

Blakness

Blak City Culture!

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art & Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative

Blakness

Blak City Culture!

CURATORS Clare Williamson AND Hetti Perkins

ACCA EXHIBITION DATES 8 October - 6 November 1994

TOURING NATIONALLY 1995-96

Destiny Deacon

Brook Andrew

Joanne Currie

Rea

Peter Noble

Clinton Petersen

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Australian Centre for Contemporary Art



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Visions of Australia aims to inspire new Australian audiences through the presentation of many different visions of our Australian culture and experience. Whether exhibitions are traditional or innovative, conservative or challenging, they all enrich our cultural experience and contribute to the nation's identity, knowledge and creativity.



introduction

by Hetti Perkins

Increasingly, the metropolitan centres of Australia are becoming home to large and lively Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. These urban zones offer greater access to education and employment opportunities, superior public services and proximity to the political strongholds of colonised Australia. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population within these centres are made up of groups of people who identify with particular locations or language groups within or outside of the region and others who have independently gravitated towards the cities.

The centralised urban communities are often stigmatised as 'ghettos' and blighted with infamous and inaccurate reputations as hotbeds of violence and crime and as 'breeding grounds for troublemakers'.¹

While documentaries such as the Redfern-based production of *Cop it Sweet* (ABC-TV, 1992) indicate a gradual improvement in media reportage of urban-based communities, extensive research argues 'that there has been a shift over the last thirty years from stereotypical portrayals of Aboriginal people as "victims" to stereotypical portrayals as "criminals"'.² As *Cop it Sweet* demonstrated to some extent, even if 'trouble' does occur in these areas it is not necessarily precipitated by Aboriginal antagonists. You can't catch a cab after dark but if you drive a flash car it's highly likely you'll be stopped by the police.

Ironically, urban communities have played an instrumental role in establishing health, housing and employment services and initiating community public action which strives for social change and justice.

Our flag/s, which are a symbol of pride and unity for our people, are seen by many others as a threat. For artists, the cities and towns can offer greater access to art schools, exhibiting spaces and critical attention. These locations extend the opportunity for exposure to the spectrum of contemporary art practice and discourse. Yet, it is only in recent years that arts institutions have (generally) begun to

encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists to pursue the development of individual forms of expression through a variety of media. Only recently have established commercial galleries been considered as appropriate venues for displaying and marketing their work. Even later still, state and national galleries and museums have begun to exhibit and acquire work by artists from urban centres. Finally, commentators are actually writing reviews and these are becoming less descriptive and increasingly analytical.

Urban-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists have successfully achieved recognition as active and vital participants in the arena of contemporary arts. However, this has precipitated debate as to the relevance and appropriateness of stating or acknowledging the Aboriginality of the artist - implying that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art practice and contemporary art practice can only operate under separate and distinct criteria. Such constructions contain assimilationist overtones in their implication that contemporary arts practitioners assume a homogeneous, monolithic mass identity. On the other hand, to assume that indigenous artists cannot exhibit together as it restricts the meaning and application of the work and thereby 'ghettoises' the artists is equivalent to racist stereotypes placed on urban communities.

The contemporary realities of indigenous people in this country may not easily be collapsed into reductive and exclusive binary models of remote and urban dwellers. Families and settlements around Australia are as unique as each member of their group. Outside of the urban context exist communities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people whose members lead alternative lifestyles to those familiar to city dwellers but who may often share familial relationships.

Furthermore, underscoring and informing the capacious indigenous contemporary urban experience are pre and post contact histories, written and unwritten. These histories, as varied as they may be, provide a common context for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people - as symbolised by our flag/s. Still, prescriptive notions of Aboriginality based on externally prescribed indicators continue to be used in an attempt to determine difference and disenfranchise the art practice and identities of Kooris, Murris, Nungas and Nyoongahs etc, and particularly those of us with lighter skin.

