

wyndham art gallery

# WAR

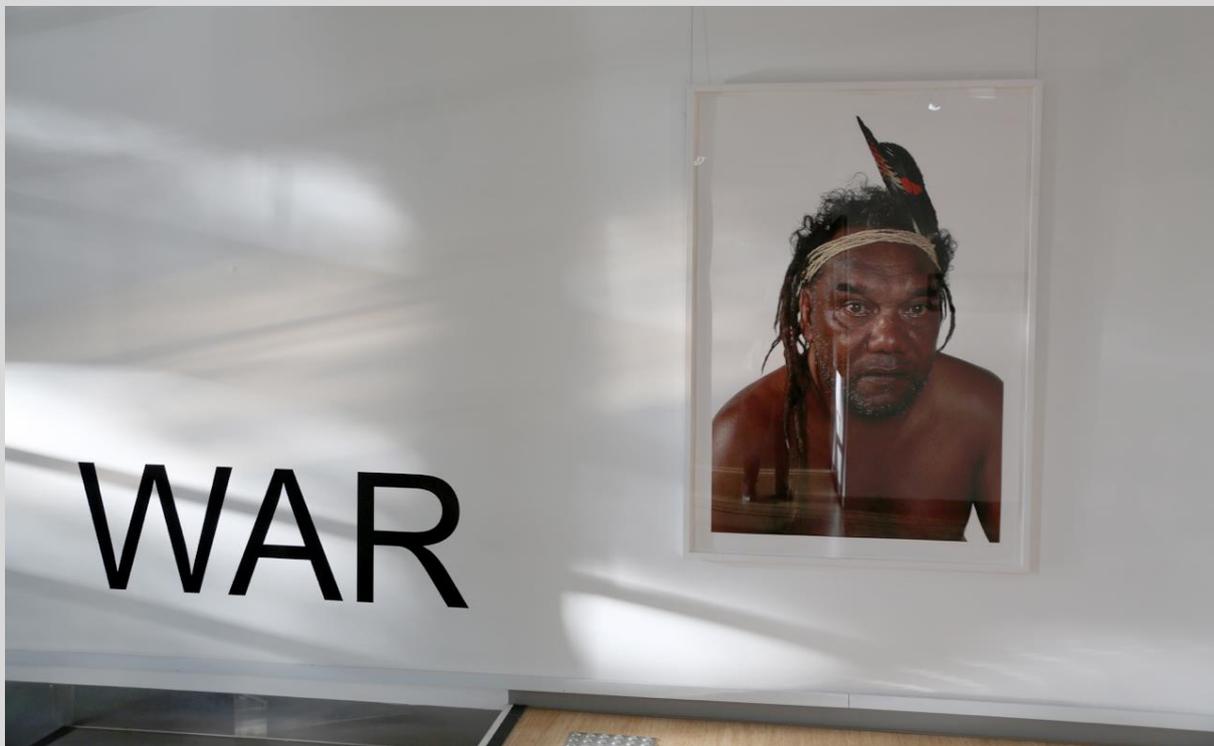
A group exhibition examining an experience of war beyond the two world wars.



July 8 to September 13 2015

## Exhibiting artists

Yoram Chama Chama (Zambia); Bindi Cole (Wathaurung); Megan Cope (Quandamooka); Vicki Couzens (Gunditmara/Kirrae Whurrong); Hamishi Farah; Fiona Foley (Badtjala); George Gittoes; Les Griggs (Gunditjmara); The Fighting Gunditjmara (Gunditjmara); Wani Toaishara (Congo); Jacob Tolo (Samoa); Steven Rhall (Taungurong); Peter Waples-Crowe (Wiradjuri/Ngarigo)





WAR will confront, as does the real thing.

The artists in this exhibition have all been affected by war whether it be through direct experience of it in their own lives or through the impact of intergenerational trauma passed down through years.

Those of us who have been lucky enough to not know this pain can only imagine what it is like.

It takes courage to express the emotions evident in this work. Artists draw on a deep personal well to create good work and it doesn't happen easily. This is obvious in Wani Toaishara's powerful video poem, enough to bring one to tears as we stand in front of his direct gaze.

The extraordinary photographs by Fiona Foley almost overpower one with their presence. Bearing Witness I and V have several layers of interpretation. Both works critique the privilege of whiteness and the arrogance of the presumed superiority of the colonial invader.

