

IF YOU ONLY KNEW...

BLAK WOMEN RESPOND TO THE CITY
OF MELBOURNE'S ART AND HERITAGE COLLECTION

26th January - 28 March 2004
City Gallery, Melbourne Town Hall
Swanston Street, Melbourne Vic 3000

Destiny Deacon • Fiona Foley • Julie Gough • Dianne Jones
Curated by Christian Bumbarra Thompson

Christian Bumbarra Thompson would like to thank the following;
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'The Deadly Tigress', Eddie Butler-Bowden, City of Melbourne,
Janina Harding, Dianne Jones, Julie Gough, Fiona Foley, Destiny Deacon,
Darren Sylvester, Elle 36, Jane Stewart, Dorella Gerardi, Bill Nuttall,
Simon Wright, Farrah and Nadia Itaywi, Sofii Belling, Elia Shugg,
Roger David Menswear, Brunswick Street Bookstore and Nola Pollard.

Destiny Deacon is represented by Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney
Fiona Foley is represented by Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney and Niagara Gallery, Melbourne
Julie Gough is represented by Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne
Dianne Jones is represented by Niagara Galleries, Melbourne



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The Entrapped Tigress

In 1893, Anna Cooper, at the World Congress of Representative Women, referred to the status of Black women as;

The despairing fight of an entrapped tigress.¹

Cooper stated;

The white women could at least plead for her own emancipation; the black women doubly enslaved, could but suffer and struggle and be silent.²

One hundred and eleven years on, this description of the status of Black women still holds profound resonance for contemporary Australian Blak³ women.

They continue to endure oppressive socio-political conditions, economic hardship and bear the brunt of ignorant stereotypical views on Blak women. All this while navigating the identity of 'Blak' and 'woman' in a country that still reeks of racist and misogynistic attitudes.

But the fight now is by no means despairing. Blak women may suffer and struggle but they are no longer silent.

If You only Knew... brings together four of Australia's leading Blak female artists, Destiny Deacon, Fiona Foley, Julie Gough and Dianne Jones. These women are at the forefront of contemporary art in Australia.

In this exhibition they tell us what has been happening behind the veil of ignorance that shrouds our nation. This fabricated veil has long appeared blissful to a country content with complacency and cover-ups.

These artists expose a history that many white Australians have been desperate to forget. Recent claims by Keith Windschuttle that massacres of Aboriginal people were exaggerated or never occurred, are just one example of the incessant whitening out of Blak history.

If You Only Knew... is an exhibition specially commissioned by the City of Melbourne, to make an Indigenous interpretation of the Art and Heritage Collection visible for the first time.

These works play with our recollection of symbols from both an Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspective. They traverse a range of issues from the hypersexualisation and denigration of Blak women to the empowerment and strength of these women, defining for themselves their femininity and sexuality.

The art of Fiona Foley, Julie Gough, Dianne Jones and Destiny Deacon spans a diverse range of media incorporating elements of sculpture, installation, new media, textiles, photography and video.

Whilst Deacon, Gough and Foley have established successful national and international careers, Jones has emerged as a vibrant and challenging voice amongst a rising new generation of talented Blak artists.

Their art explores a consciousness of the dynamics between sex, power and colonisation. It raises provocative questions and does not settle for any easy answers. We recognise the process of colonisation was not only a theft of the spirit but of the body.

Black people's entry into the symbolic order of western culture hinged on the theft of their bodies, the severing of will from their bodies, the reduction of their bodies to things, and the transformation of their sexuality into an expression of otherness.⁴

In the work of Badtjala artist Fiona Foley, we are presented with two camp like blankets. These works, entitled *On the Blanket 1* and *On the Blanket 2*, unnerve, unsettle and remove us from our harmonious ideals of Australian history. The subtle relationship between the blanket and its text enters a space that engages with the sinister implications of trade on the frontier.

The blanket as a utilitarian object suggests that these items, significant in Australian history as objects of trade to Aboriginal people from whites, represents something more intentionally malevolent. The blanket is as much a symbol of sexual trade as a practical commodity.

On the Blanket contains both a suggestion and retaliation. The coloniser in his empirical endeavor to occupy and own, is juxtaposed with the savvy of the colonised to the treachery committed by the foreigner, waiting and watching. In this sense, both parties wait and watch.

Foley's work acts much like the works of African American artists Lorna Simpson, Adrian Piper and Kara Walker; subverting power and playing on the perversion of colonialist voyeurism.