It is this complex and often contradictory urban environment that is the site for the work of an increasing number of young and/or emerging black artists. **Blakness** postulates the emergence of

Blak City Culture - invented terms using Destiny Deacon's classic reclaiming of the meaning and spelling of the word 'black'.³ Fundamental to Blak City Culture is the assertion and exploration of the possibilities of identity, of **Blakness**. In the manner that Destiny has refigured and redefined the English colonisers' language, so too the artists in this exhibition refigure and redefine their identity.

Blak City Culture is acutely responsive to the pressures and influences of other cultures which operate within civic environments. For instance, the black cultures of the urban centres of North America and Britain have been widely disseminated through various mediums of popular culture such as music (rap, hip hop, Rasta), film (*Boyz N The Hood*, *Do The Right Thing*, *Young Soul Rebels*), literature (Toni Morrison, bell hooks) and fashion. Permeating much of this is a strong political current, whose appeal for the younger members of our communities lies in its universal pro-black emphasis. This is epitomised by the revival of the philosophies of Malcolm X through the film of the same name by Spike Lee and spin-off merchandise like the baseball caps emblazoned with the logo

'X'. The extent to which this has (perhaps regrettably) been commercialised may be indicated by Kylie Minogue's current pursuit of the 'lost half-caste look'.⁴ In Australia, Yolngu band Yothu Yindi have achieved record success with their release of 'Treaty'. How much of this message impregnates the political consciousness of non-black youth beyond being a fashion statement or good dance track is debatable. However, it does present a strategy of empowerment for Black youth in its frank

assertion and celebration of distinctive youth or 'street' cultures.

As Aboriginal artists and writers, such as Marcia Langton, have argued, 'urban Aboriginal "society" and "culture" must be seen as complete, integrated and consistent systems relevant to their members - not merely as a truncated (or castrated) version of any other socio-cultural systems'.⁵ Successfully collaborating with non-Aboriginal curators and organisations, such as Clare Williamson from the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art on **Blakness**, demonstrates the autonomous presence of indigenous culture/s in urban and rural areas. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

artists will not cede to assimilationist pressure which attempts to manipulate their production. In line with the sophisticated nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art practice, our artists maintain a similarly sophisticated attitude that is interventionist rather than oppositional, pragmatic yet never apolitical.

September 1994

Notes

- 1 See Chapter 9 in House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs *Mainly Urban: Report of the Inquiry into the needs of urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people* Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1992
- 2 *ibid.* p.219
- 3 Destiny Deacon made two series of work, titled *Blak like mi*, for the **Kudjeris** exhibition at Boomalli in 1991
- 4 Kylie Minogue interviewed in *THE FACE* 69, 1994
- 5 *Mainly Urban op.cit.* p.214

LANGUAGE GROUP Arrernte.
WHAT ARE YOU READING AT THE MOMENT? Jazz, Toni Morrison. **WHAT MUSIC ARE YOU LISTENING TO?** Nina Simone - Strange Fruit and Wild is the Wind, The Piano (soundtrack) and as always, Dad singing all the Country and Western favourites. **WHAT ARE YOU WATCHING (MOVIES OR TV)?** Cathy of course! (otherwise nothing). I did enjoy the World Cup. **WHAT ARE YOUR FAVOURITE CLOTHES?** I have a childhood phobia about anything handed down, on special or home made. **WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE FOOD?** Nothing I cook and everything Rachel (my sister) cooks. **WHO ARE YOUR FAVOURITE ARTISTS?** Too many to name (and too incriminating) and they know where I live. **QUESTION OF YOUR CHOICE** Q. Who are your role models? A. My grandmothers have always guided me. **ANOTHER QUESTION** Q. Pet hate? A. Hypocrisy.

