

RACE

Vernon Ah Kee

Richard Bell

Destiny Deacon

Gordon Hookey

Clotilde Jiménez

Dianne Jones

William Kentridge

David Sequeira

Wani Le Frère

Vicki West

RACISM. It's a White Thing!

Catalogue Essay
Dr Megan Evans
Visual Art Curator

Richard Bell won the 2003 Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award for *Scientia E Metaphysica* (Bell's Theorem). It prominently featured the text "Aboriginal Art – It's A White Thing". There is a resonance between this controversial statement and the title of this essay. Racism is the source of race as a concept. Recent fascination with DNA and tracing of our origin over centuries has proven that race does not actually exist. We are all a mix of genes that have flowed around the earth over thousands of generations, some older than others.

Although race itself is social construct, knowledge of this fact alone doesn't help overcome racism. Race is complex.

Thirty years ago when I was working on the Northcote Koorie Mural, George Banbuma, an Aboriginal Elder from Ramingining in the NT, slid his fingernail across my ghostly pale wrist and said 'we all bleed the same'.

Several years later while doing my Masters at the Victorian College of the Arts, I found myself in a stand up argument with most of my classmates about this very sentiment. In a discussion on race they argued that we are all the same.

Although I didn't have the language at the time I later learned their thinking came from a blindness that is a function of white privilege. We are all equal but we are not all the same and the desire to make us all the same doesn't come from people of colour. 'All the same' means 'like us' and the 'us' is usually white.

Recognition of this comes slowly for white people who are used to seeing themselves reflected back through all the various cultural norms that make up our society. A person of colour stands out on the television as different.

On the rare occasions when it does, advertising self consciously includes people of colour but always as 'the other' and only when they fit into the mould already set by white people.

Race is about power and in general black people don't have it. The power that people of colour have, they have fought hard for, performing whiteness in order to wrest it away from the white patriarchy, but the overarching cultural norms by which we all live by are predominately white.

Racism is sometimes blunt and overt and sometimes subtle and sinister. As a white person I am ashamed by racist comments when I hear them, however more than one person of colour has said to me that they would rather deal with racism when it is obvious than when it

comes as polite yet subtle discrimination that is difficult to call out.

It is not even a matter of colour. Whiteness is a state of mind; a way of thinking which presumes the right to be outraged when something is unjust. Or being able to be loud and angry in public. Or able to belong anywhere with a righteousness that even if you don't belong, you still feel that you should be able to. These things are not available to the person who has grown up knowing themselves as 'the other'

It is by the grace and tolerance of many black and brown people that I have continued to be educated, over many years, about racism, white privilege and more recently white fragility which is the reaction that often shuts down people of colour when white people become defensive or guilty about issues to do with race.

The topic of racism rarely comes up amongst my white friends. In fact if I bring it up I often find people looking away or wondering why I am talking about it when I am so plainly white and it's not my issue.

Richard Bell takes on racists with no need to protect them from themselves in *Scratch an Aussie*. The blond patients that are psychoanalysed by Bell in a set that replicates Freud's couch have no shame, or self awareness of their racist comments.

Bell, with benign tolerance, listens to their complaints about white privilege including one woman who describes how violated she felt when her house was broken into and her mobile phone was stolen. This strikes a harsh contrast with the implied violation of dispossession enacted by their colonial ancestors.

Later in the video Bell is on the couch and has to debrief with his analyst played by Gary Foley about how to deal with these ignorant and insensitive white people.

When I first saw this video I was fascinated by watching, first my own reaction, and then reaction of others. Not many people stood to watch the full ten minutes. The blatant racist jokes make white people cringe, but black people have heard them all before and in many cases they have been directed at them.

This artwork allows white people to see themselves as 'others' see them and it can be uncomfortable. The ability to laugh at oneself is often lacking with white people when it comes to racism. Denial is more often the reaction. No-one wants to be seen as racist and yet most white people are. How could they not be in Australia, originally a black country, where we live with the legacies of dispossession, colonisation, the White Australia Policy, that play out today in our institutions, our education systems, our cultural preconceptions and our personal prejudices.

