



CHRISTIAN THOMPSON RITUAL INTIMACY

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GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY
ART GALLERY

 Griffith UNIVERSITY
Queensland College of Art

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CREATIVE VICTORIA


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FOUNDATION

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EDUCATION RESOURCE

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Christian Thompson: Ritual Intimacy is the first survey exhibition of one of Australia's leading contemporary artists. Curated by Charlotte Day and Hetti Perkins, *Ritual Intimacy* traces the evolution of Thompson's practice over the last 15 years. From his early focus on the fashioning and expression of identity and his recent engagement with Indigenous artefacts at the Pitt River Museum in the United Kingdom, to his growing interest in language and gesture through performance, sound, and song.

The exhibition also features a newly commissioned multichannel video, incorporating Thompson's ancestral Bidjara language. This new work is underpinned by a simple, yet profound idea, that the act of speaking even one word of an officially endangered language ensures it remains a 'living language'.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Dr Christian Thompson is a Bidjara man. Born in 1978, in Gawler, South Australia, he now lives and works between London and Melbourne.

Formally trained as a sculptor, Thompson now works across a wide range of mediums including photography, video, sculpture, performance, and sound. Through his work he explores concepts of identity, sexuality, gender, race, and memory. In his live performances and conceptual 'anti-portraits' he inhabits a range of personas achieved through handcrafted adornments and carefully orchestrated poses and backdrops.

In 2010 Thompson made history when he became one of the first two Aboriginal Australians to be admitted into the University of Oxford in its 900-year history. He holds a Doctorate of Philosophy (Fine Art), Trinity College, University of Oxford, United Kingdom, a Master of Theatre, Amsterdam School of Arts, Das Arts, The Netherlands, a Master of Fine Art (Sculpture) and Honours (Sculpture) RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia and a Bachelor of Fine Art from the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. Thompson has exhibited widely, both nationally and internationally.

THEMES

Cultural identity	Loss of culture	Sub-cultures
Personal identity	Memory	Connection to the land
Australia's colonial history	Ceremony	Spiritual connections
Impacts of colonialism	Expression	Family
Language	Gender	Race

WHOLE GALLERY ACTIVITY

The use of costume and body adornment is an important feature of Christian Thompson's artworks. Through the use of costume he is able to assume many different personas to communicate concepts within his works.

Take some time to explore the exhibition. Identify two artworks in which Thompson uses costume or adornment to communicate meaning to the viewer.

Record the title of the works, the year in which they were created and the medium, in your art journal or notebook.

Read the artwork labels carefully and identify the concepts explored in each work and note them down.

In a group of 3 conduct a comparative analysis of the works you have chosen, discussing their similarities and differences.

FOCUS WORK

Australian graffiti 2007

C-type prints

Australian graffiti was the last body of work that Thompson made before leaving Australia for Europe. It connects with his memories of growing up in the outback and its desert flowers, which he perceives to be both fragile and immensely powerful. By adorning himself with garlands of these flowers and flamboyant garments of the 1980s and 1990s – the period in which he grew up – Thompson juxtaposes these elements against his own Bidjara masculinity. By wearing native flora he also stands in for the landscape, evoking an Indigenous understanding of the landscape as a corporeal, living ancestral being.

RESPONDING

Look carefully at the artworks *Black gum 1-3* from the *Australian Graffiti* series. Describe the materials and techniques Thompson has used to make these images. Why do you think the artist has chosen to feature these particular flowers in his artworks?

What do you think is the significance of Thompson covering his face with these native Australian flowers? Can you see the artist concealed behind them? Discuss your thoughts with a classmate.

Remember a time during your childhood when you spent time in nature. Write a journal entry about your experience; describe the landscape, what you could see and how it made you feel.

MAKING

Make a wearable body adornment from natural items

With your teacher, explore your school and collect a variety of natural items to be used to construct a wearable item inspired by Thompson's artwork. Alternatively, you could construct your item using coloured papers. You could choose to make a neck or shoulder piece, arm band or belt.

