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LIVING BLACK

YIRIBANA GALLERY OF ABORIGINAL & TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER ART
20 DECEMBER 07 – 16 NOVEMBER 08





EUBENA NAMPITJIN born c.1925
Wangkajunga, Wirrimanu (Balgo),
Western Desert region

KINYU 2007
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 295 x 121 cm
© Eubena Nampitjin, licensed by Viscopy, Australia
35/4/2007

RUSTY PETERS b1935
Gija, Warmun (Turkey Creek),
Kimberley region

CHINAMAN'S GARDEN MASSACRE 2000
natural pigments on linen canvas, 150 x 180.2 cm
Purchased with funds provided by J S Watkins Memorial Fund 2001
© Rusty Peters, courtesy Jirruwan Arts
13.2001



DANIEL BOYD b1982
Cairns, Kudjila/Gangalu,
North-east region,
Blue Mountains, South-east region

SIR NO BEARD 2007
oil on canvas, 182.5 x 121.5 cm
Private collection loan
© Daniel Boyd, courtesy Mori Gallery



BRENDA L CROFT b1964
Garindji/Mutpurra, Fitzmaurice region,
Canberra, South-east region

JESUS WANTS ME FOR A SUNBEAM 1998
from the series *In my father's house*
colour ilfachrome photograph, 94 x 66 cm
Gift of the artist 2007
© Brenda L Croft, licensed by Viscopy, Australia
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LIVING BLACK

THE COLONIAL PROJECT 1788–

The artists in *Living Black* generously offer us a snapshot of the myriad experiences of contemporary Indigenous life around the country. The work of artists Daniel Boyd, Brenda L Croft, Rusty Peters and Eubena Nampitjin has been specifically chosen for these collection notes to examine some of the issues facing Indigenous Australians today, in what has been described as a 'post-colonial' environment.

The invasion and subsequent colonisation of Australia has had a profound impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life – defined under the terms of the United Nations as genocide.¹ Since the establishment of a British colony on Australia's east coast in 1788, the colonial frontier has moved across the country with horrific effects. The exhibition *Living Black* represents many of these experiences.

The Eora nation from the Sydney area bore the initial brunt of the colonial invasion. The 1789 smallpox epidemic alone killed over half the Eora population, devastating many traditional communities and leaving them to form as new cultural groups. Diseases like smallpox, influenza, leprosy and measles ripped through the country and in many instances impacted on Indigenous communities before the actual physical invasion of their country took place. Today Aboriginal health remains a national blight: Indigenous people have a life expectancy of around 18 to 19 years less than non-Indigenous people, an infant mortality rate three times higher than the national average, and a rate of diabetes six times higher.

The expulsion of Indigenous people from their countries was rationalised by the term *terra nullius*, or empty land, a term which has been instrumental within the Australian colonial project. The fraudulent notion that Australia was either empty or unattended has been the leverage that the Australian colonies used to justify the invasion and occupation of Indigenous lands to create a 'proud' nation.

In most areas, pastoralism drove the frontier. First to be engulfed were the areas around the colony of Sydney: Cowpastures in the south, Rose Hill in the west and Windsor to the north. The influx of Europeans changed the environment, draining local resources and altering forever the Indigenous way of life. Age-old practices of environmental management, including burning back the land to promote new growth and encourage game (known as fire-stick farming), were seen as acts of hostility toward European agricultural enterprise. The killing of cattle or sheep to replace the loss of local game was seen as poaching and brought about swift and violent reprisals, often in the form of mass killings. One notable massacre in the Sydney region occurred in 1816 at Broughton Pass in Appin, south of Sydney, where a family group of local Dharawal men, women and children was forced over the cliff edge to their death.

