

Hopes, Dreams, Realities

There is extraordinary emotional, artistic, cultural, and historical depth to Indigenous Australian art. The traveling exhibition entitled unDisclosed reinforces this. The narratives are significant expressions of diverse and singular views of the past and a present in which harsh post-colonial realities continue to shape people's lives.

By Katelyn Merry with Christine Nicholls

UnDisclosed, the Second National Indigenous Art Triennial, is a traveling exhibition featuring the work of 20 contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, convened by the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, where it opened early this year.¹ This fine exhibition has as its curatorial theme the relationships that exist between what is apparent on the surface and that which remains invisible, unspoken, or unexplained. Curator Carly Lane's approach entailed exploring the inter-related themes of concealment and revelation, overt and hidden meanings and motivations. Lane identified six subcategories within this broad curatorial theme: *Family and Country, Silence and Invisibility, Manifesting Presence, Framing Identities, Identity and Indigenous Worldviews, and Revelation*. Having said this, the choice of artworks in *unDisclosed* seems to have been governed largely by aesthetic principles.

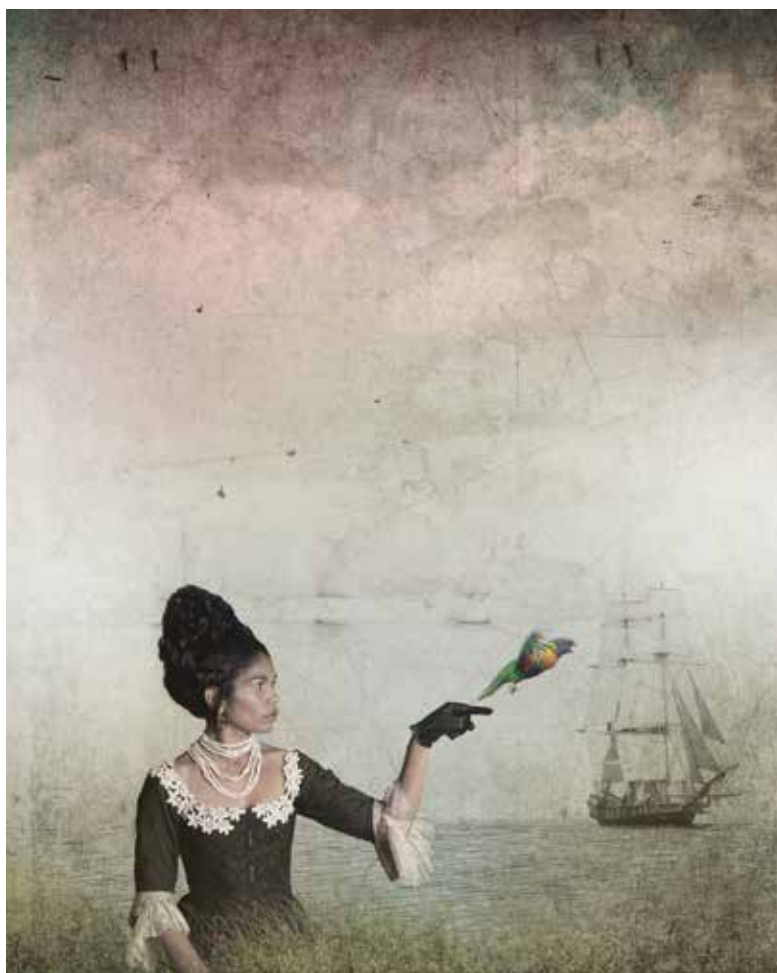
Audiences were much taken with many of these beautiful works that (in some cases very loosely) exemplify the overarching curatorial theme and subthemes. For instance, *Ring boundary tree* (2008), an archival print, pencil and watercolor photograph on canvas, features artist Nici Cumpston's



Danie Mellor (Mamu/Ngagen/Ngajan peoples), **Paradise in the sun**, 2010, pastel, pencil and wash with glitter and Swarovski crystal. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 2011.

signature technique of hand-coloring her photographic works, thereby accentuating their ethereal quality. In this piece, Cumpston printed the photograph on canvas, then used watercolor and pencil to enhance the dark rings around the trees, which have been set against a pastel sky mirrored by water.

