Contemporary Fine Art

369 Elizabeth Street
North Hobart
Tasmania 7000 Australia

T: +61 (0)3 6231 6511
F: +61 (0)3 6231 6521
E: info@bettgallery.com.au
W: bettgallery.com.au

bettgallery

Speaking of History

History is the new black. No longer relegated to the past, history is now front and centre: an object of critical inquiry, an archival resource, a means of cultural renewal and the way to the future.

Speaking about History is the compelling concern of this exhibition. Significantly the exhibition brings together a mix of artists: Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Together they engage in dialogue with each other – and with history.

This cultural mix makes for a bold and compelling exhibition. In itself the range of ethnicities is a telling reminder as if that were needed – of the global reach of colonisation and its centrality to a contemporary world. But more importantly, bringing Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists together speaks to the cross-cultural entanglements of colonial cultures.

Positioned within this hybrid space, each of the artists is intent upon pursuing their own distinctive trajectories. Identities are no longer fixed or rigid but open-ended and ambiguous, made and remade in the process of cultural exchange. Indeed what is striking is the sheer dynamism and diversity of the work on display in subject, content and media: from painting and sculpture to photography, installation and video giving rise to an immersive exhibition.

My concern here is with an Australian politics of identity. Colonisation in 1788 bought into juxtaposition two different worlds: an Australian Indigenous culture that had evolved over millennia in almost complete isolation and an Age of Empire realised in the arrival of the British fleet.
When Indigenous culture came into conjunction with the modern world it would be irrevocably changed. In the process much was destroyed but, paradoxically, Indigenous culture has also undergone transformation to emerge some 200 years later as a vibrant contemporary art. Cultures once opposed are now in convergence.

Let me begin with the moment in time when local Aboriginal people witnessed the arrival of Captain James Cook. At the time of their first encounter, Aboriginal people could not have foreseen the future outcomes of their meeting. Grounded in ancestral beliefs that linked people and country with laws that governed all aspects of existence, the local Dharawal-speaking Gweagal clan sought to accommodate their visitors according to their own cultural protocols and on their own terms.

Captain James Cook on the British Royal Navy vessel, HMS Endeavour was emblematic of the Age of Empire. Driving the voyage of discovery were Enlightenment ideals of scientific rational endeavour but Cook was also engaged in the 'business' of colonisation, to acquire territory that effectively displaced Indigenous people for economic and military purposes. There is an inherent contradiction. When Cook undertook the voyage he received instructions from the Royal Society, who had initiated the expedition, 'to treat the [indigenous] peoples with kindliness and humanity'. However Cook was also tasked with taking possession of Australia in the name of the British Crown and, to expedite colonisation, the land was declared terra nullius.

The many recorded instances of cross-cultural interaction in the young colony reveal a mutual interest and shared fascination on both sides. Aboriginal people eagerly engaged in trade with sailors from

English, French, American and Russia explorers who arrived in Botany Bay, bartering artefacts such as shields and spears for items they most desired including iron axe heads, tobacco and woollen beanies. This trade was part of a well-established tradition of cultural exchange across the continent whereby Aboriginal people traded ochre and made artefacts for exchange in ceremonies for reciprocity and good will.

Aboriginal people were also keen to embrace new technologies. Among the first drawings on paper to have been preserved were by unnamed Aboriginal artists interacting with the artists Nicolas Petit and Charles-Alexandre Leseur travelling with the French explorer Nicolas Baudin in 1802. Colonial encounters record many instances of Aboriginal people engaging in performances as a strategic form of cross-cultural theatre. The Kuringgai man Bungaree was a well-known figure in early Sydney town renowned for wearing cast-off pieces of naval attire – engaged in an act of mimicry. And Indigenous people played an important role in exploration: acting as informants, interpreters and skilled go-betweens facilitating interaction with other Indigenous people.

In the histories told by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people the figure of James Cook assumes considerable importance but for different reasons.

The painting by Emanuel Phillips Fox, The Landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay 1770, reveals how the arrival of Cook became a focus for narratives of national identity. Commissioned in 1902, a year after Federation, the painting ostensibly restages Cook's arrival on the shores of Botany Bay with all the appearance of realism. But in many ways the painting is a fiction, glossing over the 'violent showdown' that had actually occurred on the beach. Whereas diaries reveal Cook had resorted to using his pistol in order to gain possession, in the painting he is portrayed as part of a civilising mission, his arm outstretched as a conciliatory gesture to prevent future bloodshed. Maria Nugent in Captain Cook was Here suggests that this monumental painting created a 'grand and noble history' marking 'a foundational moment in the new nation' of white Australia.