Removing traditional landowners became a colonial priority and massacres were a significant factor in the process of colonisation throughout Australia. Notorious instances included the Myall Creek

Massacre of Wirrayaraay people in central NSW in 1838, the 1928 Coniston Massacre of Warlpiri people in Central Australia and the many episodes in the East Kimberley, a region where it has been estimated that over half the Aboriginal population was murdered between 1890 and the 1920s, a period that local Gija people call 'the killing times'. So desperate was the situation in the Kimberley that a royal commission led by Reverend E R B Gribble was ordered in the mid 1920s. Its findings, however, were not acted upon. Artist Rusty Peter's uncle was a survivor of the Chinaman's Garden Massacre, when pastoral workers from neighbouring properties banded together to murder grandparents, mothers, fathers and children alike. Peter's uncle was left asking 'Where are my people? Where are my people? Where? The white men had killed them all, poor things'. Peters records this tragic event in his painting *Chinaman's Garden Massacre 2000*.

Indigenous resistance fighters waged war against colonisation. Local Dharug hero Pemulwuy started raiding and burning crops on the outskirts of Sydney in 1792, leading Governor King in 1801 to declare Pemulwuy an outlaw and issue orders that any Aboriginal people found near Parramatta were to be shot on sight. Following Pemulwuy's death, he was decapitated and his head sent to Sir Joseph Banks in England. This was followed in 1833 by the head of Noongar warrior Yagan, who fought for his country and people in southern Western Australia. Thousands of other ancestral remains became part of the colonial plunder; collected, studied and sold as curiosities around the world by a burgeoning horde of anthropologists and scientists, museums and private collectors. These practices are directly questioned in the work *Sir No Beard* by Daniel Boyd, who appropriates Benjamin West's 1773 image *Sir Joseph Banks in a Maori cloak, with treasures from the Endeavour*. Boyd depicts Banks with his colonial spoils, including a specimen jar containing the artist's self-portrait, positioning himself as the curiosity and also as one of the new generation of resistance fighters. Boyd challenges the heroic Eurocentric masculine role which colonial history has invested in people such as Captain James Cook and Sir Joseph Banks, instead identifying them as pirates.

Disease and massacre did not lead to the colonial project's desired end of Indigenous cultures. Displaced, disarmed and disenfranchised, Indigenous people were forced onto government reserves and religious missions, kept out of sight and out of mind in the hope that the 'Aboriginal problem' would go away. Yet through this adversity, missions became an important part of contemporary Indigenous life, with different communities having varied but shared experiences. The Western Aranda people gravitated to the central Australian mission of Ntaria (Hermannsburg) during harsh droughts, while Warlpiri and Pintupi sought safety from massacres in Papunya.

Safety on missions, however, generally came at a price. People were forbidden to speak language and culture was outlawed. Salvation lay in the forced adoption of Christianity. However,

when governments changed their Indigenous policies from 'welfare state' to 'self-determination', a move spearheaded by the 1967 referendum, a resurgence of cultural practices and traditional ideals began through the many art movements that flourished under the new policy. Artists like Eubena Nampitjin, after years of repressive mission life, were for the first time in a position to celebrate their profound love of country and culture with brilliant acrylic colours on canvas, as seen in her work *Kinyu*. The desert art movement was sparked in 1971 in the community of Papunya, where senior men were introduced to the new policies of self-determination via the young school teacher Geoffrey Bardon, who supported and nurtured this groundbreaking cultural expression which soon spread to neighbouring communities. Nampitjin's community at the Catholic Mission at Wirrimanu (Balgo) on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert was just one in this wave of cultural resurgence. The accolade that many artists received was the first time that their culture was valued and respected by non-Aboriginal audiences.

Yet missions were also sites where governments took children from their families, children who have come to be known as the Stolen Generation, which in reality affected generations of children throughout the country. In NSW alone over 15,000 people are identified as having been taken under this scheme. The digital photographic work of Gurindji/Mutpurra artist Brenda L Croft looks at the story of her father, Joseph Croft. Taken from his mother as an infant to be brought up in children's homes in Darwin and Mparntwe (Alice Springs), Joseph Croft only met his mother just a few months before she passed away. Brenda Croft employs family quotes, suburban vernacular and images from personal and historical sources to look at the impact of the government policy that affected her father and in turn herself. She also includes references to the social politics of having an Aboriginal father and non-Aboriginal mother. In her series, images of her father as a boy in the children's homes, as a man getting married or relaxing in a domestic environment are overlaid with texts that read 'don't go kissing at the garden gate', 'he was attractive to look at, a promising lad' and 'she called him son', giving us open and honest insights into the personal experiences of a fraught life.