In groups of 2 or 3 photograph each other in your creations. As an extension of the activity, choreograph a performance inspired by the natural environment surrounding you.

FOCUS WORK

***Imperial relic* 2015**

C-type prints on Fuji Pearl Metallic paper

The series title *Imperial relic*, summarises the fundamental philosophy underpinning the colonial occupation of Australia and is closely connected to Thompson's studies in the collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum.

In *Death's second self* the artist's face is uncovered but distorted by makeup and digital postproduction effects. The title quotes William Shakespeare's Sonnet 73:

As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.

In *Ship of dreams* Thompson reprises the motif of Australian flora seen in his works *Black Gum 1-3*, obscuring his face but here his hoodie is stitched together from several flags: the red ensign (flown by British registered ships), the RAAF flag and the Australian flag.

RESPONDING

Do some research into the Pitt Rivers Museum in the United Kingdom. What kind of objects do they have in their collection?

In the past it was common for explorers to take items of cultural or spiritual significance away from their traditional owners without permission, to be displayed in museum collections. Take a moment to consider whether you think it is right for museums to keep these items today? Write a personal reflection justifying your thoughts.

What do the words 'imperial' and 'relic' mean? How does the title affect your interpretation of the work?

Discuss the Thompson's use of colour in this photographic series. Why do you think the artist has chosen to portray himself in black and white? What do you think is the significance of the other colours used in the images?

MAKING

Create a distorted digital portrait

Using Photoshop or your classes chosen image manipulation program, make your own distorted self portrait. When you have completed your portrait, show it to your class and discuss the techniques used to create your work.

Create an illustrated artwork

Find a poem or song lyrics that you feel a connection to, like Thompson in his work *Death's second self*. Use the words to to inspire an illustrated artwork using graphite or charcoal. Once you have resolved your illustration add small touches of colour in some areas to enhance your artwork.

FOCUS WORK

***Berceuse* 2017**

Three-channel digital colour video, sound: 5:47minutes

Sound design: Duane Morrison

In this newly commissioned work, Thompson sings a *berceuse* – a cradle song or lullaby – that combines evocative chanting and electronic elements to invoke the cultural experiences and narratives of his Bidjara culture. Intended as a gesture of re-imagining his traditional Bidjara language, which has been categorised as extinct, the work is premised on the notion that if one word of Bidjara is spoken, or in this case sung, it remains a living language.

Thompson makes subtle reference to his maternal Sephardic Jewish roots by ruminating in this work on the lullaby Nani Nani.

Lullaby, lullaby
The boy wants a lullaby,
The mother's son,
Who although small will grow.

Oh, oh my lady open,
Open the door,
I come home tired,
From ploughing the fields.

Oh, I won't open them,
You don't come home tired,
You've just come back,
From seeing your new lover.

RESPONDING

Do some research into indigenous Australian languages. Print a map of Aboriginal Language groups and stick it into your visual journal. Take a moment to acknowledge the diversity of language and culture illustrated by the map.

Consider Thompson's idea that if even one word of the Bidjara language is spoken, it remains a living language. With a classmate discuss why you think it is important to keep Australia's indigenous languages alive.

What part do you think contemporary artists like Christian Thompson can play in preserving indigenous languages and cultures? Write a short paragraph about your thoughts.

Imagine if your language was no longer spoken, how else could you communicate? In a group, discuss your ideas and make a list in your visual journal.

MAKING

Produce a short stop motion animation

Consider how language changes over time, it can shrink, grow or even transform into something new and different. Make a short stop motion animation inspired by this notion. Using collage or drawing techniques, create your moving artwork by capturing individual images in sequence on your smart phone or tablet and editing in your classes chosen animation program or application.

Credits:

Curators: Charlotte Day and Hetti Perkins. Griffith University Art Gallery staff: Angela Goddard, Naomi Evans, Bree Richards, Carrie McCarthy.
Education resource: Lucinda Wolber