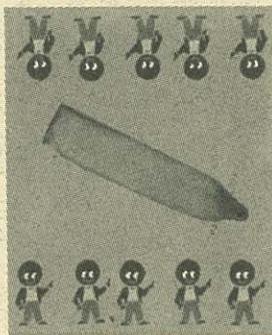


Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

FIONA FOLEY

Lick My Black Art



I HAVE NEVER LIVED WITH A WOMEN
I AM BLACK, BRITISH, CURATOR
I DON'T GO TO OPENINGS
I DON'T LIKE SPIKE LEE FILMS
I'VE NEVER BEEN IN LOVE
LOVE COMES FROM HOLLYWOOD
I NEVER TOLD MY FATHER WHAT I DO
WHAT ARE YOU IF YOU DON'T HAVE AN OPINION
ALL IRISH ARE ALCOHOLICS
ALL AUSTRALIANS WALK AROUND WITH COMPLEXES
SOME BLACK MEN ARE INTO WHITE WOMEN
SOME WHITE WOMEN ARE INTO BLACK COCK
I HAVE NEVER SHAVED
I AM THIRTY TWO
I OWN MY OWN HOUSE
I DON'T DRINK ALCOHOL
IF I HAVE A GIRL I AM GOING TO CALL HER HYACINTH

LICK MY BLACK ART



In making an irreverent connection between licking art and licking arse, Fiona Foley alerts her audience to the complex modes of subjugation that have characterised the colonial experience in Australia. Imperialism has always involved strategies of alienation and exclusion, yet paradoxically, it also facilitates a high degree of physical intimacy between the members of the impacted cultures. In Foley's installations, the transmission of bodily fluids is used to symbolise these interpersonal conjuncions.

Her methodology is informed by a story from her home territory concerning Eliza Fraser, the English gentlewoman who survived the wreck of the *Stirling Castle* in 1836 and was forced to reside with Fiona's ancestors, the Badtjala community of Thoorgine (now Fraser Island). The islanders claim that Mrs Fraser bore a child while in the long boat which was carrying her ashore. When the baby died, the Badtjala women insisted that she breast feed another infant whose mother could not feed as her milk had dried up. She reputedly regarded this as one of her most humiliating moments on the island. There is a resonance between that memory of a white woman unwillingly providing sustenance to a black child, and Fiona Foley's own pleasure in designing a postage stamp, a form of Black art (and a black cockatoo, no less), that is literally licked.

Fiona Foley's work is thematically expansive: this exhibition deals with the manner in which Aboriginal art has been co-opted into foreign agendas. The form, however, is dominated by the artist's personal memories and infused with a strong sense of her own locality. Like the drawings for which she is now well known, where natural objects — a yam leaf and a swordfish bone, for example — are separated by a powdery expanse of pastel, her installational approach is suggestive of wanderings along the famous beaches of Fraser Island. Such walks are conducive to the gathering of myriad objects, each worn by its passage through the ocean, each endowed with its own narrative. We find a reference to these peregrinations in the bottles of sand collected from the island. The layering of black and white is consistent with the exhibition's preoccupation with race relations, and also refers to an environmental history. The black sand, known as rutile, is the substance that holds the dunes together. It was also the material sought by mining interests during a protracted conservation battle in the 1970s.

The juxtaposition of symbols is consistent with the combined motions of walking, gathering, collecting. The overall effect is an assemblage of objects poised in dialogue. Two melodies seem to compete in this polyphous exchange: signs of movement are counterposed to signs of stasis. Postage stamps, envelopes, driftwood all suggest ideas of transmission. Condoms, drawers and bottles are suggestive of containment. That tension between a barrier and its transcendence is most noticeably encapsulated in the driftwood installation where dingo tracks escape the delineated boundary of the drawer. The dingo is Foley's totemic animal according to Badtjala

tradition. The driftwood drawer is a form of coded signature, comparable to the ochre hand prints sometimes found in Australian caves. Such traces would often mark the birth place of the print maker.

The use of animal tracks is itself a common metaphor in traditional Australian art, often carved into rock platforms or painted in caves. Foley's relationship to these traditions is a matter of ongoing negotiation. The dingo tracks refer to a practice of great antiquity, but their deployment in a contemporary context is utterly contingent on their relevance to Foley's own experience. The relationship between the artist and her images is thus utterly dependent on a notion of cultural and personal authenticity.

