

wyndham art gallery

IDENTITY

BY Susan Maco Forrester



January 20 to March 6 2016

The well known cultural theorist Stuart Hall says that Identity is the ever unfinished conversation and asks, *“How much do we retain and how much do we give up of our cultural identity in order to be ourselves?”*

Susan Maco Forrester has been dealing with issues of identity all her life. As the daughter of a Scottish father and a mother from Somaliland, growing up in England where her blackness was seen as an aberration, she was forced to confront these issues not as an academic exercise but as an everyday reality of life.

In fact all people of colour are confronted with this issue if they live in the west surrounded by the unacknowledged ‘culture’ of whiteness.

I am white and grew up with no concept of my whiteness as anything other than an ordinary ‘normal’ way to be. Everyone who didn’t conform to this was out of the ordinary.

My mother used to tell a story about me as a child. I was 4 years old travelling on a tram in Melbourne city when an Indian woman in a sari got on the tram. According to my mum I tugged on her dress and said in a whisper, ‘Oh mum, look at the beauty of her’. While this might seem to be a sweet thing for a child to say and the opposite of racist, when looking at that comment today I realize that at four years old I had learned to see non white people as exotic and ‘different from the normal way of being.’

Whiteness is so all consuming that people like me don’t even know they are white.

This is at the heart of racism.

It is the source of devastating practices such as skin lightening and hierarchies of colour in cultures that are predominately black. It is in our literature and language where black is bad, the colour of the devil and the hue of negativity. We have black moods and dark days.

White is associated with purity and goodness. Depression is called the black dog.

The Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie spells it out brilliantly in *Americana* when describing the privilege of whiteness. While her examples are from America the same could be said of Australia where whiteness is so often presumed to be the colour of Australian identity.

Chimamanda says that racism is about power and in America, (add Australia) it's 'white folks' who have that power. She goes on to describe how.

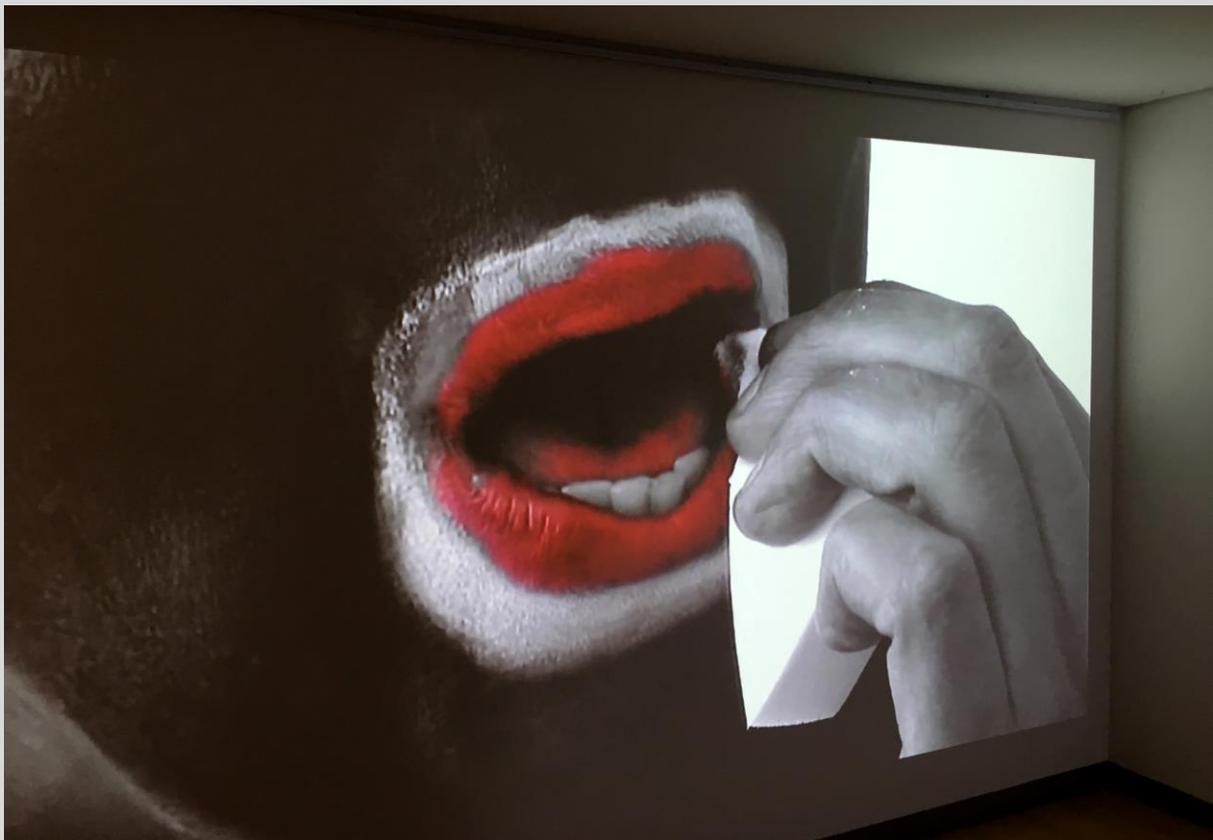
'Well white folks don't get treated like shit in upper-class American communities and white folks don't get denied bank loans or mortgages precisely because they are white and black juries don't give white criminal worse sentences for the same crime and black police officers don't stop white folk for driving while white and black companies don't choose not to hire somebody because their name sounds white and black teachers don't tell white kids they are not smart enough to be doctors...'. p327