Hetti Perkins

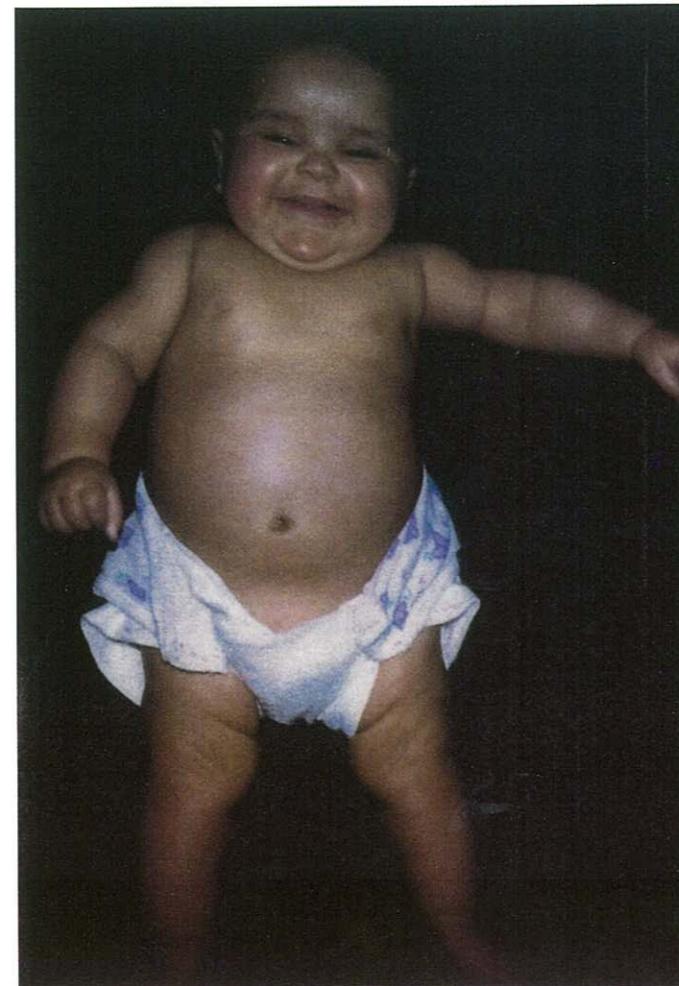
Born 1965, Sydney
Currently living in Sydney



LANGUAGE GROUP Ku-Ku and Meriam people. **WHAT ARE YOU READING AT THE MOMENT?** Blood on whose hands?, Women's Coalition Against Violence, Dissonance: Feminism and the Arts 1970-1990, ed. Catriona Moore. **WHAT MUSIC ARE YOU LISTENING TO?** The soundtrack to 'Once Were Warriors'. **WHAT ARE YOU WATCHING (MOVIES OR TV)?** Videos with coarse language and low level violence, TV talk shows, news and documentaries. Last movies seen: Go Fish (3 out of 5 stars), Once Were Warriors (5 out of 5), Priscilla (3 out of 5). **WHAT ARE YOUR FAVOURITE CLOTHES?** Stuff in the ultra cool posh shops that I can neither fit nor afford. Usually I dress like someone who walks greyhounds. **WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE FOOD?** Cracked lobster (with my special cocktail sauce), a buttered fresh (white) French roll, washed down with a beer (a sure cure from feeling sad). **WHO ARE YOUR FAVOURITE ARTISTS?** Fiona Foley, Tracey Moffatt and Brenda L. Croft.