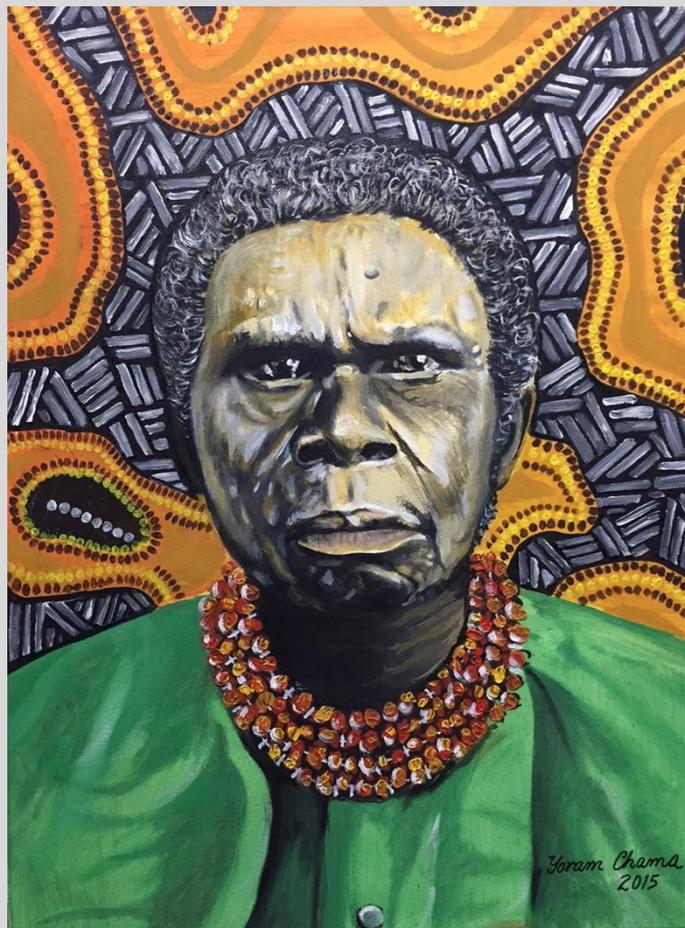
Bearing Witness V is a play on the history of the European tendency to name Aboriginal people they perceived to be leaders as kings, and place a name plate on them. This highly patronising action was also a portent of the lack of understanding by the invader of Aboriginal lore and customs, an ignorance that continues to this day in many mainstream institutions.

Foley has replaced the original name inscription which includes things such as 'King Billy' with the Sophocles quote, "Ignorant men don't know what good they hold in their hands until they've flung it away."



*Bearing Witness V* by Fiona Foley

Yoram Chama Chama is a resident of Wyndham but originates from Zambia. He has exhibited all over the world and his sensitivity as an artist was alerted when he came to live in Werribee and noticed the names of the roads. For this exhibition he researched the life of Truganini who was born on Bruny Island in 1812 and came to Melbourne in 1838 with George Augustus Robinson. Truganina is named after her along with many names in Wyndham such as Derrimut who is also the name of a prominent Aboriginal person from the 1800's. Yoram decided to research in the community and he knocked on the doors of houses in Truganina, speaking to 53 people and asking them what they knew of Truganini. He found 10 people who had heard of her and knew their suburb was named after her and only 2 who knew anything about her. From this research he painted a portrait of Truganini which portrays the powerful woman that she was.



*Truganini, A victim of war* by Yoram Chama Chama

Megan Cope's work looks at the ownership of land and the effect of the gold rush on the increased dispossession of traditional owners. Her work uses geological maps that are stained with rum and tea, two commodities that fuelled the economies of colonial Victoria as well as the violence of early settlement, making beautiful images that echo the shapes of shields.



*Mining Boom #1 (Wadawurrung) and Mining Boom #2 (Dja Dja Wurrung) by Megan Cope*

Peter Waples Crowe reflects on his journey as a Wiradjuri/Ngarigo man. His work looks at the impact of colonization on identity and a sense of belonging.

Fractured families and lives torn from their places of belonging leave deep scars which take many generations to heal. Many Aboriginal communities from the south east of Australia were the first to feel the impacts of languages lost and cultures repressed.

The vitality of spirit that has had Aboriginal people not only survive but flourish can be seen in Peter's work.



*St Peters Cross by Peter Waples Crowe*

Les Griggs is another artist who was impacted by the policies of a deeply racist way of thinking. The Stolen Generation has become a common word as a result of many years of campaigning that had Kevin Rudd make the formal apology in 2008.

