

wyndham art gallery

# REACH



Honeymoon flowers by Clinton Nain

On first impressions this exhibition is located squarely in the aesthetic of abstraction. Beautiful works that elude to atmospheric environments with romantic allusions, encouraged by the titles such as the one on the cover *Honeymoon flowers*, seduce the viewer into an unguarded art experience. However the beauty has a sting in the tail.

Clinton Nain is Indigenous and for most Aboriginal people the politics of their very existence is front and centre in their everyday life. Clinton grew up in a country that had a white Australia policy and he is black. However unlike many people of colour who have emigrated from elsewhere, he doesn't have a homeland where his colour and culture is the norm. Clinton Nain is from the Meriam Mer, Erub, Ugar peoples of the Torres Strait and the Ku Ku people of far North Queensland. Being Indigenous in Australia means constantly having to reinforce your place in the history of a nation that only very recently acknowledges your role in the identity of the country.

Clinton's people are Eddie Mabo's people. In fact Eddie Mabo is Clintons Uncle, the person who single handedly disrupted the lie of Terra Nullus, the long held Australian colonial myth that the continent was uninhabited when the tall ships arrived to occupy the land in the name of England. Having such impressive lineage places Clintons work in the context of this breakthrough in the contemporary legal history of Australia.

Whether Indigenous people want to engage everyday with this issue or not they are shaped to a large degree by the absence of understanding that exists in the majority of the Australian population. Small misunderstanding such as thinking that all Aboriginal people look a certain way, have a big impact given the weight of history. Questioning someone's identity when that identity has been threatened by the occupying peoples for over 200 years is infuriating for Indigenous people. Assumptions still exist from a time when the colonial ruler was on the other side of the earth and intent on sending their excess citizens to a faraway shore. White Australia has yet to do the investigation of their own personal part in the dispossession of Aboriginal Australia.

This is the background to the beautiful works on exhibition in REACH.

Why REACH? As one moves through the space and reads the texts about the various bodies of work you get to a ladder, the only three dimension object in the exhibition. It sits on some fake green grass and leads up to a small wall painting up high on the roof. Against a cloudy blue sky are stenciled the words REACH. A hopeful invitation for those willing to climb the ladder, to begin to understand the complex and varied Aboriginal experience so generously unraveled in this exhibition.

REACH is also very close to BLEACH, a medium cleverly employed in the paintings.

Clinton uses domestic bleach to stain black velvet. Interestingly the purpose of bleach, which is to 'whiten', is subverted here. The stain which would normally be removed by the bleach, returning the object to its clean white origin, is a white stain. The bleach lightens the black velvet in uneven marks. In a sensitive and aesthetically beautiful way Clinton asks the audience to see the stain of whiteness.

This work also references the tradition of velvet paintings.

At times one senses a degree of justified anger in his message, but this is balanced by what is clearly a deep delight in the actual creation of the works. "I believe it's all about balance between aesthetics and politics," says Nain. "I wouldn't necessarily say that my message is angry but more so I use strong imagery in my work to depict confronting issues that are faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people such as the dispossessed, homelessness, racism, violence (domestic and other), police custody, drugs and alcohol. However, there is still a sense of hope in my paintings, stemming from our strength as first people

<http://www.artcollector.net.au/ClintonNainHopinghardinthecity>

Clinton Nain first came to public attention with his puns on colour and sexuality - White King Bleach versus Black Queens. With the visual savagery of splashes of white paint, bleach and black umbrellas he paraded questions of both racial and sexual stereotyping.

Clinton Nain: Living Under the Bridge by Joanna Mendelsohn

The personal politics, the heartbreaks, what's been going on, fighting for crown land, emotions, no longer at the beginning or the end of..., they're bleaching us

This is Clinton Nain's response to the question of what motivated this exhibition. In many ways he has produced a series of works for us to be swallowed up emotionally and spiritually, to stumble and fly through.

Clinton Nain is both the Meriam Mer (Torres Strait) and Ku Ku people of far North Queensland, and was recently described as one of Australia's most exciting emerging artists. Clinton would probably respond to that by saying that after 11 years on the scene, how long does it take to emerge!

Nain describes Whitens as 'an amalgam of emotion and figure' and is a continuation of his White King, Blak Queen series that began at the Sydney Mardi Gras in 1999 and has continued to develop via myriad themes. Throughout 2000, Nain displayed his trademark politically perceptive flair, by using bleach on fabrics, concisely expressing these themes and ideas. While his work has always been described as political - to say this alone is to deny the true complexity and stylish flamboyance of his work and persona.

By becoming the *Blak Queen*, (a reference to both Nain's gay pride and the mother of creation), Nain tells stories of colonization, cruelty, spiritual strength and survival as the work manifests before our eyes. I have witnessed him dance, paint, tell stories and sing all at once, a truly inspirational show. The *Blak Queen* is omnipotent, knows no boundaries and recognizes no colonizing fences. She has even transformed herself into a bird and flown out a window! She can turn everyday household items into weapons against colonization and the fading of memory. Her splashes of bleach become evocative images of lingering memories, prodding us to remember the truth. The *Blak Queen* is our Renaissance woman.

Dr. Megan Evans  
Visual Arts Curator  
Wyndham Art gallery 2013