

Identity in post colonial australian essay



In the second half of the 20th century, after two centuries of colonial oppression and assimilation policies in Australian history, political and social breakthroughs of Aboriginal people into the dominant European culture were brought to an end, thus enabling Aboriginal Artists to have the freedom to express their traditions, culture and identity. According to Oxford Art Online, the simultaneous explosions of the Australian art market in the 1990s, gained international recognition for Aboriginal Art that emerged into the contemporary Aboriginal art that appealed to White Australia's conflicting desire for cultural reconciliation.

The recognition of artistic production in Aboriginal communities across Australia enabled artists to explore themes of cultural alienation. The first wave of contemporary Aboriginal painters including Clifford Possum, Rover Thomas, Paddy Bedford and Emily Kame Kngwarreye, utilized repertoires of dots, blocks of color, with stimulating negative spaces or gestural brushstrokes to evoke the sense of a sacred, collective 'knowledge'.

Collectors and museums began to actively collect contemporary Aboriginal works, whose conceptual paintings reinterpreted Australian colonial history.

Today Aboriginal Australians are producing art in the remote regions where artists continue to explore their connections with their ancestral land and traditions of ground designs, body art, painted canvases, and bark paintings using contemporary materials. The practice of art is seen differently by indigenous art-makers than their contemporary artist counterparts; the works themselves often have a lot in common with much contemporary artwork, particularly with conceptual, installation and issues-based art.

However, in early times, art had a different function than the modern ideas

of self-expression or decoration; created with spiritual and hunting/survival purposes in mind. The identity of the individual artist/maker of cave paintings, masks and other traditional art forms was not as significant as it is today. Still, the traditional art objects perceived today also as a work of art, and valued for its aesthetic qualities. In addition, they are exploring contemporary art forms such as photography, film, multimedia, theatre, sculpture, printmaking, and installation.

Artists such as Tracey Moffat, (b. 1960), Fiona Foley, (b. 1964), and Gordon Bennett (b. 1955), whom consider indigenous art as a way to express political and social issues in new forms of contemporary media, reflects unique perspectives of a distinctive experiences. Whilst their art proclaims aboriginal identity, it often acts as a medium for cultural renewal, operating beyond the classical idioms, conforming to the inspiration from aboriginal practices and European, and other visual language and techniques.

As, written in Wally Caruana's book, *Aboriginal Art*, chapter 6, *Artists in the Town and City*:

“ In the second half of the twentieth century, as the movements for the recognition of aboriginal rights gained momentum, urban and rural artists found compelling reasons to produce art. Aboriginal people required imagery and symbols with which to express their ideals and inspirations. These issues of dispossession, broken families, racism-the secret history of Australia- and an intensifying of the sense of cultural identity provided strong motivation, and these themes are all apart of the repertoire of artists.

For instance, works by Aboriginal installation and mixed media artist Fiona Foley, from Harvey Bay, Fraser Island, engages with the history, ideas, family tradition from her cultural heritage from the Wondunna clan of Badtjala tribe from her mother's side, and her work reflects the remembrance of colonial oppression, the colonized vision of Australia and her ancestors.

Foley's work deals with the issues of displacement and dispossession of land, the people and some of her work is highly political, committing herself to the history of Aboriginal people and represents racism and violence and identity, and raises issues from a historic and contemporary cultural view.

(<http://eprints.utas.edu.au/2644/6/part5>, (Morphy, Illus 260, 273).

'Annihilation of the blacks' (1986), is a frightening sculptural installation which is a part of the permanent collection of the Australian National Gallery (Caruana, 1993). The work represents the massacre of the disturbing treatment of Aboriginal people by the colonizers; the work consists of a white figure standing in front of 9 hanging black figures. The upright forked posts and cross poles are a powerful symbolic medium in traditionally-oriented Aboriginal communities for shelters and homes (Reser, 1977b).