Les Griggs spoke loudly of his experience of being taken away and institutionalised as a result of this government policy long before the term came into being.

Sadly Les never lived to hear that apology but his life as an artist inspired many who came after him. He paved the way for many political artists when political art wasn't the order of the day, making work about his experience of imprisonment, drugs and alcohol and deaths in custody. He died in 1993, the International year of the Worlds Indigenous people, by his own hands, his anger and pain inflicted on himself in the end.



*No Standing Anytime* by Les Griggs

Vicki Couzens is a Guditjmara woman and her work sits along-side Les's in an impressive installation that he would have been proud to be near. Her work directly confronts the issue of war and speaks of the genocide of her people.

The Guditjmara were known for their 30 year war against the encroaching farmers conducted from Lake Eccles and other strong holds in the Gariweird (Grampians). This war could be said to be

ongoing when one looks at the terrible statistics for life expectancy and incarceration rates amongst Aboriginal people. Notice the small photograph of the cross still existing on the side of the road in the western district stating *George Watmore speared by blacks*, and compare it to the massive mourning installation and you will see the scale of death and destruction, weighted against the traditional owners who had small chance against the technology of warfare, bought to the land to fight against them.



Stony Rises Project by Vicki Couzens



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When entering the upper part of the upstairs gallery to see the work of Steven Rhall and George Gittoes one has to walk through the work of Hamishi Farah which is a very personal work.

It is the artist's hair made into something that resembles doorway fly strips. The dreadlocks confront you with their visceral quality.

Disembodied hair always makes me think of death and appropriately we are further confronted by the film by George Gittoes titled *Songs for War* in which one has to listen to American soldiers talk dispassionately about the heavy metal music they like to listen to when they go out to kill.



*Untitled* by Hamishi Farah



*Untitled* by Hamishi Farah

Steven Rhall's work is about the violence re-enacted through gesture. It is related to a performance where the artist made marks on a series of A4 papers in a ritualistic way.

The ream of papers are in the installation held down by a rock and surrounded by ash which has been severely shaped into a T shape, somehow resembling the architectural draftsman's T square along with the fragment of subsiding building frame. The angular forms evokes a violence in space.

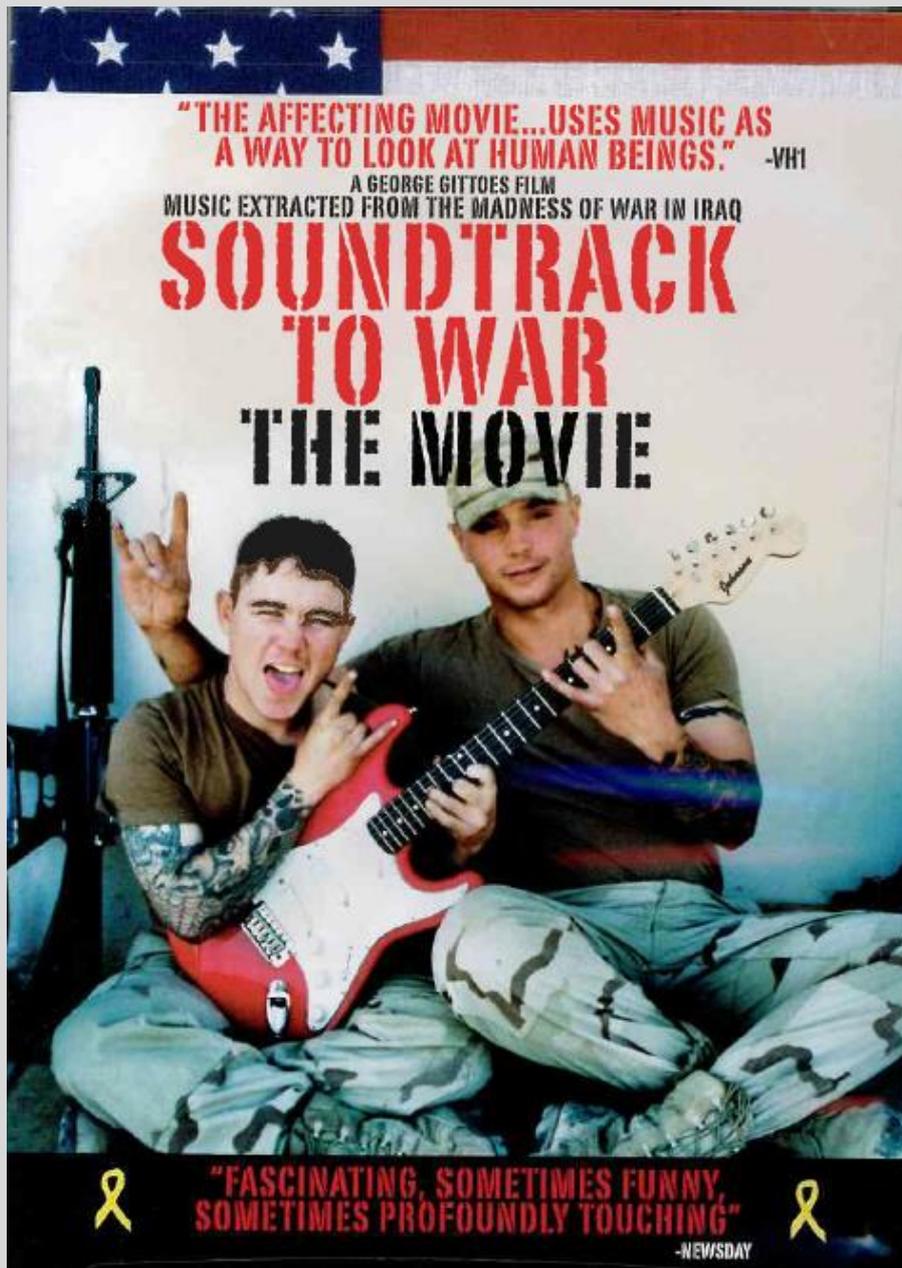
Also notice that the torn paper in the frames is a photograph of the tear, like a representation of a violent act in the past.



