

BURUWI BURRA (THREE SKIES)
13/05/15 – 06/06/15

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Buruwi Burra (Three Skies) is an exhibition of three important works by three key Aboriginal artists of their time and place: Paddy Sims Japaljarri, Michael Riley and Archie Moore. Each work is in some way a depiction of a sky. Respectively, the works encapsulate ancient belief, reflection upon the colonisation of ancient belief by Christian dogma and questions of contemporary nationhood and identity stemming from 19th Century anthropological foundations. The exhibition bridges early Warlpiri desert painting and contemporary conceptual art both photographic and object-based. The exhibition title comes from the near-extinct Dharug language of the Eora people, the original custodians of the Sydney region. The people who spoke this language were the first Aboriginal people to encounter British colonists in the 18th Century and were the first to be dispossessed of their country, culture and mother tongue.[1]

Paddy Sims Japaljarri, Milky Way Dreaming (Yiwarra Jukurrpa) - 1986

A large, early painting of a Milky Way Dreaming (*Yiwarra Jukurrpa*) by Warlpiri painter, Paddy Sims Japaljarri (c. 1917 – 2010). Around sixty-seven years old at the time, Sims was the eldest of the five painters of the 1984 Yuendumu School doors (now in the South Australian Museum). The thirty painted metal school doors are a landmark in Central Desert painting and are widely recognized as the first and most unmediated, comprehensive encapsulation of traditional Warlpiri knowledge for subsequent generations.

Sims “spent at least thirty years ‘foot-walking’ across Warlpiri country, coming to know the sites and Jukurrpa intimately” [2] though, along with the rest of his people, was forced to stop this millennia-old way of life due to encroaching white mining and pastoral interests. Extreme droughts increased competition for land between Aboriginal people and pastoralists and their cattle and resulted in instances of violent massacre of first peoples in the Central Desert area. In an attempt to ameliorate this situation, a ration and welfare depot was established in 1946 by the government at the site that is now Yuendumu. In that same year, Sims settled there.

Sims was said to be the last living custodian of all the Milky Way Dreaming songs and ceremony of which the Milky Way painting in this exhibition is an early example. It was painted within a year of the artist beginning to paint on canvas after the establishment of the Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Association at Yuendumu in 1985. In 1989, Sims was one of six Warlpiri men selected by the Power Gallery at the University of Sydney to create a ground painting for the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition in the Halle de la Villette at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. Typical of his early works, this 1986 Milky Way Dreaming is a richly complex and highly detailed topography. It has never previously been stretched or exhibited (it is being exhibited in *Buruwi Burra (Three Skies)* unstretched) and has been in the one collection since 1986.

“This Dreaming painting is about the Milky Way, those stars which shine up in the sky at night when we sleep. This story that I am telling is about my fathers in the Dreamtime who made the stars travel across the sky. They were of the Japaljarri-Jungarrayi section. They came from their country in the north and lived in one place. [...] It is also about the land which is sacred because it was created by the Dreaming. Special places were made by the Dreaming, which fell down as a shooting star to earth. Thus the Dreaming came to be for people. It is our father which stretches across the sky above us as the Milky Way.” [3] Paddy Sims Japaljarri, 1987 (translation from Warlpiri)

Michael Riley, *Untitled*, from the series *cloud*, 2000

Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi photographer and filmmaker Michael Riley (1960 – 2004) spent his childhood years on Talbragar Aboriginal Reserve near Dubbo in rural New South Wales. The reserve was established in 1898 on Riley’s family’s ancestral lands. The nomination of small parcels of land as reserves was an attempt by Government to segregate Aborigines from the white population in order to both render them culturally invisible to white eyes and to enable the largest possible amount of land to be exploited for white agricultural purposes unhindered by the nomadic movements of its traditional custodians. Segregation on reserves also facilitated assimilation of Aboriginal people by

the Church to Christianity, the Church who spiritually “subverted them, discouraging and preventing them from continuing their own religious and social practices, from speaking their own language. In personal conversations, an anger surfaced in Michael about what he felt he had lost.” [4]

Raised by Christian parents on the reserve, Riley, a quiet, deep-thinking lover of beauty, moved to Sydney in 1976 when he was sixteen at the height of the land rights movement. By 1983, he was enrolled in a Koori photography

course at the University of Sydney and had become immersed in a cosmopolitan community of extraordinary Aboriginal individuals, of great talent and politically active, who Riley referred to as the "Rad Ab" [5], many of whom were the subjects of his early portraits.