It is also a sacred complex and symbol for the first residence of the Wagilak in Arnhem Land, which represents the Kunapipi ceremony (Berndt, 1951).

Also within the young Aboriginal boys waiting to be born again, as young men, are viewed metaphorically as flying foxes, hanging from the beam, it is said that the flying fox ancestral spirits brought circumcision to the central Arnhem Land clans and because the flying fox is a central totemic species to clans in this region.

Fiona Foley often draws inspiration from traditional Aboriginal culture and life, while making powerful and contemporary political statements. All of this gives the sculpture a very strong traditional as well as contemporary symbolic quality, with multiple and intertwined meanings and messages.

Annihilation of the Blacks

1986

wood, synthetic polymer paint, feathers, string

278 x 300 x 60 cm

Collection National Museum of Australia, Canberra

Image courtesy National Museum of Australia,

Canberra © the artist

Photograph: George Serras, National Museum of Australia

http://www.mca.com.au/general/FFoley_resource.pdf

In her large sculptural installation work such as 'Land Deal', 1995, is about the response to the words of the nineteenth colonial official John Batman, when he described how he purchased 600,000 acres from local aborigines in Port Phillip, in exchange for beads, blankets and knives, scissors.

(<http://eprints.utas.edu.au/2644/6/part5.pdf>). This work consists of a spiral of flour on the floor; representing the loss of lifestyle and health that consequently came about during white settlement, and also by invoking the genocidal colonial practice of poisoning the flour given to aboriginal people,

<https://assignbuster.com/identity-in-post-colonial-australian-essay/>

(Evans, Raymond, *Fighting Words: Writing about Race*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1999. The work also incorporates the objects, which hang from the walls. The real projection is that her expression to suggest the indigenous loss of the land, as a dialogue of transaction, reminding the public of the cold absence of indigenous voice, and the lack of understanding that for the ongoing campaigns for land return in which Foley and her own family have embarked in.

Land Deal

1995

installation view, Savode Gallery, Brisbane, 1995

mixed media, flour, found objects, text

dimensions variable

Collection National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Image courtesy the artist and National Gallery of Australia,

Canberra © the artist

http://www.mca.com.au/general/FFoley_resource.pdf

Foley's personal searches to discover Badtjala material culture by referring to these objects, examining the history of their collection and interpretation. Foley reclaims their true significance to Aboriginal people. The ambiguous relationship between the descendants of the white settlers and Australia's

<https://assignbuster.com/identity-in-post-colonial-australian-essay/>

original inhabitants in Fraser Island's recent history as the struggle for recognition of native title for the Badtjala people continues. Avril Quail

Gordon Bennett, also from an Aboriginal heritage from his mother's side; he was an orphan from Cherbourg reserve 240km northwest of Brisbane. Known for his paintings, installation and multimedia art forms focuses on a more personal viewpoint of past and present struggle for identity as an Australian of Aboriginal and Anglo-Celtic descent. His works present and examine a broad range of philosophical questions related to the construction of identity, perception, and knowledge.

(<http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/gordonbennett/education/intro.html>) within cultural and historical inequities created by European settlement in Australia,

(<http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/gordonbennett/education/02.html>)

For example, he uses his self-portraits as a concept of self-identity and questioning stereotypes and labeling on a larger national scale, immersed within a 'White' European culture. Bennett was unaware of his Aboriginality until his early teens as he described this knowledge as a 'psychic rupturing',

(Ian McLean, 'Towards an Australian postcolonial art' in Ian McLean & Gordon Bennett, *The Art of Gordon Bennett*, Craftsman House, 1996, p. 99).