The chant of the 1988 anti bicentennial protests was 'White Australia has a Black History'. Many white Australians saw this as a comment on colonial history, but that interpretation itself is racist along with all the other meanings imbedded in blackness such as 'the black' dog', 'a black day', 'the black sheep'. A black history means just that, what we now call Australia was once a continent of sovereign nations of black people and we have whitewashed this history with stories of whiteness that exclude other ways of being.

The impact of this can be seen everywhere, not just in Australia. It is the context in which Michael Jackson so distressingly mutilated his face to reduce the black features he was born with. It is the reason even in Watton St Werribee there are shops where you can buy skin lightening cream and relaxant to make African hair straighten. These behaviours are a product of embedded racism in which people of colour are not able to be themselves but are compelled to conform to a white model. White is right, white is the norm to which everything else is measured.

Image: Richard Bell - Scratch an Aussie (2008 production still).
Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery Brisbane





Racism is about presumed ways of being. Indigenous people from all over the world experience racism in the way their values are overridden. In some cases they are what is called 'white passing' but they can be affected by racism in different ways. Racist comments made in front of them include, 'but you could pass as white' as though this is a desired outcome, or 'how much Aboriginal are you', meaning what right do you have to claim your own identity.

Vicki West a Trawlwoolway woman from North East Tasmania, makes work that both presents Indigenous ways of being and also challenges the colonial oppression of that way of being. rikawa responds to Tasmania cultural materials held at the Adelaide Museum that are presented as representations of Tasmanian Aboriginal cultural objects traditionally made by Aboriginal women. These objects were made by Norman Tindale, a white male anthropologist in the 1960's. Tindale was noted at the time as having been disrespectful, relating to the Aboriginal community members he encountered as scientific specimens. In continuing her cultural practices in a contemporary context Vicki celebrates the survival of her people and at the same time critiques the racist attitudes of the colonial collector.

Image : Vicki West - rikawa

Clotilde Jiménez, a young black American artist makes work that aims to unpack the stereotypes that black men fall into in the global imagery .

To be young and black and a man means you carry an expectation of being strong, tough, and masculine. Clotilde questions this and plays around with typically gendered poses that play with your expectations of sexuality.

Using collage and paint in Portrait of my Father Clotilde playfully turns his father, who represents that stereotype of masculinity to him, into a pirate riding a hobby horse. In Niggaz Wit Attitude, Jiménez pays tribute to the Black Lives Matter movement through his selection of collage material that he purposefully collects.



Image: Clotilde Jimenez - Portrait of my Father



Gordon Hookey is known for his biting satire and critique of the contemporary political landscape. In Mulla Mulla Hookey references terra nullius, the legal state that claimed Australia was 'nobody's land'. The High Court rejected the doctrine of terra nullius, in favour of Aboriginal title in the Mabo decision of 1982, a common law doctrine that the land rights of indigenous peoples to customary tenure, persist after the assumption of sovereignty under settler colonialism. Gordon was born in Cloncurry and belongs to the Waanyi people. His work also plays humorously with the idea of what is authentic Aboriginal art.

Image (Bottom): Gordon Hookey - Nulla Nulla (2012) Photo Carl Warner. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery Brisbane

Sth African artist William Kentridge has a long and prolific career spanning a wide range of media from opera to major public art works. MINE is one of his earliest works and part of a suite of animations based around two characters called Soho and Felix. MINE is the terrain of Soho the wealthy industrialist who has usurped the psychological and material wealth of his domain for his comfort and personal gain.

We see this from the beginning as the landscape of the mine trembles under the moving figure of Soho who moves in his sleep, rippling the earth as the landscape becomes his bedclothes. Dan Cameron writes of an 'unequal reciprocity' evident between Soho and the miners who are impacted on a momentous scale by every minor gesture taken by Soho.

Taking coffee in his bed the plunger drills down into the mine below revealing the conditions of the miners, repeating some of the most famous imagery of deprivation, the slave ship map and Nazi concentration camp showers. However Kentridge doesn't just critique the impact of racism but also places himself in the frame. Soho Eckstein has the resemblance of a self portrait and in this way he confronts the difficult task of taking personal responsibility for his own privilege.