Ring boundary tree depicts the trees along the bed of Nookamka, a freshwater lake in South Australia that receives and feeds water into the Murray River. As such it is a significant part of Australia's major river system, now threatened, chiefly as a result of human mismanagement. The rings shown in Cumpston's work are a direct result of the degradation of Nookamka, which has in turn been harmed by the continuing maladministration of the River Murray (see Lane, 2011, p.52). The extent of the damage to this area goes beyond what is visible, and therein lays its connection to the overall theme of the exhibition. Nookamka is a place of importance for South Australian Indigenous people, its relevance to Indigenous cultures and livelihood dating back to pre-contact times. While not an overtly political work, Cumpston's work demonstrates the connections between environmental ruin and the destruction of



Michael Cook (Bidjara people), **Broken Dreams 3**, 2010, digital color photograph. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 2011. Courtesy Andrew Baker Art Dealer.

the area's rich Indigenous culture, shedding light on both issues in visually compelling terms.

Danie Mellor is another artist who takes a signature approach to color usage to achieve a desired effect. His *Paradise in the sun* is wrought

almost entirely in blue and white, a color grouping reminiscent of the United Kingdom's Spode Pottery Company's blue-and-white ceramic works, which reached the height of their popularity around the same time that the British began to colonize Australia in the late 18th century. In terms of Mellor's usage of blue and white, the only exceptions to this in *Paradise in the sun* are his depictions of Australian Indigenous people and Australian native animals, which he renders in full color. Color is used both visually and metaphorically in this work as a means of oblique political commentary. *Paradise in the sun* is essentially a post-colonial take on, and perhaps a retrospective interpretation of, an illustration title *Paradise in Sun's Park* (*Paradisi in Sole Paradisus Terrestris*), by the renowned English botanist and herbalist John Parkinson. The original

appeared in 1629 in one of Parkinson's written works, in other words, prior to the British colonization of Australia.

The scene depicted in Mellor's revisionist work is essentially that of untouched landscape, although this is offset by an irony-laden inset disclosing colonial ships and buildings, the symbolic significance of which has become painfully



Nici Cumpston (Barkindji people), **Campsite V, Nookamka Lake**, 2008, inkjet print on canvas, hand-colored with pencil and watercolor. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 2011.

obvious in the aftermath of colonization. Mellor's picture is framed by a single row of Swarovski crystals, another signature element of many of his works. This piece is the first in a trilogy illustrating the resilience of the Indigenous people in the face of colonization, whilst also pointing to the eventual almost complete collapse of their previous way of life.² One's initial impression of this work is that of an idyllic way of life, rather than a visual statement about the dire consequences of colonization, for those who are colonized. Such knowledge sits just beyond the surface, and emerges only in the other two installments of the trilogy. With the benefit of hindsight, Mellor's piece takes on a very different edge: burdening it with a sense of foreboding about that which is to come, although as yet undisclosed—and at that point in history, undisclosable.

Another striking installation altered by a contemporary perspective on colonization is Fiona Foley's mixed-media *Let a hundred flowers bloom*. The composition of the work is striking, consisting of 34 photographs, 36 metal opium poppies, and three opium pipes.³ The individual components all originated in Beijing, and collectively they comprise an impressive display. Most of the photographs portray pink opium blossoms in various stages of bloom, their vibrant colors serving as a perfect backdrop to

the more sinister display of opium pipes and metal long-stemmed opium poppies. The contrast between the delicate blossoms in the sunlit photographs and the heaviness of the metal blossoms encourages the viewer to explore all aspects of the opium trade.

Opium has had a well-known, well-documented, and notorious history throughout Asia; however, it is the substance's presence in Australia's north-eastern state of Queensland in the late 19th century that provides the historical context for this piece. The relationship between Aboriginal people and opium has been under-researched and under-explored in more general terms, but, at the time, it had a profound effect on many Queensland Aboriginal people's lives. It was often used as payment for labor, resulting in addiction, docility, and enslavement, another form of oppression of Indigenous people by the Anglo-European settlers. Today, as a result of engaging in the war in Afghanistan, Australia once again has ties to the opium trade and the effects of this are yet to be seen. Foley's piece brings this into sharp relief, leaving viewers to reflect and speculate on the possible long-term consequences.