(Ian McLean, 'Towards an Australian postcolonial art' in Ian McHis art attempts to depict the complexity of both cultural perspectives. Self portrait (Ancestor figures), 1992 deals with broader issues of cultural identity as well as personal identity. The installation consists of images of his family and drawing. The self- portrait of the artist seems to be present everywhere within the installation but is in fact nowhere. The dresser draw labelled 'self'

<https://assignbuster.com/identity-in-post-colonial-australian-essay/>

is closed while the drawers for ' history' and ' culture' that is partly open and partly closed. Bennett indicates the need to be reconciled within the context of culture and history to develop a full sense of identity. An understanding of self in the context of family does not seem enough as the mirror, acts as a chronic symbol within his work, is not a two- dimensional illusion but an honest construct. The viewer does not confront the artist, but self. Bennett uses this symbol because:

“ In the mirror, everything is possible because nothing is there”

(Ian McLean, ' Towards an Australian Postcolonial Art' in The Art of Gordon Bennett, p. 105)

Gordon Bennett

born Australia 1955

Self portrait (Ancestor figures) 1992

chest of drawers, watercolour, photocopies, lead, rocks, masking tape

(variable) (installation)

Collection of the artist, Brisbane

© Courtesy of the artist

Photography: Phillip Andrews

<http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/gordonbennett/education/02.html>

<https://assignbuster.com/identity-in-post-colonial-australian-essay/>

What emerges for all who take part in this piece is in fact an examination of the self. The 'I am' from Self portrait (But I always wanted to be one of the good guys) is replaced with 'We all are'.

In addition, the grid and perspective lines on the floor represent another symbol acting as the groundwork of the installation that appears to confirm this sense. In European tradition, the means to map a particular space, land, etc alludes to ownership and territory. It recalls the way stereotypes, labels, identities, and systems of thought are fixed. On each corner of the grid are the letters A B C D . While these may indicate the way maps are constructed to find different locations, they also represent the first letter of racial slurs. Identity is fixed and self is understood in the context of words such as Abo, Boong, Coon and Darkie . The 'Other' is clearly marked out as not only different but by necessity inferior.

These contrasting and complex meanings and ideas are not accidental. Bennett purposefully constructs these layers to blur fixed ideas and raise questions about the way identity is constructed. He uses his self as the vehicle to do so.

Lean & Gordon Bennett, *The Art of Gordon Bennett*, Craftsman House, 1996, p. 99)

You have to understand my position of having no designs or images or stories on which to draw to assert my Aboriginality. In just three generations, that heritage has been lost to me. Gordon Bennett 9

Blood is a potent symbol and has historically been a measure of Aboriginality. In the past 'Quadroon', was a socially acceptable term used to label Indigenous people as a way of establishing genetic heredity. The 'purer' the bloodlines, the more Aboriginal you were. Mixing of pure 'blood' with European 'blood' was feared by Europeans, 'authenticity' was at risk and identity diluted. As an Australian of both Aboriginal and Anglo Celtic descent, Bennett felt he had no access to his indigenous heritage. He states:

The traditionalist studies of Anthropology and Ethnography have thus tended to reinforce popular romantic beliefs of an 'authentic' Aboriginality associated with the 'Dreaming' and images of 'primitive' desert people, thereby supporting the popular judgment that only remote 'full-bloods' are real Aborigines. Gordon Bennett 10

Gordon Bennett explores these ideas in *Self portrait: Interior/ Exterior*, 1992. Once again, the arena of self-portraiture becomes a vehicle to take over and challenge stereotypes. Here he exposes the truth of colonial occupation - it was a 'bloody' conquest. Bennett depicts self as a black empty vessel, coffin-like with lash markings almost disguised by a thick layer of black paint. Literally opening up this black skin of paint are the words 'cut me'. They act as deep welts created when tissue scars. Gouged into the skin like a tattoo, these markings will never heal or fade away. They powerfully describe pain and violence. Bennett only uses two colours, symbolically, red and black.