*In 'n' Out of Grace* by Steven Rhall

George Gittoes provides a powerful film that requires some time to watch. *Songs of war* is confronting as it should be given Gittoes's commitment to seeing the reality of war demonstrated by his time spent abroad.

He has travelled to and worked in many regions of conflict, including the Philippines, Somalia, Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Bougainville, and South Africa. In recent years his work has especially centered on the Middle East, with repeated visits to Israel and Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan.



*Soundtrack to War* by George Gittoes

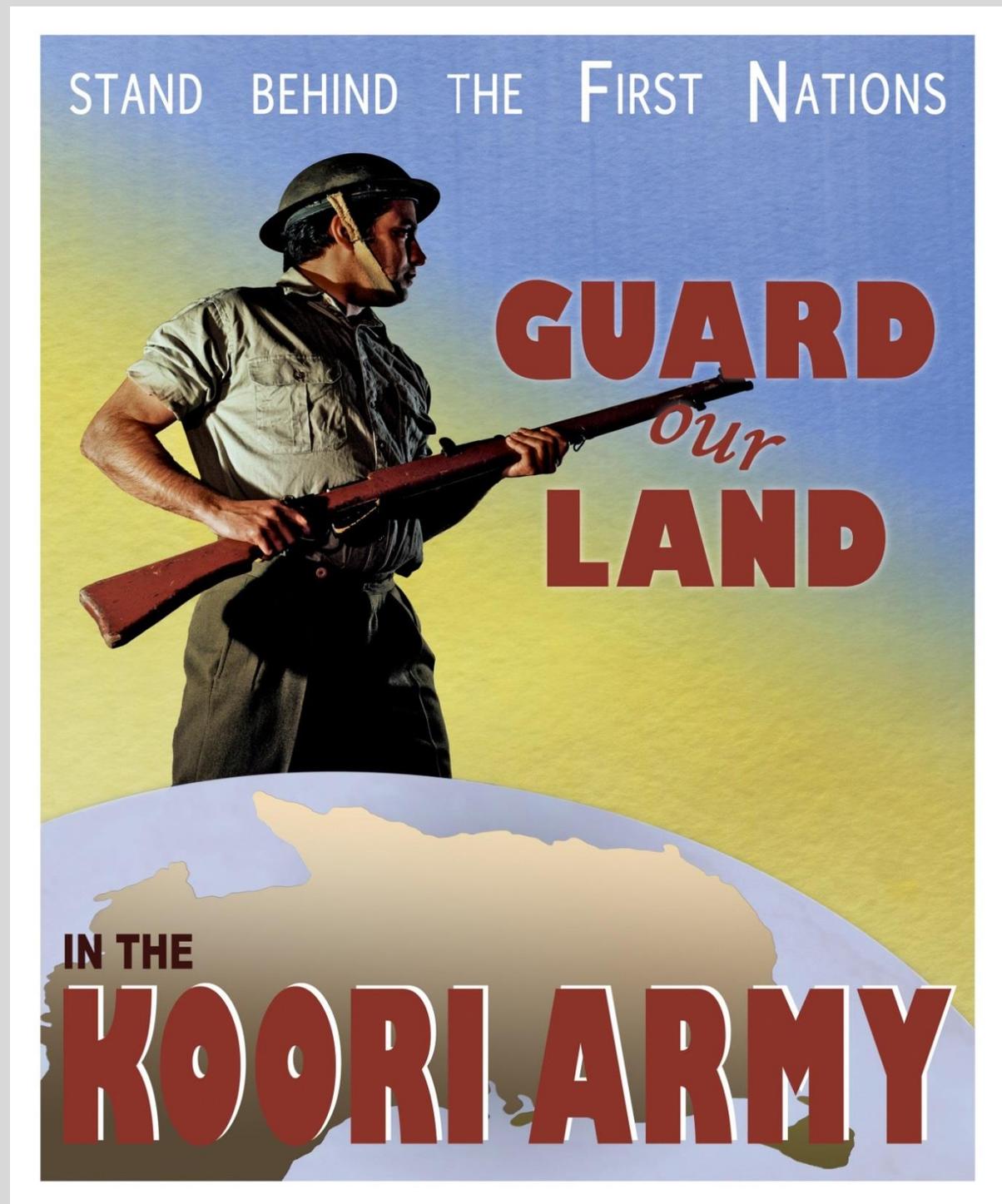
Jacob Tolo makes work that is also a representation of a representation. His mock ups of a readymade Captain America figure complete with promotional box and advertising is of a black figure rather than the typical square jawed white man in army uniform. The imagery on the box uses Samoan patterning in the red white and blue of the USA. These are all clues to the meaning behind the work which is about the prevalence of American Samoan recruits who are seduced to go and fight for 'the man' and yet when they come home get none of the army benefits that mainland Americans get.