This systematic transportation and displacement of the Blak body on the frontier reduces the Blak identity to a type of representative object of 'otherness'. Any expression of 'self' will always be rendered by non Indigenous people as something 'other', something removed from their own lived

experience, devoid of a human face.

Continuing this theme, Tasmanian Aboriginal artist Julie Gough's new work *Blood Counts*, follows the movement of the Blak body. Gough focuses on the shipment of Tasmanian Aboriginal women from Tasmania to Victoria and further shores.

Gough's work maintains an ongoing relationship between herself and her traditional country, mapping history and the landscape at the same time. Gough states:

The opportunity to make this work provided a return to particular materials (Kelp, Tea Tree, Cotton) I had denied myself since I moved to Victoria from Tasmania six months ago.⁵

Gough's installation is a potent melding of historical events and materials; Tasmanian Aboriginal women, sea slavery, whalers, huts, sticks, spears, pelts, pegging of skins, language, organs, Batman, syphilis, white immigrants, truths, fictions, refute, disrepute, language of sea and land...

Gough's contemporary journey is one, which parallels to a degree that of her own ancestors. As she says:

I have also been recollecting journeys of women, including one of my ancestors and the vast distances they traveled from their north east Tasmanian homelands.⁶

In this new work, we are invited to join Gough on her pilgrimage and that of her forebears, fraught with travels, tales and truths.

Whilst the process of colonisation sought to remove Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from the

landscape through false representation, these contemporary artists revise these historical inaccuracies through realistic and contemporary images of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

Nyungar photomedia artist Dianne Jones does precisely this in her appropriations of iconic Australian paintings and photographs when she inserts images of herself and her family into the work of John Glover, Max Dupain and Tom Roberts. This can be seen in her previous works *Newport* and *Jones's Picnic*.

In her new work, Jones addresses the invisibility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people during celebrations in 1949 for Melbourne's successful Olympic bid.

At this time Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were not even citizens of our own nation. There was no representation of Indigenous people for Indigenous people yet the propaganda for the games capitalised on the mystique of the noble savage.

The various paraphernalia associated with the games was littered with generic pseudo Indigenous iconography. This exploitation of the exotic native 'fauna and flora' has been a popular global practice of the tourism industry.

In her new series *Blaklash*, Jones deals with archetypal images of the contemporary Aboriginal woman adopted by non-Indigenous people. She parodies Blak identities that have been popularised by a homogenous dominant culture.

Jones responds to the demonisation of Blak identity by satirising them. By exaggerating the absurdity of these images and contrasting them with a portrayal that resists this reductionist categorisation, Jones reclaims the right represent herself. As Jones states:

Everything I am caricaturing is everything but what I am.⁷

Jones stands on the ground where once Aboriginal people where denied a place. She positions herself strongly with her foot placed firmly on Keith Windschuttle's *Fabrications of Aboriginal History Volume I*.

Her actions transcend both the historical and contemporary placement of the Blak female body. Jones asserts both a self-confident presence and a fierce political sentiment. She is here to stay so you had better get used to it!

The original image, which Jones references, was used for the Mayors' Ball in 1949. It depicts the Town Hall decorated with Indigenous flora. In the foreground of the photograph is a statue of a naked Aboriginal man holding an Olympic torch in the air. Like Gough, Jones is tracing the movement of the Blak body; its' presence and absence.

Jones, through her juxtaposition of historical and contemporary images, reminds us of the deliberate exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from Australian society. Through her shape shifting, Jones represents polar ends of the Olympic experience. While the white crowd roars, the silence of the Blaks is deafening.

This process of constant reflection is an innate part of contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. We share an intricate web of traditional regions, cultural groups and language. To this day it sustains our affinity and empathy with one another.

It is this sense of affinity that is present in the work of Ku Ku / Erub / Mer artist Destiny Deacon. Deacon employs pop cultural references in her ironic and highly composed photographs and installations.

In her new work, Deacon, along with her nephew and niece, set about to create their own private Moomba festival parade in the Art and Heritage Collection store room, complete with kings, queens, princes and princesses.

Deacon's nephew Elia, dresses in the Moomba King outfit perched on a tattered and tragic gold Victorian seat, an oversized crown, cloak and scepter, accompany him. He poses in front of the 602 store rooms wall of past white king's and queen's portraits. A youthful John Farnham peers over Elia's left shoulder.