Working across the country in different mediums and contexts, the artists featured in the exhibition *Living Black* reveal how the colonial project still has a profound impact on Indigenous communities today. These artists, through their art, offer a means of grieving and understanding, and a way forward.

Jonathan Jones
Coordinator of Aboriginal programs

SOURCES, FURTHER READING AND VIEWING

Books

Tradition Today: Indigenous art in Australia, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney 2007

Painting the land story, National Museum of Australia, Canberra 1999

One sun one moon: Aboriginal art in Australia, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney 2007

Ryan, Judith. *Colour power: Aboriginal art post 1984*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne 2004

Exhibition catalogues

Blood on the spinifex, Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne, Melbourne 2002

Boomalli: 20 years on, Australian Collection Focus Room, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney 2007

Culture warriors: National Indigenous Art Triennial, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra 2007

Newspapers and magazines

Koori Mail

DVDs

True stories: Artists of the East Kimberley, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney 2004

Websites

Boomalli Artists Co-operative www.boomalli.org.au

Gadigal Information Service www.gadigal.org.au

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) www.aiatsis.gov.au

EUBENA NAMPITJIN

Kinyu depicts some of the artist's country south west of Wirramanu (Balgo) along the middle stretches of the Canning Stock Route. The majority of the painting shows the tali (sandhills) that dominate this country. The central circles refer to tjurrnu (soak water) named Mudjul. This is the country where Kinju the spirit dog lives.²

Eubena Nampitjin is a senior Wangkajunga painter, a custodian of women's culture and the most recognised female artist to emerge from the community at Wirrimanu (Balgo) in the Great Sandy Desert, a community established originally as a Catholic mission in 1934.

- Research the history of missions and reserves in Australia and the impact they have had on Indigenous life. Focus in particular on evidence of restrictions on Indigenous language and the practice of culture.
- Consider the effect of such repressive conditions on Eubena Nampitjin. Discuss the expressive, celebratory style of her painting in this context. How can such an exuberant act of artmaking, an expression of passion for country, function as an affirmation of identity and beliefs? Compare Nampitjin's art with art made at Ntaria (Hermannsburg), Yirrkala and Nguiu, and discuss the way art practice can act as a social catalyst.
- This painting tells of the country where Kinyu the spirit dog lives, a story important to Wangkajunga country and culture. Study the surface of this painting and describe the qualities of colour, paint and brushstrokes. What can you infer about Nampitjin's technique? How does it contribute to the mood of the work? Look at the work of other artists from this community and identify common elements in terms of style, materials, technique and content.
- Research the emergence of women's art in the desert. Investigate the similarities and differences between the art produced by women at Utopia, Papunya Tula and Wirrimanu. Look at the work of artists such as Emily Kam Ngwaray, Makinti Napanangka and Mitjili Napurrula.

RUSTY PETERS

These white people didn't like black people, that's why they were killing them to the west, the south, the north and the east.

Rusty Peters 2002³

Along the colonial frontier in the Kimberley region, the period between 1890 and the 1920s was marked by violence as Europeans claimed Indigenous land. *Chinaman's Garden Massacre* was part of the 2002 exhibition *Blood on the spinifex*, conceived as a direct response to the 'History Wars', triggered by historians such as Keith Windschuttle, who claimed in his book *The fabrication of Aboriginal history* that stories of mass killings of Indigenous people on the frontier are not supported by (European) historical evidence. The people of the East Kimberley, relying on a tradition of oral history and excluded from a debate based on written history, chose to tell their stories through art.