Destiny Deacon

Born 1957, Maryborough Queensland
Lived in Melbourne since 1959



DESTINY
DEACON

Where do
babies come
from? 1994
Colour laser
copy of
polaroid
photograph

PHOTO
Courtesy
of the artist

LANGUAGE GROUP Wiradjuri **WHAT ARE YOU READING AT THE MOMENT?** Nothing much. After years of Uni and now with my job, I don't get much time to read stuff I want to. I'd rather paint or watch good films. And I'm not doing much of that either. **WHAT MUSIC ARE YOU LISTENING TO?** Tori Amos and the Eagles. Tori Amos because it's the type of music which I consider to be real art. Just the way she composes her tracks, it's inspirational. The Eagles because it brings back the past. The thing I'm just starting to deal with now. Because I noticed that the older I get, the more I want to forget. At this age in my life I'm training myself not to forget but learn. **WHAT ARE YOU WATCHING (MOVIES OR TV)?** I must say that I have never been a sucker to any TV show apart from Dr Who. Nowadays it's just documentaries - the stuff that doesn't rot my brain. **WHAT ARE YOUR FAVOURITE CLOTHES?** Comfortable ones. Mostly the colour blue - sometimes I get in trouble for wearing too much blue. **WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE FOOD?** Simple. I'm sort of over fancy food. I'm still learning to cook myself. I love cooking and end up cooking for everyone else too. Being a vegetarian opens up the door to so many foods - contrary to what people normally think about vegetarianism. **WHO ARE YOUR FAVOURITE ARTISTS?** Rover Thomas and Fred Williams. **QUESTION OF YOUR CHOICE** (I'm on an old rattler train - Sydney to Penrith) Why is the woman behind me justifying 'Gods' power to let so many children starve? The things people talk about on trains. **ANOTHER QUESTION** What is your favourite sex?

Brook Andrew

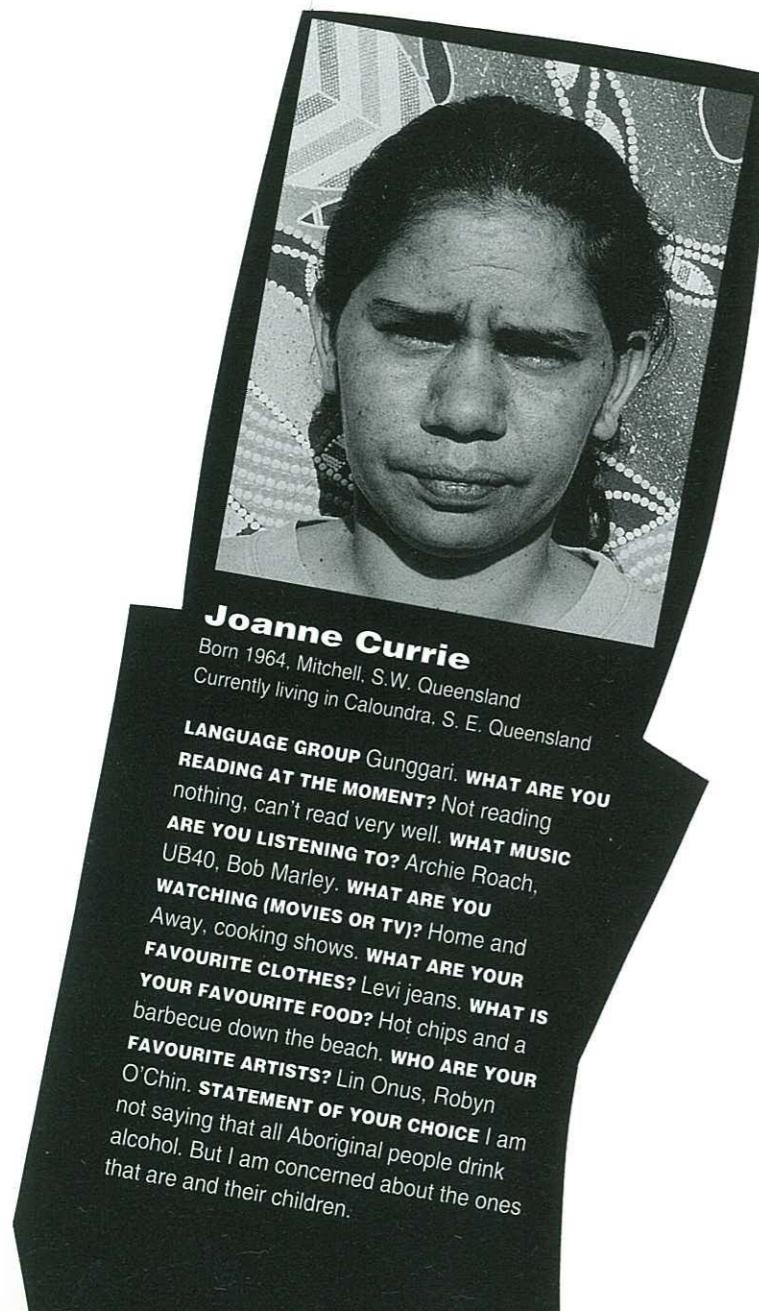
Born 1970, Sydney
Currently living in Penrith, NSW



