern art and. From 1988 he discovered sculpture, which became a very effective tool to comment on contemporary issues.

~ R E A ~



Rea was born in 1962 of Gamilaroi and Wailwan peoples in Coonabarabran, New South Wales. After studies in Electrical Trades, she undertook a Visual Arts Diploma in 1990 and then completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1993 at the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Sydney.

Her works were first exhibited in 1994 and she received a development grant from the Visual Arts and Crafts Board of the Australia Council.

If she describes herself as being essentially a photographer, her work encompasses several digital media such as video. Even if she uses computers and other digital techniques, a lot of her work is done by hand, and she insists on the importance of creating her own source material (mainly the photographs).

She was influenced by Black women artists in general, but also by Albert Namatjira, and her art is her way to question colonial constructs and explore Aboriginal identities, as well as history.

~ Michael RILEY ~



Michael Riley (1960 – 2004) was born in Central New South Wales and spent his early years on the Talbragar Aboriginal Reserve with his family. He then moved to Sydney in 1976 and attended a photography course at the University of Sydney, before working as a technician in the photography department of the Sydney College of Arts, where he continued to study.

Many of his photographic works explore Indigenous identity, experience and politics, and he attached importance to portraits.

Riley was one of eight Australian Indigenous artists to be chosen for an architectural commission for the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris.

~ Yhonnie SCARCE ~



A descendant of the Kokatha people from the Lake Eyre region and the Nukunu from around Port Lincoln, Yhonnie Scarce has quickly achieved an important recognition for her work. She majored in glass making at the South Australian School of Art and uses this uncommon medium to explore the Aboriginal experience and the treatments that have been inflicted to them in both historic and contemporary contexts. Her works are very powerful despite the apparent simplicity of her medium, and she likes to see it as a historical documentation.

In 2006, after graduating with a Bachelor of Visual Arts (Honours), she was a finalist in the 23rd Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award and held her first solo exhibition. In 2007, she was a finalist in the Xstrata Coal Emerging Indigenous Art Award at the Queensland Art Gallery – Gallery of Modern Art, and in 2008 she received the inaugural Qantas Foundation Encouragement of Australian Contemporary Art Award. In 2010 Scarce completed her Masters of Fine Arts (Research) degree, where she was working on a project featuring her own hair, blood, skin, fingernails and saliva placed in found test tubes.

~ Judy Watson ~



Judy Watson is a Waanyi woman but has Scottish and English ancestry as well. She was born in Munduberra, North Queensland, in 1959. Her work, which combines aesthetics and poetry, echoes her own history but also appear as universal as she symbolically evokes any other oppressed people in the world: indeed, her links with her land are very strong and her parents used to take her to places where member of her family lived, but she also travelled a lot and experienced Indigenous oppression in a broader perspective. While reinforcing the Aboriginal relation to the land, Watson shows that the trauma of colonisation, of the Stolen Generation has marked several generations and still haunts a lot of people, as well as history. Her works are more abstract than many urban artists, but they are still extremely powerful because she tries to exorcise a past that is hers as well as that of any Indigenous people. Her abstraction allows her to convey tough messages in an almost subliminal way: they can only be discovered by entering the artworks and deciphering their layers.

## RÉSUMÉ / ABSTRACT

L'Australie d'aujourd'hui, malgré l'image multiculturelle qu'elle se donne, s'obstine à ne pas voir sa population indigène : les Aborigènes, qu'ils soient « urbains » ou vivent dans des communautés isolées du Territoire du Nord et des zones désertiques, restent bien souvent une présence indésirable que l'on ignore ou méconnaît. Cette situation extrêmement paradoxale, où les « premiers habitants » du continent australien ont fini par devenir des étrangers et doivent lutter pour être acceptés au sein de leur propre pays, semble exacerbée dans les œuvres des artistes aborigènes dits « urbains » : le motif du corps est omniprésent dans leurs travaux et se fait l'écho autant que l'antidote d'une invisibilité (ou d'une fausse visibilité) qui s'est enracinée dans la société australienne depuis les premiers temps de la colonisation. A travers ces représentations de corps aborigènes se dessine la trame d'un véritable processus de reconstruction : exorciser les souffrances passées et actuelles, affirmer la présence aborigène et créer un dialogue avec la société « blanche », telles sont les différentes étapes qui permettront peut-être aux Aborigènes de retrouver une image qui ne leur sera plus imposée, et à l'Australie de se construire en acceptant cet héritage indigène qui fait, qu'elle le veuille ou non, partie de son histoire.

Today's Australia, despite the multicultural image it wants to put forward, persists in ignoring its Indigenous population: whether they are 'urban' or live in remote communities in the Northern Territory and desert areas, Aborigines remain very often undesirable, and their presence is either ignored or little-known. This highly paradoxical situation, where the 'first inhabitants' of the Australian continent have become strangers and have to fight for recognition within their own country, seems to be intensified in the works of the so-called 'urban' Aboriginal artists: the motive of the body is omnipresent in their works, and echoes (and fight at the same time) an invisibility (or a false visibility) that has anchored itself in the Australian society since the early days of colonisation. Through these depictions of Aboriginal bodies appears the framework of a genuine process of reconstruction: the several steps of exorcising past and current

sufferings, asserting the Aboriginal presence and creating a dialogue with the 'white' society will maybe allow Aborigines to find an image again, which won't be imposed on them anymore, and Australia to build itself by acknowledging this Indigenous heritage that is, whether the country wants it or not, part of its history.

MOTS-CLÉS / KEYWORDS

Aborigènes / artistes urbains / corps / histoire / art / visibilité

Aborigines / urban artists / body / history / art / visibility

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