Image: William Kentridge - Still from MINE

Wani Le Frère's video work and photographs are a provocation on whiteness. They celebrate Sape as a means of aesthetic resistance. Sape is a fashion statement traditionally taken up in the most economically deprived landscapes and communities where people dress with extreme care and polish, unaccountable when you consider their circumstances.

There is a nod to white privilege in the form of the fashion but the respect ends there as the colour and style is of its own. Wani has taken this tradition out of its poverty ridden home in the Congo and filmed his uncle in Wyndham dressing up. The constraint of the buttoned up collar and the difficulty knotting the tie at close quarters reinforce the binds of the expectations of whiteness. And yet he looks amazing, as if to say, I am taking what is yours and redefining it on my terms.

Richard Bell, Gordon Hookey and Vernon Ah Kee are all members of Queensland's Indigenous art collective proppaNOW, established in 2003 to give urban artists a voice.

Vernon Ah Kee's text works are informed by war propaganda posters and advertising imagery. Like concrete poetry but on a big scale they create an abstract image while also demanding careful reading to unpack their meaning. Ah Kee states, "Text is immediate. If there's something you want to say - write it" (borninthisskin, 2009).

The statements in this exhibition are potent reminder of the status of Aboriginal people. notananimaloraplant critiques the law that existed before the 1967 referendum that meant Aboriginal people were categorised along with fauna and flora. hangten is a sober reference to the Billy Holiday song 'Strange Fruit' about southern American lynching's and a reminder that Australia has its own Klu Klux Klan.

Image: Vernon Ah Kee - notananimaloraplant



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Dianne Jones's work confronts the brutal legacy of colonisation and the echoes that resound in the landscape and bodies of Aboriginal people today. The violence enacted on people only generations ago is passed down through intergenerational trauma and is evident in the terrible health, suicide, imprisonment and education statistics of Aboriginal people living today. Dianne photographs her niece Wenonah in a landscape that resonates with the history of this blood shed. She postulates that the memories of these atrocities are embedded in the living landscape.



David Sequeira's work is dominated with imagery that represents the binaries of race. Black and white. Using his own image but paradoxically painted in India by professional miniature portrait painters, he faces off against himself. The complex patterning behind the portraits reminds us of Sequeira's long term interest in abstraction and pays homage to modernism, however this is overlaid by another reading which relates to race and racism. These portraits particularly reference race, presented as they are from the typical perspective of the mug shot. In today's climate of suspicion of people who look a particular way, a black man wearing a turban in profile brings with it particular associations. Black lives matter!