BROOK ANDREW
Mi(e) Sex
1994 (detail)
Series of ten
C-Type
photographs

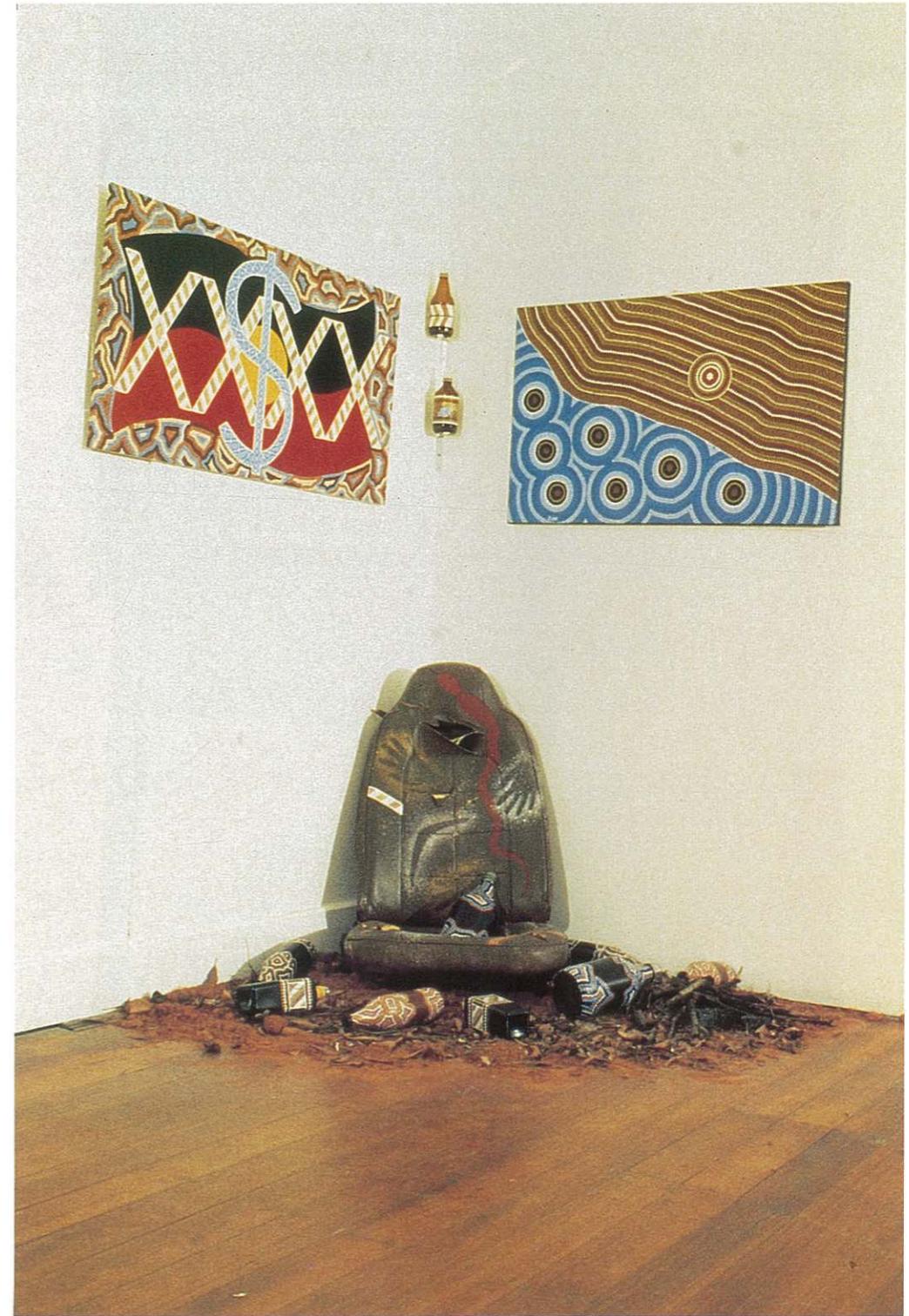
PHOTO
Courtesy
of the artist





JOANNE CURRIE
Drowning in Alcohol 1993
Installation:
car seat,
bottles,
earth and
screenprinted
poster

PHOTO
Mick
Richards



WHAT ARE YOU READING AT THE MOMENT?
Ain't I a Woman: Black Women & Feminism,
bell hooks, THE FACE, Real Time. **WHAT**
MUSIC ARE YOU LISTENING TO? Jazzmatazz
Vol. 1, U2 Zooropa, Sounds of Blackness.
WHAT ARE YOU WATCHING (MOVIES OR TV)?
Go Fish, Cathy Freeman winning GOLD!
WHAT ARE YOUR FAVOURITE CLOTHES?