This might explain Foley's wariness about the categorization and fetishization of 'Black Art', which constitutes an important theme in this exhibition. Many of the installations are intended as a direct critique of curatorial practices that purport to represent 'the margins' while actually perpetuating their displacement. The fatuous comments listed in *Every Girl Needs Her Golliwog* — 'Love comes from Hollywood', 'Some black men are into white women', 'Some white women are into black cock', 'All Irish are alcoholics', etc. — are direct quotations from a black British curator who visited Australia in 1993. Foley's suspicion of this same curator was aroused when she learnt that he was in Australia to meet with Aboriginal curators and artists and to discuss a collaborative project modelled closely on an exhibition which he had recently assembled in London. She saw this as a clear example of a foreign agenda dictating expressive parameters.

The desire for institutional recognition has played an important part in Aboriginal politics, particularly in the arts where the appearance of Aboriginal objects in predominantly Eurocentric spaces is interpreted as a sign of cultural acceptance. Artists' eagerness to participate in international shows, such as that proposed by the black British curator, emphasises just how problematic it is to transfer highly localised idioms into remote places and spaces. The contradiction that Foley identifies very clearly in her installations is that in a climate where notions of difference are being lauded and elevated, there is a tendency to see homogeneity *within* difference; to equate the very diverse struggles, say, of black Australians and black British as one and the same.

Foley does not pretend to provide answers to these difficult problems. Rather, just as her installations are shaped by the architecture of the gallery, she draws attention to structural parameters and locates her own expressive voice within. The effect that emerges is perhaps typical of our changed local circumstances where the Mabo judgement has necessitated a profound redefinition of how this country is to be physically occupied and spiritually inhabited. Australia, in this era, can be seen very much as a nexus of competing boundaries.

Martin Thomas November 1993

C O C K

A

T O O
B I A C K

Fiona Foley

Born 1964, Maryborough, Queensland
Lives and works in Sydney

Education

1982-83 East Sydney Technical College
1983 Visiting student to St Martins School of Art, London
1984-86 Sydney College of the Arts
1987 Sydney Institute of Education, Sydney University

Solo Exhibitions

1988 Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney
My Fishing Line Is Still In The Ocean, Griffith University, Queensland
1989 *A Three Legged Dog Day*, Maningrida Arts & Craft, Northern Territory; Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney
1991 *By Land and Sea I Leave Ephemeral Spirit*, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney
1992 Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Group Exhibitions

1984 *Koorie Art 84*, Artspace, Sydney; Butchers Exhibit Gallery
1985 Aboriginal Artist Gallery, Melbourne
Aboriginal Artist Gallery, Sydney
1986 *Urban Koories*, Willoughby Workshop Arts Centre
Art Bites, Piers 2 & 3, Walsh Bay, Sydney
1987 *Aboriginal Australian Views in Print and Poster*, Australian Print Council, Melbourne
Boomalli Au-Go-Go, Chippendale, Sydney
1988 *From Pukumanu Poles to Sand Painting*, Craft Centre Gallery, Sydney
1991 *The Concept of Country*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney
1992 *Flash Pictures*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Tyerabbarbowaryaou, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
Crossroads: Towards A New Reality, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, Japan
1993 *Death*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney
RAKA Award, Ian Potter Gallery, University of Melbourne
Yanada (New Moon), Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney
Dream Time, Vigado Gallery, Budapest, Hungary
Aratjara, Dusseldorf; London; Jan Weiss Gallery, New York, USA

Collections

Art Gallery of New South Wales; Queensland Art Gallery; Art Gallery of South Australia; Artbank; Australian National Museum; Darling Downs Institute of Education; Flinders University Collection; Gold Coast Art Gallery; Griffith University; National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; Robert Holmes à Court Collection

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Images

Front cover: *Every Girl Needs Her Golliwog*, 1993
acrylic, red oxide, and PVA glue on canvas
Centre pages: *Lick My Black Art*, 1993
acrylic and oil on canvas
Above: *Too A Black Cock*, 1993
postage stamps, acrylic and black ink on paper

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Fiona Foley: *Lick My Black Art*

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