- Research the debate which was generated by Windschuttle's book and which became known as the 'History Wars'. What role did the exhibition *Blood on the spinifex* play as a catalyst for social and political change? Investigate other artistic forms which have been used to make records of colonisation such as rock art, songs, ceremonies and theatre.
- Look at this painting and describe it in terms of composition, shape and colour. Consider the effect of addressing monumental and horrific subjects such as massacres through non-figurative painting. How do elements such as sparseness, simplicity and pared-back concentration on place and events in this painting create a powerful effect? Would the effect of using graphic and shockingly realistic images be different?
- Look at the work of other artists who have witnessed horrific events, for example Doris Salcedo, Alfredo Jaar and Maria Elvira Escallfin. Discuss the importance of art as a documentation of unpalatable truths. Analyse the role of the artist in relation to these events.
- Rusty Peters is part of a group of artists who established Jirrawun Aboriginal Art Corporation. Research the foundation of this group and the importance of Aboriginal owned and operated art organisations.

BRENDA L CROFT

Aboriginal people who were taken away from their communities often travel vast distances in a subliminal, as well as literal search for themselves and a place to belong. My father, and my family, was 'luckier' than some that never made it home.

Brenda L Croft 1998⁴

Brenda L Croft is an artist and curator from the Gurindji and Mutpurra community, a founding member of Boomalli Aboriginal Artist's Co-operative and one of a group of urban Indigenous artists to emerge from Sydney in the 1980s. Her father was a member of the Stolen Generation, taken from his mother at the age of 18 months. Many such children were taken to children's homes, often run by the church, where they were trained as domestic or farm workers.

- Croft explores the intersection between family experience and history through work which uses her own family photographs, religious imagery and familiar language and text. Identify the use of post-modern strategies such as irony, humour and quotation in *Jesus wants me for a sunbeam*. How might Croft be referring to the Stolen Generation and the roles of many such children?
- Discuss the use of personal content when referring to broad issues such as the Stolen Generation, missions and the history of Aboriginal and European relations. How are these issues still being felt today in an environment that many describe as post-colonial?
- Research the emergence of 'urban Aboriginal culture' and discuss the influences of this movement on the social and political landscape of today. Look at the work of other urban Indigenous artists who work with photomedia, such as Tracey Moffatt, Destiny Deacon and Michael Riley. Discuss the ways in which their work and artmaking practices challenge stereotypical ideas about Aboriginal identity.

DANIEL BOYD

Questioning the romantic notions that surround the birth of Australia is primarily what influenced me to create this body of work. With our history being dominated by Eurocentric views it's very important that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to create dialogue from their own perspective to challenge the subjective history that has been created.

Daniel Boyd 2007⁵

This painting by emerging Kudjla/Gangalu artist Daniel Boyd re-presents an iconic 18th-century portrait of Sir Joseph Banks surrounded by the trappings of European exploration in the South Pacific.

- Identify elements of this work which conform to European conventions of portrait painting that valorise 'great men'. Think about pose, the gaze, costume, objects and architectural features included in the picture. How do such portraits help to tell a story of Australian history as heroic and just?
- Find other examples of portraits, including public sculptures, which function in this way. How does Boyd subvert these conventions to propose a different view of history? What does the use of the eye-patch tell us of his perspective on Banks's actions of exploration and 'discovery' in the South Pacific?
- Boyd has included a self-portrait as the head in a specimen jar at Banks's feet, referring to the grim practice of beheading Indigenous people, including resistance fighters, and preserving their heads as scientific curiosities. How do you think Boyd sees the role of art and his own role as an artist? Discuss the ways in which this artist opposes the two different ideas of a 'hero' in this work. Research the current issues regarding repatriating Indigenous ancestral remains.

NOTES

1. *United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, United Nations General Assembly, 1948, Article II (a) to (e)
2. Courtesy Warlayirti Artists
3. *Blood on the spinifex*, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, Melbourne 2002, p 56
4. Brenda L Croft, in the catalogue essay 'In my father's house', NAIDOC Week 1998: 'Bringing them home', Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, 10 July – Aug 1998, p 95
5. Daniel Boyd, *Culture warriors: National Indigenous Art Triennial*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra 2007, p 72

Acknowledgments

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