Religious images - seductive tools - recur in Riley's work, incorporated ambiguously into a broader visual metaphysics of landscape that is minimal and contemplative. In Riley's photograph included in *Buruwi Burra (Three Skies)*, a sensual, white marble angel with its back to the photographer addresses the sky with outstretched wings. It is from his series *cloud*, the work for which he received the most international acclaim. The series of ten images was included in *Poetic Justice - the 8th Istanbul Biennale*, curated by Dan Cameron (2003), it was awarded one of three grand prizes at the 11th Asian Art Biennial (2004) and the Musée du quai Branly, Paris, commissioned a large-scale permanent installation of *cloud* for the Australian Indigenous Art Commission curated by Brenda L. Croft and Hetti Perkins for the Australian Government (2006).

The print in the present exhibition was previously exhibited in *Holy Holy Holy* at Flinders University City Gallery [6] in 2004, which examined the interaction between Christianity and Aboriginal culture. In his review of *Holy Holy Holy*, Nick Waterlow compared Riley's work to that of fellow Wiradjuri artist, Harry J Wedge, which "questions the right of anyone to assert the supremacy of belief only in their own God." According to Waterlow, Riley's quieter images were "no less resistant in their depiction of the tools of religion, Angel, Cross and Bible." [7]

Archie Moore, *Kamilaroi Nation*, from the series *14 Queensland Nations (Nations Imagined by RH Mathews)*, 2014

In 2014, Brisbane-based conceptual artist and activist Archie Moore (b. 1970) was commissioned by the University of Queensland to make a new body of work for an exhibition entitled *COURTING BLAKNESS: Recalibrating knowledge in the Sandstone University*, curated by senior Aboriginal artist and Adjunct Professor, Fiona Foley. The exhibition was held at the Great Court of the University of Queensland St Lucia Campus. It was accompanied by a two-day symposium of the same title. Together the exhibition and symposium aimed to interrogate "the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the University as a prestigious knowledge institution. Universities have traditionally been elite institutions, isolated and dissociated from the concerns of Indigenous people. [...] Today, however, Indigenous knowledge and cultural industries are increasingly recognised as drivers of social change and innovation in the global university." [8]

Moore's work for *COURTING BLAKNESS* was *14 Queensland Nations (Nations imagined by RH Mathews)*, a series of fourteen sewn linen flags that he designed based on the Queensland section of a map of Aboriginal nations identified by surveyor and lay anthropologist RH Mathews (1841 – 1918) published in 1900. [9] Mathews was one of the first white people to identify a multiplicity of Aboriginal nations based on language groups. He "developed the clearest definition of an Aboriginal nation in the 19th century and boldly produced maps that clearly showed the boundaries of his Indigenous nations." [10]

While Mathews' identifications of Aboriginal nations were inaccurate, informed by incomplete knowledge and substantial ignorance, Moore is interested in the fact of them and the question of identity more generally. Moore presented a paper on his flags at the *COURTING BLAKNESS* symposium. The following is an extended extract from his paper:

"The fourteen flags don't create, allocate or represent identities of peoples in the areas mapped by Mathews, but are based on a personal decision to highlight his problematic document describing incorrect territorial boundaries in 1900. To develop these flags and complete the image, I loosely considered existing flag protocols and used colour playfully to represent land, water and other things unique to the areas Mathews identified, but I've also fallen on designs that I find attractive. These are artworks masquerading as flags and do not require the status of an Australian National Flag or intend to follow existing protocols. These false flags do not hide their own dualities and are intended to be ambiguous and contradictory, to raise questions of authenticity and to entail my own fragmented personal identity. Seeing the current Aboriginal flag as a pan-Aboriginal flag and whether all Aboriginal people feel represented by this flag." [11]