My second-hand 501s, white linen shirt and
my very groovy linen jacket. **WHAT IS YOUR**
FAVOURITE FOOD? Pizza, pasta and damper.
WHO ARE YOUR FAVOURITE ARTISTS? Lorna
Simpson, Adrian Piper, Emily Kngwarreye,
Ginger Riley, Andy Warhol and Marcel
Duchamp. **QUESTION OF YOUR CHOICE**
Q. What I like to do a lot? A. Going fishing
and sleeping. **ANOTHER QUESTION** Q. What I
don't like about the world? A. I don't like
racist, sexist, homophobic people who can't
deal with differences.

Rea

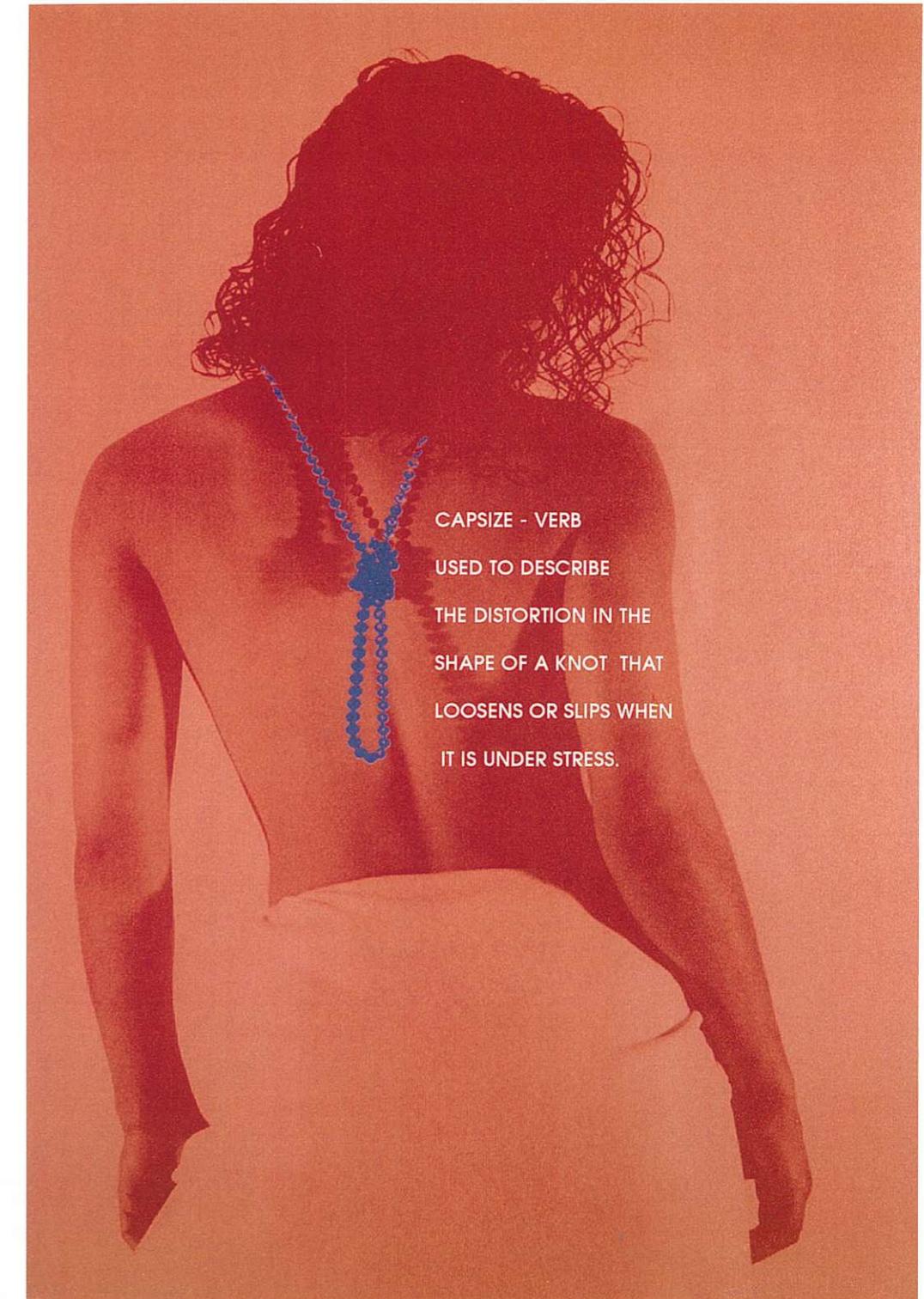
Born 1962, Coonabarabran, NSW
Currently living in Sydney