Gordon Bennett

born Australia 1955

<https://assignbuster.com/identity-in-post-colonial-australian-essay/>

Self portrait: Interior/Exterior 1992

synthetic polymer paint on canvas on pine frames, leather stock whip, paper tags

(1-2) 187.0 x 60.0 x 25.0 cm (each) (1-3) (variable) (installation)

Collection of the artist, Brisbane

© Courtesy of the artist

Photography: Phillip Andrews

<http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/gordonbennett/education/02.html>

There is no physical body. The coffin-like box acts as the body, both inside and outside are scarred with 'Pollock' inspired lashes of paint. These scars are not just physical they are also emotional. This imagery is reinforced by the whip neatly hanging on the wall beside the 'body'. Ultimately, this piece, one of a series of 'welt' paintings, explores identity through pain, exploitation and suffering. Bennett does not wish to romanticise or sanitise this 'bloody' history. The viewer is challenged to face it. The blood splashed and flowing under the layer of black skin does not discern the colour of the skin it contains, only the potency of life. Bennett challenges the viewer with contrasting identities. The oppressors, those who use the whip, and the oppressed, those enslaved by the whip. These opposites are not absolute. Bennett is more interested in exploring what lies between.

My work is often seen as about exploring my identity in order to secure it, like I'm searching for it, like I've lost it somewhere, which is the total

<https://assignbuster.com/identity-in-post-colonial-australian-essay/>

opposite to what I'm doing. Sure, I'm exploring identity, but I'm trying to make it obvious about how open it is; how it's a process of the negotiation of these different sites of memory, human relations. It is all those other things, and it shouldn't be closed off. It shouldn't be a thing that constricts nor should it be an imposed thing, from outside oneself, like a prison. Gordon Bennett 11

Bennett's art practice attempts to remove the obstacles that interfere with a positive development of self.

Tracey Moffatt, born into a fostered white family in Brisbane, close to where her Aboriginal ancestors grew up, on a mission outside of Brisbane called Cherbourg, (Moffatt qtd. in Rutherford 52, plays a huge part in representing a multicultural role in society as she examines the ways Australia's colonial past enlightens the present. The photographs, mostly still from her film-making, places a narrative images into many of the stories being told, representations past and present times in Aboriginal History, her perspective seems to identify to her Aboriginality and feminist view point. However, she cautiously uses her style of narratives with multiple and specific politics concern of Australian identity, with an inspiration of the lives of her Aboriginal heritage and culture. Her unique visual style of cinematic images challenges the stereotypes of race and gender, with issues symbolic of political references, (<http://admin5.lisjc.lism.catholic.edu.au/~mark/Visual%20Arts%20documents/Identity%20unit/Tracey%20Moffatt%20from%20Australian%20Artists.pdf>)

Her compelling and very powerful photographic works such as 'Up in the Sky' 1998, is a sequence of twenty five monochromatic narrative photographs set in the vast desert concerning the Australian Stolen Generation. Indigenous Australian children were taken from their families and forcibly relocated under Government policy - was enacted and performed on location in Queensland's outback, ([http://www. answers. com/topic/tracey-moffatt](http://www.answers.com/topic/tracey-moffatt)). In these images Moffatt refers to both the collective memory of her own personal experiences as well as the constructing reality of the influence of culture, alienation, desolation, and the wider concerns of remote living.

Tracey Moffatt

Up In The Sky # 1, 1997

series of 25 images

off set print

61 Å- 76cm

72 x 102 paper size

Edition of 60

http://www.roslynxley9.com.au/artists/26/Tracey_Moffatt/73/32634/

In her films still 'Night Cries': A rural Tragedy 1989, she represents the truth and memory about a mother and daughter relationship with a focus on events that took place focusing on Death, childhood, loneliness and memory.

