



Archie Moore, *False Friends*

The linguistic term ‘false friends’ refers to pairs of words across different languages that are written or pronounced similarly but fundamentally differ in meaning. Archie Moore has adopted the term for the title of his first solo exhibition in Darwin, drawing attention to semantic puns and misunderstandings – themes that have been central to his work for many years. Moore shares his name with that of the champion American boxer of the 1950s and ‘60s, known for his long career and his campaigning for African-American civil rights. While in the age of Google many of us have been made aware of how we share our name with someone else, this seems especially fitting in Moore’s case given his proclivity for false impressions. Growing up in Tara, Queensland, and based in Brisbane most of his life, Moore’s work has consistently addressed slippages in language and identity, often underlining the ways in which cultural context affects meaning.

In the video work *False Friends* (2005-), from which the exhibition takes its title, Moore assumed a ‘literal’ approach to his source material, appropriating snippets of English-sounding dialogue from foreign language tapes and presenting them in newly assembled forms. As a viewer, one waives between hearing the words in their original ‘foreign’ context or as part of Moore’s abbreviated narratives, many of which are laden with ‘Carry On’-style innuendo. The black-and-white format of the work has racial connotations, particularly if one is familiar with Moore’s other works that deal with derogatory and racist speech. About this fascination for language, he has stated:

I’m always looking at words and seeing other words within them. I probably see all words as potential ‘false friends’ and I’m attracted to finding out underlying meanings or unintended connotations, which might stem from my experience with schoolyard racist jokes.¹

Raised by a black mother and a white father in a conservative country Queensland setting, Moore has spoken at length about the sense of vacillation he has felt since he was a young child. An early introduction to racism led him to constantly reassess what things mean, shuffling back and forth between different viewpoints, as if caught between conflicting ideologies. This two-fold disposition is a feature of Moore's practice, and is key to understanding its subdued yet quixotic character. Art critic Timothy Morrell has stated about Moore: 'Unlike Indigenous artists who are stridently confrontational or sharply political, Moore is often quite understated ... When the work is angry it's quietly angry.'² Even when using bold archetypal tropes, vulgar language or kitsch imagery, Moore's work maintains an idiosyncratic sense of grace – a subtle distance from his subject matter that is, perhaps, symptomatic of this vacillating sense of identity.

In *Moving Image and Sound* (2014) Moore has put together sequences sampled from television shows and films in which indigenous Australians are represented in insensitive and discriminatory ways. One such sequence is from an episode of *The Goodies* where they plan a trip to Australia to capture Rolf Harris in order to boost visitors to their park, with Bill Oddie saying about Australia: 'I don't want to go there. It's full of abos and dingos'. Reminiscent of Tracy Moffatt's video collaboration with Gary Hillberg, *Lip* (1999) – which combines clips of black servants in Hollywood movies talking back to bosses – Moore's work is less lyrical but more personal. As its title suggests, the work is an unembellished compilation of moving images and sound; however, because Moore's editing lacks the rhythm of Moffatt's work, it is purposefully dispiriting in its parading of cultural insensitivity and racism.

images: installation views, *False Friends*, NCCA, Darwin, 18 October to 8 November 2014;
photos: Fiona Morrison



The conspicuous lack of irony and nostalgia in *Moving Image and Sound* prompts viewers to consider the impact of these mediatic representations on Moore himself, who recalled many of the scenes from his childhood. Here the staging of cultural disenfranchisement through popular media is shown to have a significant personal impact, particularly in terms of identity formation. The work exemplifies the inherent politics of culture; how negative and simplistic stereotypes of indigenous Australians – even in their most innocuous forms – have served to subliminally reinforce their representation as an apolitical, collective and one-dimensional 'Other'.

Echoing the stripped-back quality of *Moving Image and Sound*, the installation *Sound Recording* (2014) consists of a modified audio cassette player that has been disassembled and affixed to the gallery wall, enabling viewers to make sounds by touching the rolling tape. The work is an example of the free-form nature of Moore's studio-based practice; the way he pursues whatever captures his interest rather than dutifully adhering to a coherent line of investigation. *Sound Recording* showcases Moore's fascination with materials. Such excursions away from explicit socio-political critique function as a kind of 'relational materiality' in his practice, blurring semantic and material deconstruction. As the British cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall has stated, 'the word is as material as the world' – exemplifying Moore's emphasis on the material aspects of signs and signifiers.³



images: Archie Moore, *Sound Recording*, 2014, tape head-fitted glove, wireless bluetooth headphones, cassette tape; installation view, NCCA, 18 October to 8 November 2014; photos: Fiona Morrison

In his work Moore ventures beyond perceived categorical divides to depict reality as a complex process of heterogeneous engineering, in which the social, technical, conceptual, and textual are all puzzled together. In an age in which the importance of marketability is continually reinforced to us, he presents a refreshing alternative, forging his own iconoclastic path without shirking social responsibilities nor retreating into a type of formalism. Steeped in autobiographical narrative, his work draws attention to the ideological and material forms that we might otherwise overlook, following an urge to deconstruct that is resistant to self-imposed limitations. One never knows what to expect from an Archie Moore exhibition. He keeps us on our toes and, most importantly, he keeps us engaged.

Dr Wes Hill, October 2014

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endnotes

1. Wes Hill and Archie Moore, 'Wes Hill in Conversation with Archie Moore', *Eyeline*, Issue 82, 2014.
2. Timothy Morrell, 'Archie Moore: Drilling Deep', *Artlink*, Issue 32.2, 2012, p. 32.
3. Stuart Hall, 'Brave New World', *Socialist Review*, Issue 21: 1. January-March, 1991, p. 62.

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