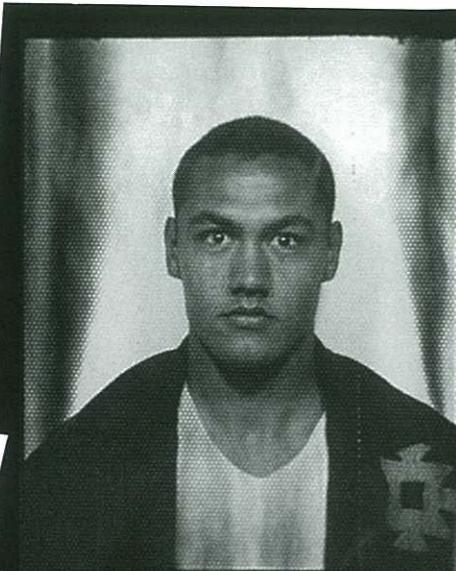


REA
Definitions
of Difference
1994 (detail)
Series of
six computer-
manipulated
C-Type
photographs

PHOTO
Jonathan
Clabburn

CAPSIZE - VERB
USED TO DESCRIBE
THE DISTORTION IN THE
SHAPE OF A KNOT THAT
LOOSENS OR SLIPS WHEN
IT IS UNDER STRESS.





Peter Noble

Born 1970, Gold Coast
Currently living in Sydney

WHAT ARE YOU READING AT THE MOMENT?

Routed by the Resistants, Captain America comic. **WHAT MUSIC ARE YOU LISTENING TO?**

Rein Sanction, Broc's Cabin; Crow, The Helicon Days; Tortoise, Tortoise; Tori Amos, Under the Pink. **WHAT ARE YOU WATCHING**

(MOVIES OR TV)? Kalifornia, Commonwealth Shames Games, Ren and Stimpy. **WHAT ARE**