Tony Albert's mixed-media text installation, *Pay Attention*, also leaves a long-lasting impression on the viewer, but for different reasons. Albert's in-your-face work makes a bold statement by utilizing language in an uncompromising way.

Cleverly, the artist presents his message—'Pay Attention Mother Fuckers'—not once but twice, replicating it through its mirrored image. The message is a borrowing from American artist Bruce Nauman, whose work is also titled *Pay Attention*.⁴

The aluminum letters used to form the statements are wrought in mixed media, although Albert did not personally design all of these.⁵ The 25 letters used in the original facing phrase are Albert's creations, each one depicting a stereotypical visual image with respect to Aborigines, or what Albert refers to as 'Aboriginalia' (items that include ignorant or stereotypic representations of Australian Aboriginal people and their cultures).

The 25 mirrored letters were the works of different contemporary Indigenous Australian artists, through which these artists signify their individual styles, identities, and cultures.⁶ The size of the letters allows for close inspection of each artist's technique. The level of care, time, and effort put into creating each individual letter is apparent. The bright colors of each letter contrast with the stark white wall on which they are hung, the differing styles and color combinations making for a visually appealing collaborative work.

Albert's co-authored piece connects strongly with the overall theme of the exhibition, conveying multiple messages, to be accessed by those who are prepared to put in the requisite time and



Fiona Foley (Badtjala people), *Let a hundred flowers bloom* (detail), 2010, 3 opium pipes, stool, packing case, sketchbook, 36 brass opium poppy sculptures, and 34 photographs on inkjet print. Courtesy the Artist, Andrew Baker Art Dealer, and Niagara Galleries. © the Artist.



Christian Thompson (Bidjara people), **HEAT**, 2010, 3-channel video. On loan from the Artist and private lender.

effort into very carefully looking at each element within the work as a whole. Otherwise the work's meaning is destined to remain forever undisclosed. The piece as a whole represents a collective voice that speaks volumes about the contemporary politics and 'feel' of the Aboriginal art on display in *unDisclosed*.

The disclosure/undisclosed *thématique* can function as a powerful means of communication as Christian Thompson demonstrates in his digital media work *Heat*. Thompson's digital installation comprises three separate video channels, to some extent operating asynchronously, but depicting similar subject matter, each screen focusing on one of three Indigenous sisters, the adolescent or young adult daughters of Indigenous curator Hetti Perkins. Each girl (or young woman) has long dark hair, streaming and swirling poetically around or behind her face, as if blown by gusts of a mysterious, invisible breeze.

The heads and shoulders of the young, apparently unclad, protagonists of Thompson's work are seen against a rich orange background, unembellished with extraneous or decorative elements. The three channels of the installation play simultaneously, in slow motion. Accompanying Thompson's hypnotic visual imagery is an achingly beautiful melody played on a harp (Sapera 2010). The piece concludes with the women dissolving, one by one, into the desert landscape, after which the loop is replayed,

to mesmerizing effect. While the three women's unfaltering gazes border on the unsettling, the sense of the uncanny that this installation conveys is mitigated by the girls' appearance of youthful health and beauty, and the delicacy of the music. Nonetheless, it is clear that these young women are strong, proud, and uncompromisingly honorable.

Thompson's suggestion of a gentle desert zephyr, observable only through the movement of the girls' long dark locks, and set against an undifferentiated ochre-colored background, functions as a form of homage to his country, the Queensland desert. Indeed the inspiration underpinning this work appears to derive from the artist's passion for the desert heat radiating from the arid landscape of his desert homeland.⁷ This work is an embodiment of country, emphasizing the importance of land, family, and identity.

The central placement of *Heat* in the Samstag Gallery—it was possible to view the work from both the upper and lower floors of the gallery—made it a central point of focus, which, considering its relationship to the curatorial theme, was appropriate. This work is one of the most basic representations of the theme in the entire *unDisclosed* collection, in terms of its raw emotion and power.

While *Heat* was the major focal point in the upstairs exhibits, the lower level had no clear point of central focus.

On entering the gallery's ground floor, one's eye was drawn in diverse directions, which possibly lessened the impact of some of the works. There was no clear direction with respect to which way one should move through the gallery. While this allowed for patrons to wander and view the works at a leisurely pace, it caused some viewers to feel overwhelmed. Because of the gallery's design, the places in which the works could be displayed was limited; in some instances it felt as if pieces were placed in areas simply because they would fit nowhere else. The most blatant example of this was Jonathan Jones's installation, which involved the use of electric lights to reference the crystalline structure of Murray River salt. This was stuck in a far corner of the upper gallery, where it seemed a little lost, thereby rendering the work's ultimate *raison d'être* more or less unintelligible.