Susan Maco Forrester has the courage to deal with these issues head on and expose her own experience in a way that many people won't do because it makes them vulnerable.

The key metaphor she uses is the Gollywog. It is a clever point of reference as for many people it is seen as a harmless toy. Susan describes some of her friends saying 'but I loved my gollywog' as though this discharged the meaning behind the symbol. For Susan and for most black people the gollywog is an offensive reminder of the way they are diminished for their colour.

The English-American author Florence Upton invented the gollywog in a series of picture books produced at the onset of the Jim Crow laws, which mandated racial segregation in the American south. She described the character as 'a horrid sight, the blackest gnome'.



Good Golly – SD Video

In the video work *Good Golly* Susan paints herself in 'black face' while talking about the humiliating experience of being identified with such a dehumanizing racist caricature.



Good Golly – SD Video

There is no missing the point in this work. The large scale of the projection and the close up of the artists face allows no-one off the hook. She generously invites us in to a very personal space as we watch her become that caricature, at which stage she stares directly at the viewer, daring them to dismiss her pain.

The UK is several steps ahead of us in their understanding of gollywogs as a brutal and racist epitaph to slavery. In 2009, Hamley's, a big London toy store, declared that it was joining the Queen's estate in banning the items from its shops. The Queens Sandringham estate in Norfolk apologised for selling £9.99 golliwog dolls called Tazz and Ollie at the gift shop for more than a year. In Britain police action has been taken against those displaying such items, on the grounds of incitement to racial hatred.

In Australia gollywogs are still a store in the Block Arcade to hide gollywogs and so called Mammy dolls from view so she didn't have to look at them when she came to stay in Melbourne. Our former State Premier Jeff Kennett has a large collection of gollywogs and proudly wears one as a pin.



AZIZA the Shaitaan Golly - Lambda metallic print, foam core

Although the gollywog is central to this body of work it is only a starting point for Susan. This exhibition is about both a critique of stereotypes of identity and a proud assertion of identity.

In *AZIZA the Shaitaan Golly* Susan embodies both things. In the voice of Shaitaan she says in her statement about this work, 'I am born of ignorance, misguided sentiment and Islamophobia.' And yet she holds a fiercely proud posture, defying the projections of others.



Areweelo - Lambda metallic print, foam core.