By contrast, in the stories told by many Aboriginal people, the figure of Captain Cook is used to describe their relations with white people and the ongoing problems created by colonisation. The saga of Captain Cook told by Hobbles Danaiyarri from the Victoria River District in the Northern Territory is typical. Danaiyarri insists that the problem began when Captain Cook didn't follow protocol, he didn't say 'hello' to the local people.

> He should have come up and: 'hello', you know, 'hello'. Now, asking him for this place, to come through, because [it's] Aboriginal land. Because Captain Cook didn't give him a fair go to tell him 'good day', or 'hello' you know. Give people a fair go.

In his narrative Danaiyarri takes the uniquely Australian idea of 'a fair go' to create a bridge between cultures. In Danaiyarri's view the problem can only be resolved when non-Aboriginal people recognise the immorality of Cook's actions. In Aboriginal stories of Captain Cook, the past is used to explain the present.

.

With Federation in 1901 Australia became a nation state in its own right. For Aboriginal people, colonisation brought dispossession and destruction. Indeed such was the impact of colonisation that by the late 19th century it was generally assumed that Aboriginal people were doomed to extinction – an

assumption which government polices of protection and assimilation which relegated Aboriginal people to isolated reserves and town camps, did little to alleviate. This is what the anthropologist W. E.H. Stanner famously termed, 'the great Australian silence'.

Art follows life. By the late 19th century the landscape had become a national icon. In the decades to follow a fascination with the landscape on the part of artists, photographers and the wider public was all pervasive. What began as an expression of nostalgia on the part of city dwellers for an earlier pioneering ethos began to fulfil a more subtle role as an expression of national identity. Depicting the bush in picturesque terms as a sundrenched arcadia fulfilled a symbolic role for an immigrant people. Nevertheless Aboriginal people were seen to have no part in this future and an Aboriginal presence had no place in this vision.

Modernism disrupted this pastorale. In the 1920s Australia's leading modernist was Margaret Preston, heralded for her cubist-inspired still life paintings and prints of native flora. In a series of articles published in the journal Art and Australia from 1925, Preston explicitly advocated the use of Aboriginal motifs not as a means of inspiration – the role which tribal art usually played for modernists but for nationalistic reasons, to create a unique Australian art. Preston was indeed part of a growing recognition for Aboriginal art in the southern capitals, widespread among artists and anthropologists. Understandably the appropriation which Preston advocated and many artists practised has since drawn widespread criticism from both black and white. However this new found interest in Aboriginal art resulted in the very first exhibitions of Aboriginal art. Importantly Primitive Art (1929) and Aboriginal Art and its Application (1941) moved Aboriginal art from the ethnographic context of the museum into the art gallery.

Coincidentally the Arrernte artist Albert Namatjira emerged to national acclaim in the same era. Namatjira grew up on the Hermannsburg Mission, west of Alice Springs and learnt watercolour painting from the Victorian artist Rex Batterbee. Namatjira joined Battarbee on a two week painting expedition and Battarbee facilitated Namatjira's entry into the art world including a work by Namatjira in his 1937 Adelaide exhibition. Battarbee, like many other artists, was motivated to paint the vivid colours and unique features of the desert region then emerging as a focus of tourism popularised by the government sponsored Walkabout magazine from 1934. In the course of his lifetime Namatjira achieved widespread fame. In particular, Namatjira's meeting with Queen Elizabeth II in 1954 carried considerable status for both black and white. Through his pioneering efforts Namatjira established an entirely new school of Aboriginal art. And to a future generation of urban Aboriginal artists like Lin Onus, Namatjira represented an heroic role model – proof that Aborigines could bridge the divide 'between two worlds' and use their art as a means of cultural survival.

Despite the widespread popular acclaim for Namatjira or perhaps because of it –both the art world and anthropologists disparaged Namatjira's achievements and his consummate mastery of Western imagery as evidence of assimilation and hence, a loss of Aboriginality. Within the categoric imperatives of modernism, to be authentic, 'primitive art' had to remain traditional. Where Preston's use of Aboriginal motifs won acclaim: Namatjira's forays into Western imagery and techniques stood condemned. Battarbee however, thought otherwise: he wrote about the Hermannsburg School as Modern Australian Aboriginal Art. And over time, Namatjira's achievements at the cutting edge of a new era, have come to be seen from a more informed perspective. Today it is possible to look beyond the explicit titles given to his paintings to acknowledge his spiritual connections to country. Namatjira

perceived the land from an Indigenous perspective: his paintings are concerned with the tracks of mythic ancestors travelling across country in effect presaging the acrylic canvasses of Papunya Tula.