It would be interesting to know how, if at all, the dynamic of the exhibition differed when these works were on display at the much larger space at Australia's National Gallery, where *unDisclosed* opened and was on show for some months before traveling to Adelaide. In fact, owing to the space issue, not all of the works in the original exhibition could be included in the Samstag exhibition.

Other notable works in *unDisclosed* included photographer Michael Cook's remarkable, technically perfect, photographs titled *Broken Dreams* (2010).



Tony Albert, **Pay Attention**, 2009–2010, mixed media on aluminum. On loan from the Artist and Conceptio Unlimited.

Collectively Cook's series of photographic works constitute the dreamscape of a beautiful young woman, who is at first seduced by the apparent promise offered by colonization and by the colonists. By means of the non-linear narrative provided by this series of photographs, the protagonist works her way toward disillusionment and ultimately a strong sense of betrayal, as she suffers at the hands of the colonists. As a consequence, the young woman's originally sanguine responses to the coming of the non-Indigenous interlopers are shattered, her hopes and dreams destroyed.

Pintupi artist Naata Nungurrayi's brilliant *Untitled* (2010) is in a league of its own, in terms of the curatorial concept of *unDisclosed*, especially given the artist's reluctance to provide even as much as a title for her beguiling work about Ancestral Women's traveling though desert country. Clearly, the artist carried this image of her natal country in her mind's eye for many years before creating this extraordinary piece of work, and this is what has apparently guided her in its overall composition. *Untitled* is permeated with a joyous sense of color and movement, but the rest is silence.

Outsiders often see Indigenous Australian art as one dimensional, but *unDisclosed* proves that this is not so. The narratives of history and culture encapsulated in each of the works in *unDisclosed*, whether known or not, or merely glimpsed as in Michael Cook's *Broken Dreams*, or just hinted at, as in Naata Nungurrayi's *Untitled*, are of utmost significance. Both authors of this review concur on this point. For the American co-writer of this article, *unDisclosed* has truly been an eye-opening exhibition, altering a pre-existing perception of Australian Aboriginal art as belonging to the past, thereby propelling it into the present and the future. Δ

Notes:

1. More recently, *UnDisclosed* has been on tour, showing at Adelaide's Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art (May 3 – July 7, 2013). It is on show until October 6, 2013, at the Western Plains Cultural Centre, Dubbo, New South Wales, Australia.
2. Tina Baum, *unDisclosed, Second National Indigenous Art Triennial*, 94.
3. Djon Mundine OAM, *unDisclosed, Second National Indigenous Art Triennial*, 58.
4. Glenn Iseger-Pilkington, *unDisclosed, Second National Indigenous Art Triennial*, 28.
5. *unDisclosed Themes Tony Albert Pay Attention*, National Gallery of Australia, <http://nga.gov.au/Exhibition/unDisclosed/Default.cfm?IRN=206522&MnuID=3&View>



Naata Nungurrayi (Pintupi people), *Untitled*, 2010, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 122 x 122 cm. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 2010. ©the Artist, represented by Aboriginal Artists Agency.

- ID=2 (July 8, 2013).
6. Deane Gallery, *PAY ATTENTION: Tony Albert*, City Gallery Wellington, <http://citygallery.org.nz/exhibition/pay-attention-tony-albert> (accessed July 8, 2013).
 7. Tina Baum, *unDisclosed, Second National Indigenous Art Triennial*, 112.

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Ring Boundary Tree. 2012. <http://nga.gov.au/Exhibition/unDisclosed/Default.cfm?IRN=207202&MnuID=3&ViewID=2> (accessed July 8, 2013).

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Katelyn Merry is a student at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.A., where she is studying Environmental Studies. In the early part of 2013 Merry was an exchange student at Flinders University Adelaide, Australia, where, among other subjects, she studied Indigenous Australian art. Dr. Christine Nicholls is an Australian contributing editor for Asian Art News and World Sculpture News. She lives in Adelaide, South Australia, and works at Flinders University.