And elsewhere in Moore's paper:

"I think these processes closely connect with my own search for validity with my own identity. Not being 100% sure of being a part of Kamilaroi group, not sure who father is. The history and knowledge lost forever from my grandparents, their own misrepresentations of events and biases influenced by the upheaval of their lives. So the work connects my experience of engaging in these histories - connoting, mis-representations, gaps in knowledge, personal identity etc. ... The potential of identity being a lie? To pinpoint the intricacies of racism and ... I'm interested in what happens when you pursue or try to validate things based on something inauthentic. These things constantly rub up against each other; falsehoods and truths, one person's claim may be based on another's misinformation, re-evaluation of information etc. I find this engagement with out-dated material [such as Mathews' map] mirrors the process of finding my own identity through a myriad mess of perspectives and alienating forms of data." [12]

Moore's *Kamilaroi Nation* flag in *Buruwi Burra (Three Skies)* combines a blue background with a central diamond made of six bands of colour - black, red and yellow, repeated - taken from the Aboriginal flag. It is overlaid with seven white stars representing the constellation of the Pleiades or Seven Sisters, a small, shimmering cluster visible in both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres' night skies, and which featured in Kamilaroi cosmologies as a story about seven young women.

Subsequent to its exhibition at the University of Queensland, Moore's flag series has been exhibited at Canberra Contemporary Art Space and Tandanya National Aboriginal Institute, Adelaide. In July this year, it will be exhibited at the Art Gallery of Western Australia as part of the Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards 2015 for which Moore is one of fourteen shortlisted artists.

Buruwi Burra (Three Skies) is an exhibition of three artworks by three Aboriginal artists in some way each about the sky. Together they provide signposts for a rapid sketch of a troubled history.

The Commercial supports *Shut Down Australia*, a grassroots campaign to oppose the Australian Federal and State Governments' plan to forcibly close Aboriginal homeland communities and the scheduled global day of action on 1 June 2015.

ENDNOTES

[1] With gratitude to Dharug speaker and custodian, Richard Green, Dharug artist, Leanne Tobin and historian, author and curator, Keith Vincent Smith, for their advice on the Dharug language. Information has also been drawn from the various records made by 18th and 19th Century colonists, summarised and made available online by the work of Jakelin Troy.

[2] Philip Jones with Warlukurlangu Artists, *Behind the Doors – An Art History from Yuendumu*, South Australian Museum, Adelaide, 2014, p. 75

[3] Paddy Sims Japaljarri (trans. Tess Napaljarri Ross with Nick Piper) 'Milky Way – Door 29' in Eric Michaels and Warlukurlangu Artists, *Kuruwarri: Yuendumu Doors*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1987, p. 127

[4] Djon Mundine, 'CLOUD Wungguli – Shadow: Photographing the spirit and Michael Riley', in Brenda L. Croft, *Michael Riley: Sights Unseen*, exh. cat. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2005, p. 127

[5] Mundine, p. 126

[6] *Holy Holy Holy* was curated by Vivonne Thwaites and toured nationally. An excellent 110 page catalogue accompanied the exhibition with essays by Bill Edwards, Marcia Langton, Rob Amery, Mary Eagle and Varga Hosseini.

[7] Nick Waterlow, 'Holy Holy Holy at the Flinders University City Gallery', *Art Monthly* #170, June 2004, pp. 24-26

[8] <http://courtingblakness.com/courting-blakness-symposium/>

[9] A biography of Mathews has recently been published: Martin Thomas, *The Many Worlds of R.H. Mathews – In search of an Australian anthropologist*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2011, 462 pp.

[10] <http://press.anu.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/ch0648.pdf>

[11] Archie Moore, unpublished paper presented at COURTING BLAKNESS Symposium, the University of Queensland, Brisbane, 06/09/14. Publication of all papers from the symposium is forthcoming.

[12] Moore, 2014