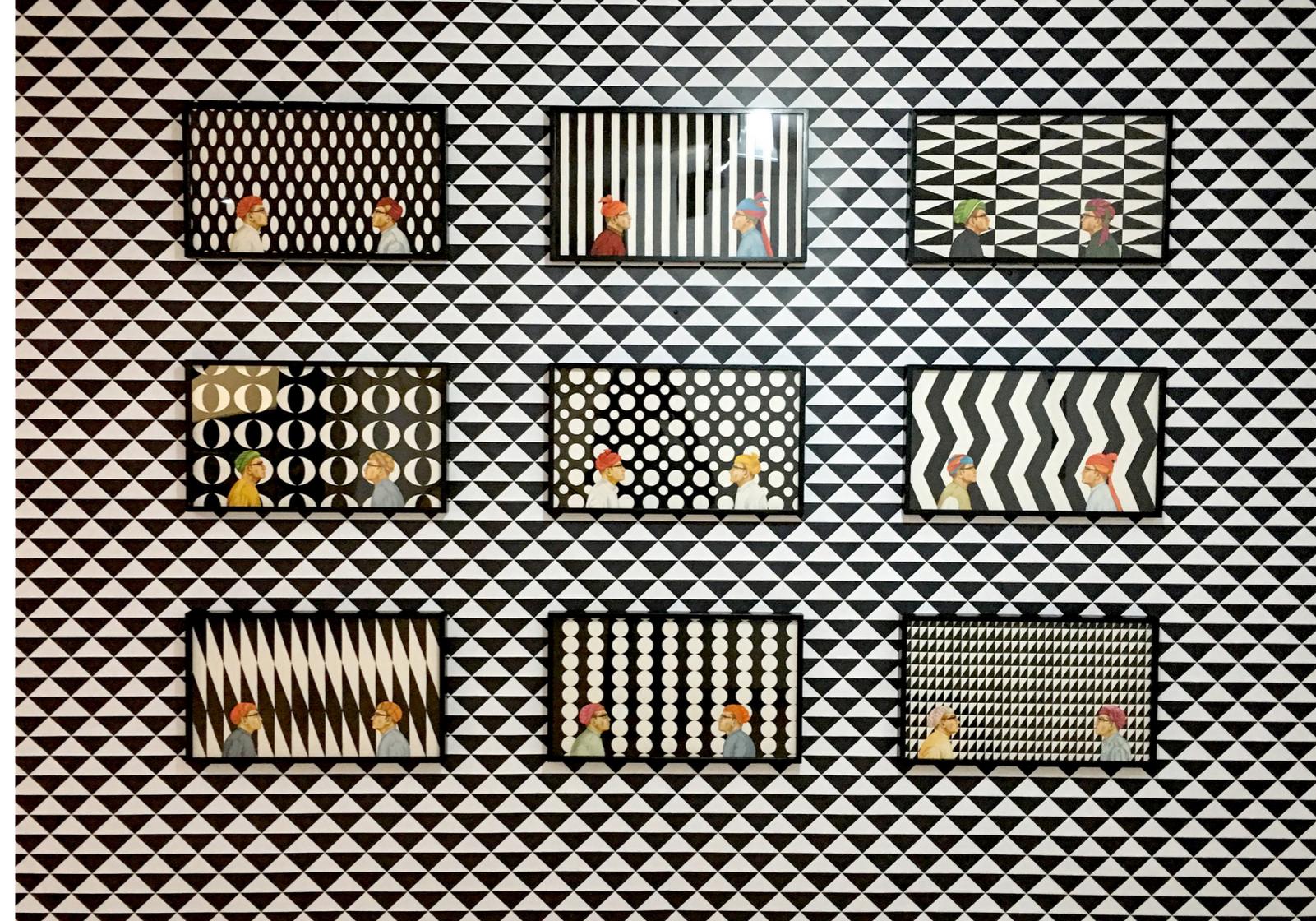


Image (Top): Dianne Jones - Untitled #1
Image(Right): David Sequeira - After 65 - Installation View



In Daisy and Heather discuss race, Destiny Deacon takes on the ignorance of people about whiteness in the empty head of the white doll.

Sitting side by side but not looking at one another Heather, dressed in her Scottish tartans, appears to wring her hands while Daisy has a look of resignation. Race cannot be discussed because of the yawning gulf in understanding, circumstances and experience.

And besides they are dolls with no voice.

Image: Destiny Deacon - Daisy and Heather discuss race

If we are ever to build a bridge across that yawning gulf it must begin with listening. White people must learn to practice deep listening, which goes beyond thinking that they already know. They must be prepared to be uncomfortable and criticised and not shy away. They must learn to put themselves in the shoes of another in a way they haven't yet been able to do.

To presume you understand racism, if you are white, is absurd. Ask someone of colour; begin to learn what it is like and the many ways it occurs. Racism is like an ugly mask stuck to our face. It is so close that we don't see it, we see through it. It is the responsibility of white people to discover the mask and take it off their own face.

Racism. It's a White Thing! It's up to white people to unpack it for themselves, call it out, expose it but most of all educate themselves about it and find solutions that are their own. Ultimately they must be willing to share power, to invite people of colour to the table.

RACE is an exhibition that begins to unpack these issues. It's a journey that leads to a society that we all would be proud to live in. Art is the pathway in this case.

RACE

**Wednesday 6 July -
Sunday 28 August**

An exhibitiiion by renowned national and international artists examining issues of racism.

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William Kentridge
Wani Le Frère
David Sequeira
Vicki West**

***Including Heartlands 2016 - stories from
refugee youth
Presented by AMES Australia***



#wyndhamarts
arts@wyndham.vic.gov.au



 wyndham.vic.gov.au/race