Susan invited three young women to work with her in this exploration. She called them the *Substratam collective*. Catherine Mercovich, Hannah Donnelly, and Kaytsen Jama were each asked to explore how their identities had been shaped as children, by stories told to ‘warn them away from something’. They were then encouraged to embody those identities while they were being photographed.

Kaytsen Jama chose Araweelo a Somali warrior queen to embody. Working with people in order to elicit such personal stories and capture them in a photograph is no small thing. It requires trust and empathy which Susan obviously has in droves. She has caught Kaytsen in a moment of emotional and physical motion. She is about to step towards the viewer in a challenging pose indicated by the clenched fist but it is not clear whether she is defending her identity or threatening the childhood imaginary foe. The audience is left to decide.



Half Caste Drum Solo part 1 - SD video

Half Caste Drum Solo part 1 is a confronting video work which reminds one of those childhood nightmares. Flashes of skin, hooves, and sinew are lit in a way that echoes the horror film genre. The imagery is all taken from her family drum which has been in the family for generations and can also be seen in the exhibition lit in a dramatic way.



Poinciana Woman - Lambda metallic print, foam core

Cat Mercovich chose a woman who, by community legend, haunts the cliffs off East Point in the Northern Territory as a result of a brutal assault under a Poinciana tree. She embodies an incredible vulnerability as well as a frightening visage. This photograph is perhaps the most raw and powerful, she leans forward in the uniform of the aggressor wounded and fragile but at the same time so powerful. It reminds me of a quote I like. 'I can't hear what you're saying because who your being speaks louder than words.' While she is disguised as a victim who she is 'being' is a powerful woman.



Freshwater Mermaid - Lambda metallic print, foam core.

Hannah Donnelly emerges out of the lomandra, holding aloft a coolamon which is used to cradle babies as well as carry food. A symbol of life, yet paradoxically she also represents a mermaid who sings men to their death. Her watery make up and her blue raincoat create a beautiful contemporary version of an age old cross cultural legend.

A Wiradjuri woman, Hannah chooses an identity which is also powerful, reclaiming a character that was used by Disney in an entertainment context, and placing it in a cultural context in which it has a new power.



Where's Golly - Found image, paper and ink

Susan has subverted the character of woman in her piece *Where's Golly*. The waifs who waft in someone's idea of an idyllic landscape are made complicit in the construction of the stereotype 'gollywog'. With bland faces that lack any kind of personality they all look at a golly. One beheaded, one fleeing and one hiding in the bushes.



Mum & Dad, Children of the Empire - Paper, wood, photograph

Susan uses every means at her disposal to educate a white audience about the injustices and inequalities of racism. *Mum & Dad, Children of the Empire* is a work that depicts the social environment that her

parents were shaped by. Her Somali mother collected copies of *British Empire* for the Scottish father and Susan grew up reading them. It is hard to imagine that she wasn't indoctrinated by this deeply racist material. In this work she places photographs of her young parents in the frame surrounded by covers of the magazine, which offers a small glimpse of the context that their relationship existed in.



Sambo and Susan - Works on paper

Susan and Sambo is a true to life cartoon found in one of the books that Susan has collected. She has cleverly revised the text to suit. This is the only place that Susan's sexuality is referenced however this midsumma show is as much about the right and freedom to be gay as it is to be black, however while ultimately ones sexuality is really no one's business, we do still live in a world where people make presumptions based on an idea that heterosexuality is the norm. In this way whiteness and heterosexuality are equally oppressive in the way they claim the space of normativity.

While white people need to educate themselves, and rapidly, so that we can live without hypocrisy with our stated values and human rights laws, there are also some people who reclaim and revise racist imagery and stereotypes in the same way that queer has been reclaimed.

Susan avoids this path and stands strongly against such visual pollution. In my view this makes her work all the stronger.

Dr Megan Evans – Visual Art Curator

1. Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie



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