The film brings forth the powerful issues related to the black and white

<https://assignbuster.com/identity-in-post-colonial-australian-essay/>

relations of Australian history during the attempts to assimilate Australian Indigenous people into the white society, (http://www.qag.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/27504/qld_edu_kit_web.pdf)

Tracey Moffatt: Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy, Still, 1989

[http://www.qag.qld.gov.](http://www.qag.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/27504/qld_edu_kit_web.pdf)

[au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/27504/qld_edu_kit_web.pdf](http://www.qag.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/27504/qld_edu_kit_web.pdf)

Tracey Moffatt

•

The interest in Aboriginal art which has flourished since the 1970s has created new opportunities for indigenous artists, as their work leaves the communities to be shown in museums and galleries around the world. Meanwhile, the imperatives to produce art for traditional purposes continue, and the expanded environment in which indigenous art now operates has created further compelling reasons for artists to continue expressing the values of their culture to the wider world. In the public domain, Aboriginal art can be appreciated for its spirituality and aesthetic qualities, and as a reflection of the social and political achievements and aspirations of the peoples who create it.

•

Avril Quail: World of Dreamings, Traditional and modern art of Australia, An exhibition held at the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg | 2 February – 9 April 2000

<https://assignbuster.com/identity-in-post-colonial-australian-essay/>

H , Robinson: *Feminism-art-theory: an anthology, 1968-2000*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2001

Bonwick, J., *John Batman, the Founder of Victoria*, Melbourne: Samuel Mullens, 1867.

Caruana, W., et al, *The Eye of the Storm: Eight contemporary indigenous Australian artists*, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1996.

Cooper, C., *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collections in Overseas Museums*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1989.

Elder, B., *Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and maltreatment of Australian Aborigines since 1788*, second edition, Sydney: New Holland Publishers, 1998.

Moon, D. & Krause, J., *Deutsche Auswanderer – Hope and Reality, History of the nineteenth century German settlement of Mount Cotton in south east Queensland*, Cleveland, Queensland: Redland Museum Inc., 1999

Gordon Bennett's ref: Gordon Bennett, 'The manifest toe' in Ian McLean & Gordon Bennett, *The Art of Gordon Bennett*, Craftsman House, 1996, p. 33

Ian McLean, 'Towards an Australian postcolonial art' in Ian McLean & Gordon Bennett, *The Art of Gordon Bennett*, Craftsman House, 1996, p. 99

Gordon Bennett, 'The manifest toe' in *The Art of Gordon Bennett*, p. 22

Rebecca Lancashire, 'Blurring the lines of history', *The Age*, Monday 5 May, 1997

Kelly Gellatly, ' Citizen in the Making: The art of Gordon Bennett' in Gordon Bennett (exh. cat.), National Gallery of Victoria, 2007 p. 16

Gordon Bennett, ' The manifest toe' in The Art of Gordon Bennett, p. 34

Gabriella Coslovich, ' Bennett puts on a brave face', The Age, 28 April, 2004

Ian McLean, ' Towards an Australian Postcolonial Art' in The Art of Gordon Bennett, p. 105

Gordon Bennett & Chris McAuliffe, ' Interview with Gordon Bennett' in Rex Butler (e d.) What is Appropriation? An Anthology of Writings on Australian Art in the 1980s and 1990s. IMA Publishing, Brisbane, 2004, p. 27

<http://leonildeviljoen.wordpress.com/2009/11/02/fiona-foley/>

[http://www.quitnow.info.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/C143D432E3817918CA2571F10000CC3A/\\$File/indall.pdf](http://www.quitnow.info.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/C143D432E3817918CA2571F10000CC3A/$File/indall.pdf)

<http://www.newrepublics.com/GordonBennettHomeDecor.pdf>

http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/33990/cda_5.pdf

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_go1931/is_1_27/ai_n29415749/

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_go1931/is_1_27/ai_n29415749/pg_2/?tag=content;col1

<http://www.artaustralia.com/images/currentbookpdf/Tracey%20MoffattVol41No2.pdf>

<https://assignbuster.com/identity-in-post-colonial-australian-essay/>

<http://www.artlink.com.au/articles.cfm?id=2596>

<http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/cteq/00/10/night.html>