Deacon's use of irony and her seemingly innocent game of dress ups, poses more serious questions about the presence of Aboriginal people in such an event, Is the concept of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Moomba King and Queen something that can only exist in make believe?

Deacon's photographs are accompanied by a video work in which Elia and her niece Sofii simulate the Moomba parade. With freight trolley in hand, they move around the store, teeth gleaming, waving to the crowd as they push each other back and forth. Deacon also displays various Moomba paraphernalia in a glass case. This mimics the way Aboriginal artifacts are exhibited in a museological context.

Together, the artists critique of the City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection highlights the absence of any authentic Indigenous voice in the collection. They insert themselves into conventional historical narratives that systematically erased and excluded them.

We thank the Blak women who have come before us, in times when the tigress was well and truly silenced. They have been the key that unlocks the cage for current and future generations.

All these women affirm in their work a holistic and empowered sense of their own femininity; a testimonial of their survival and success as liberated women of colour. Their voices dance on the fissures of identity in a celebration of vision, bravery and skill.

If You Only Knew... is a reclamation and a revelation. Loud, proud and playing with all your presumptions and expectations, these women retaliate to violence with creativity, ignorance with intellect and cruelty with clarity.

In a time when much Aboriginal art is still misunderstood and marketed in a tokenistic manner fashioned for a white palette, *If You Only Knew...* is a refreshing and vital commentary.

What happens once you know what we tell you? Did you know it all along... what we gonna do about 'the white problem'?

Christian Bumbarra Thompson
Bidjara, 2004

1. Cooper, Anna, Julia. *A voice from the South*. Xenia, Ohio, 1892.
2. *ibid*
3. The term Blak refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia.
4. Fusco, Coco. *The Bodies That Were Not Ours*. Iniva Press, 2002.
5. Gough, J. *Artist's Statement for 'Blood Counts'*, 2003.
6. *ibid*
7. Jones, D. *Artist's statement for 'Blaklash series'*, 2004.



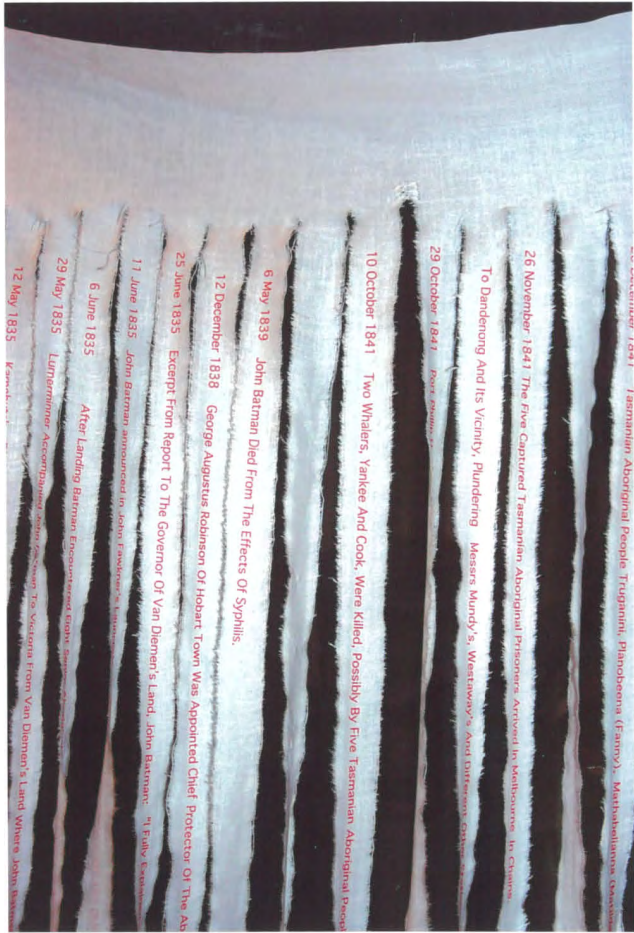
Destiny Deacon *Where's Mickey?*
 Lambda print from Polaroid original
 100.0 x 80.0cm, 2002



Fiona Foley *Stud Gins*
 Blanket installation, Synthetic polymer
 paint on found blankets (Detail), 2003



Dianne Jones *Fabricate Dis*
 digital print
 2003



Julie Gough *Blood counts*
 ti-tree, kelp, cotton, variable dimensions,
 collection of the artist, 2004 (detail)