.

In the 1970s and 1980s driven by pride in their Aboriginality, land rights and self-determination a new urban Aboriginal art movement emerged alongside the acrylic canvasses from Papunya Tula in the Central Desert. The political activism driving this movement served to unite Aboriginal people across the continent in an expression of pan-Aboriginality and contributed to the successful outcome of the 1967 Commonwealth Referendum (winning 90.77% votes). Acclaimed by critics this new Aboriginal art movement achieved worldwide recognition as Indigenous contemporary art.

But initially this transformational shift in Aboriginal art only served to exacerbate divisions within the white art world. In response to a resurgent Aboriginal presence, Bernard Smith in his Boyer lectures of 1980, pointed toward 'a new moral agenda' created from a process of cultural convergence. Initially the idea of cultural convergence was anathema to the theoretical debates then of concern to the white art world but within a few years this opposition would become irrelevant swept aside by the wider, more inclusive postcolonial space of global contemporary art. Whereas previously, colonisation was viewed in terms of the apparently 'fatal impact' of the West on various cultures and continents, now it was seen to be 'a culture in its own right' where, as Ian McLean argues in How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art, 'the so-called coloniser and colonised each have a voice, no matter how unequal, and together create new hybrid territories' [called] "colonial cultures"'. From this perspective Australian art is better seen as a hybrid aesthetic, a transactional space where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists appropriate for diverse reasons. Indeed it is the dialogue between black and white and the intersubjective experiences of cross cultural exchange which point the way forward.

How do artists engage with history? Many non-Indigenous artists seek to redress the past by engaging in collaboration with Indigenous artists. Leading this move Tim Johnson worked extensively with Papunya Tula artists picturing the artists and their paintings, interested in both Aboriginal culture and Buddhism. Other artists involved in collaboration include Michael Nelson Tjakamarra with Immants Tillers; and Kimberley artist Rusty Peters with New Zealand artist Peter Adsett. Equally important, if less well known, are the collaborations which occur in more urbanised settings: like that between Rod Moss and Arrernte living in town camps in Alice Springs or pura-lia meenamatta (Jim Everett) and Jonathan Kimberley in northeast Tasmania. In these contexts, landscape itself is investigated as artists seek to represent the deep time of Aboriginal country. And Geoff Parr in The National Picture (1985) restaged Duttereau's The Conciliation (1840) a contentious painting which purported to depict the harmonious colonial relations achieved by George Augustus Robinson.

Pursuing this critique further Queensland artist Gordon Bennett has interrogated a colonial legacy and its political regimes and mechanisms of suppression through what he called 'History Painting' juxtaposing Aboriginal and Western imagery. Working in photography and film Tracey Moffatt has likewise raided a colonial legacy but also created new fictional worlds. Artists such as Michael Riley and Ricky Maynard have used photography to document a community presence once erased from recognition and indeed this is the very starting point for Vernon Ah Kee's large scale charcoal drawings.

Histories are not shared. In 1988 the Aboriginal Memorial from Ramingining in Arnhem Land, now on permanent display at the National Gallery of Australia, was a key focus of the highly politicised bicentenary year. The Memorial took the form of 200 burial poles to commemorate Aboriginal people who had died in defence of their country. The massacre narrative, once taboo, is now an important genre in Aboriginal art with the 2002 exhibition by East Kimberley artists Blood on the Spinifex and most recently Secrecy and Despatch at the Campbelltown Arts Centre in 2016.

The difficult process of cultural revival and renewal is crucial for many Aboriginal people. For Waanyi woman Judy Watson, it has involved retrieving family connections to northwest Queensland via her mother and grandmother and transposing this history of people, place and objects into large free floating canvasses. In Victoria, the revival of possum skin cloaks required access to the few remaining cloaks still held in the collection of Museum Victoria. Worn by Elders at the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne the cloaks became part of a public performance of cultural identity. Likewise the cultural continuity evidenced in the production of shell necklaces by Aboriginal Tasmanian women must be historically contextualised in relation to their exile on Flinders Island.

And so to Speaking of History. The artists in this exhibition all speak of history but from multiple perspectives. They live in a colonial culture, where identities are ambiguous, complicated and contingent, where both black and white find points of intervention between the local and global where history is in the making.

Dr Sylvia Kleinert