*Readymade – Captain Amerika by Jacob Tolo*

Bindi Cole also mocks up a poster that re presents a different view of war. She has reconstructed an image from an historical poster, photographing Artist Reko Renni in army gear standing ready to protect his land. This reminds me of the famous early video work

Babakiueria (“Barbecue Area”) made by Director Don Featherstone in 1986 in which the tables are turned and white people are a minority, white kids are taken from their families and white people are being moved because the black government needs their home for “something”.



Post Us by Bindi Cole Chocka

The Fighting Gunditjmarra are a dance group from Portland Victoria who have proudly continued in the traditions of their ancestors and claimed their heritage in a powerful video that represents who they are.

Skin colour is not an identifier for Aboriginal people. There are as many hues as hair styles in the larger Aboriginal family and to identify is a fact of who you were brought up as or how you choose to identify based on your heritage and your story line.

This is often hard for non-Aboriginal people to understand when the stereotype that has been adopted by the broader population is of the black man standing on one leg with the other resting on his knee, holding a spear. However this is a silly as thinking that the Scotsman is always and only wearing a kilt and the full tartan regalia and if out of uniform they are no longer Scottish. Slowly things are changing and we non-Indigenous people are learning from our very generous and patient Aboriginal brothers and sisters.



The Fighting Gunditjmarra



I will run again  
I will never give up  
I will keep running and even when  
they catch me I'll run further still  
They can never own me  
They may have captured my body but my mind  
It still belongs to me  
I am mine not theirs and they can never claim me  
No matter how much they try I will not yield  
I am a warrior, I am not a slave  
I will never be yours.  
I am mine  
and I will  
run again.

-Wani Toaishara

There are similar misconceptions in relating to people from the African Diaspora. Wani Toaishara is out the change that and educate people through his spoken word poetry and performance. His deeply moving video work in this exhibition shows Wani expressing his pain in an honest and vulnerable moment which allows us to touch our own pain and vulnerability. I have tears in my eyes as I watch this video.

The poem he has written on the wall is written for his grandfather.

There just remains to thank these artists for their generosity of spirit and their courage in providing this work for us to experience and allowing us to know a little bit more of the world of conflict so that we are able to bring our own generosity of spirit to the fore. Art at its best!

Dr. Megan Evans

Visual Art Curator/Artist



*Traditions of War - Wani Toaishara*



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