

FLAGS OF CONVENIENCE – ARCHIE MOORE THE COMMERCIAL REDFERN, SYDNEY

by Djon Mundine OAM



Installation view:
Archie Moore, *Flag*
The Commercial, Sydney
Photo: Jessica Maurer
Courtesy the artist
and The Commercial, Sydney



Flags are a sign of group identity and allegiance at a base level, but they are also visual signals to others of intent, movement, or call to action, or condition (as in infectious disease or hunger or thirst). In jingoistic terms, the flag is the last refuge of scoundrels. For some it is a skin of moral right, a vanity of their thinking, and ideas of morality. Is it skin/paper thick (thin) and fragile?

Signal flags have a long history up to the present day in human communication, as in a type of conversing language, especially among watercraft, whether to describe the condition of yourself (disease, fire, damage, assistance required, affirmative, negative, etc.), of impending movement or other action, or, just to identify who you are.

In Galiwin'ku where singer Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu comes from, Aboriginal people dance a flag dance. It talks of the yearly coming of the Macassan trepangers from the Celebes in what is now Indonesia. They came to collect sea cucumber (trepang) and brought iron, rice, matches, gin, money and cloth. There is the Mildjingi story of the Dingo man who meets the Macassans and is offered all these gifts as presents. He considers these but realises that if he accepts he will become civilised and dependent, and so rejects them in order to remain independent and free.

Archie Moore (born 1970) is a very interesting Aboriginal artist. Archie Moore is a very interesting thinking artist, period. One of Moore's heroes is the great Russian writer Pushkin (1799-1837) whose use of language he admired. A curious association but even more curious, one of Pushkin's great grandfathers was a black African slave who rose to be a nobleman and be in charge of all ports and canals in Russia.

In previous art pieces Moore played on the ambiguous pronunciation and meaning of some descriptive words across languages and cultures. In other work he forced the art viewer to act out an unconventional stance, dance, or other action as a type of projective identification - to stand in the other's shoes.

Ever inquisitive and in search of forms and meanings, Moore removed the paint itself from a type of rubber surface leaving triangular flags of pure fragile skin of paint and colour, to separate the meaning from the site of sign creation possibly, a language out of context, something of Moore's particular interest.

The descriptive word 'skin', of course, is another form of central, basic Aboriginal birthright identification. Your 'skin name' places you in that society physically and in social relationship and responsibility to others and the land itself.

Aboriginal people, of course, come in many ages, physical types, personalities, and political and social positions. In the present-day political and social climate, there are also many forms of Aboriginality. As Michael Riley has commented, outside people only stereotype us as the 'Trad Ab and the Rad Ab', and more recently, as certain 'intellectuals' would have it, right and left, or working class or middle class.

Art versus life. Some say we live in a time of great narcissism and that art exists only in the aesthetic. Artists and art have been historically characterised in public perception by a lack of empathy - an indifference to life. This indifference could be viewed as a type of narcissism that can only lead to loneliness, emptiness and death.

Moore has mischievous fun in flag parody and playing on our 'skin' to point to how frivolous and shallow some personality's use of such flag slogans, flappings, and flyings, generally are.

In November 2012, Archie Moore exhibited a set of monotone flags (in black, red, and mustard yellow colours) in a group show curated by Director Amanda Rowell to open The Commercial gallery space on Abercrombie Street in Redfern. A place to watch.

Left to right:
ARCHIE MOORE
Aboriginal Left, 2012
acrylic on nothing
85 x 94 cm

ARCHIE MOORE
Aboriginal Right, 2012
acrylic on nothing
85 x 95 cm

Courtesy the artist and
The Commercial, Sydney