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14 Nations

Archie Moore

When *Courting Blakness* was initially mooted, it had the working title 'Intervention'. Touring the Great Court with Fiona Foley, what had greatest visibility for me was the pathway that divided it in two. The pathway led to the Forgan Smith tower and my eye was drawn to the five flags flying on top. The five light posts that align the pathway took on an image of flagpoles in my mind, and I thought about the public's awareness of the many nations that existed here before European arrival and the nationhood that has been rendered invisible for the past 200 and more years. I thought of designing a flag for every nation or a 'United (Aboriginal) Nations' flag, and then I found anthropologist RH Mathews' map from 1900, which divided Queensland into fourteen nations. This shrunk the number of artworks to design drastically. But I was also interested in highlighting Mathews' role as one of the first to recognise the existence of Aboriginal nations.

Mathews' acknowledgement became the catalyst for my work for *Courting Blakness*, but it was the process of looking at his research, the feelings I experienced when surrounded with his questionable map boundaries and his data that initiated the work. It prompted the concept of European intervention and what the initial stages of intervention looked like on paper, and marked the point when white Australia started to sympathise, document and learn about Indigenous people. Perhaps this was the first time that Indigenous people were seen as sovereign peoples with their own national borders. I was interested in the printed media, with Aboriginal language groups visibly associated with and located on maps. As an artist, I engage with and interpret these topics, utilising the action of research.

I was intrigued by the authenticity of Mathews' account. How tainted was his interpretation of data from a position of racial and intellectual superiority? What impact on Aboriginal peoples' lives eventuated from using sources like this to

validate policies? These thought processes connected to my search for validity and identity. I am not sure that I am part of the Kamilaroi group; I am not sure who my father is – my history and knowledge has been lost in the upheaval of my family history. The work for Courting Blakness connects my experience of engaging in these histories – connotations, misrepresentations, gaps in knowledge, personal identity and more. The potential exists that my identity is a lie. I am interested in what happens when you pursue or try to validate ideas based on inauthentic experiences. These elements constantly rub up against each other: falsehoods and truths. One person's claim may be based on another's misinformation. I find my engagement with outdated material mirrors the process of finding my identity through a myriad mess of perspectives and alienating data.

Flags are used to identify sovereignty, imperialism, colonialism, nationalism, exploration, possession, power, protection, law over land and sea, piracy and independence. Interpretations of the flag, the role of flags and what they achieve, what position we have to be in to need a flag all interact in these works. Flags may be jingoistic and are used as markers – to say, 'We were here first.' There were six American flags placed on the moon in 1969, with five still standing according to analysis by NASA from shadows they cast on the surface. There is a Russian flag on the Arctic seabed. The rigid nature of flag-flying protocols – the very existence of National Flag Protocols – begs the question of who these protocols are for and why we might need them.

The Aboriginal Flag is fourth in order of precedence when it is flown with other Australian flags. It cannot fly higher than the Australian National Flag. John Howard objected to Paul Keating's decision to deem the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags as official Australian flags, because Howard felt that this would create division.



Archie Moore, *14 Nations*
(detail), 2014, linen flags.

Photographs by Carl Warner.



My research examined the way subliminal exposure to national flags may affect political thought, and perceptions of the way that flags may threaten inter-group relations. What emerges is the sense that flags may both include and exclude.

The fourteen flags I designed for Courting Blakness were not intended to allocate or represent identities of peoples in the areas mapped by Mathews, but are based on my interest in highlighting his problematic mapping. They describe incorrect territorial boundaries in 1900. In my development of the flags, I considered existing flag protocols and used colour to represent land, water and other things unique to the areas Mathews identified. I've also used designs I find attractive.

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As a result, these artworks masquerade as flags. They do not require the status of Australian National Flag nor are they required to follow existing protocols. They are false flags and, as such, do not hide their dualities. They are ambiguous and contradictory, raise questions of authenticity, and evoke my own fragmented personal identity. The current Aboriginal Flag is a pan-Aboriginal flag. Aboriginal people may not feel represented by this flag – given that it is a united Aboriginal nations flag.

My Courting Blakness flags also question and address the existing ways in which we consume flags, through the creation of signs that encompass inauthenticity. They examine the way that I (and Indigenous people) fit (or don't fit) within dominant narratives. As such, they invite a different sense of Indigenous participation into the University of Queensland courtyard, and speak to previous artwork I have made about flags and the issues they raise.

In my solo show *Flag* at The Commercial gallery in Redfern (2012), I created ten alternative Aboriginal flags. This work was predicated around the concept that placing all Aboriginal people under one flag, into one group, renders them one-dimensional. In this exhibition I created flags for Aboriginal people based on their political leanings and preferences; that is, left- or right-wing, sexuality, religious beliefs, and so on. The medium for these works was acrylic on nothing – they were just sheets of paint. To make them I painted the designs onto rubber, using layers and layers of paint, and then peeled them off the rubber. They refer to earlier works where I had used the same process. I also wanted these to be like a skin. Flags are like a skin, yet your skin may form your identity. Some people like to wear the flag like a skin, wrapped around their body – which, by the way, is in breach of protocols for the proper display of the flag.

The earlier flag work, again at The Commercial, was called *Dermis*, meaning ‘skin’. The Aboriginal Flag was fragmented into three parts, with each part created by a different European method of applying paint: the red by brush, the black by roller and the yellow by a palette knife. These referred to differences between traditional painting and introduced methods. I wanted to question unity and the cohesive nature of identities – whether all Aboriginal people feel the Aboriginal Flag stands for them. Could they relate more directly to the yellow/the sun as the giver of life, the black/the people or the red/the earth signifying spilled blood? It is an exploration of the question, ‘Does unity exist among Aboriginal people?’

Flags represent my own confusion with identity: ‘Who am I?’ I feel more Aboriginal on some days than others. I’m not black enough for some white people; I’m not black enough for some black people. Do I identify as black or white, black *and* white? I feel like I am all of these and none of these. I exist inside and outside these parameters.