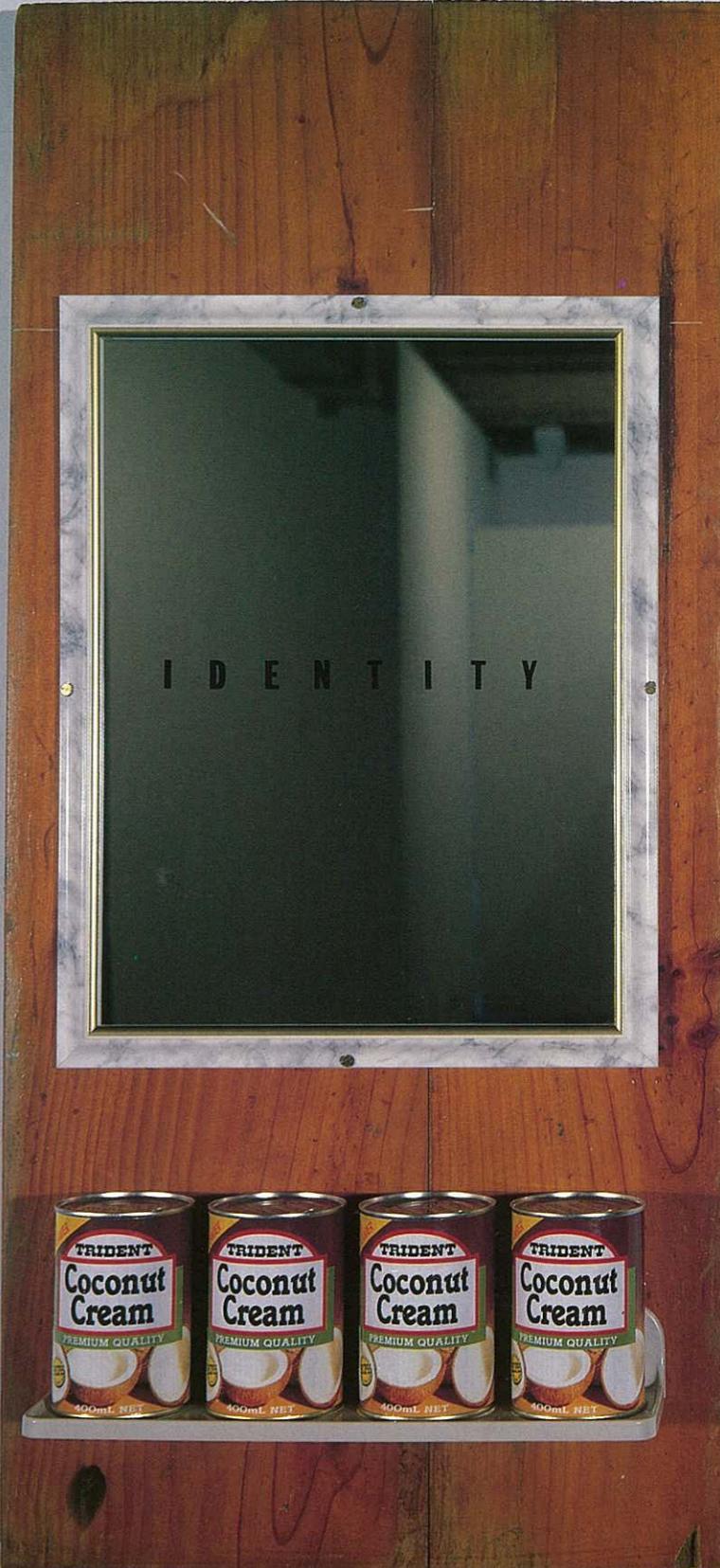
YOUR FAVOURITE CLOTHES? Puma suedes, grandpa cardigan. **WHAT IS YOUR**

FAVOURITE FOOD? Garlic and cheese naan bread. **WHO ARE YOUR FAVOURITE ARTISTS?**

Francis Bacon, Judith Wright, Gordon Bennett, Mats Krüger, Eva Hesse. **QUESTION**

OF YOUR CHOICE Why are videos never rewound when you pick them up from the video store? **ANOTHER QUESTION** Is coconut art valid indigenous expression or is one just jumping on the black art bandwagon?

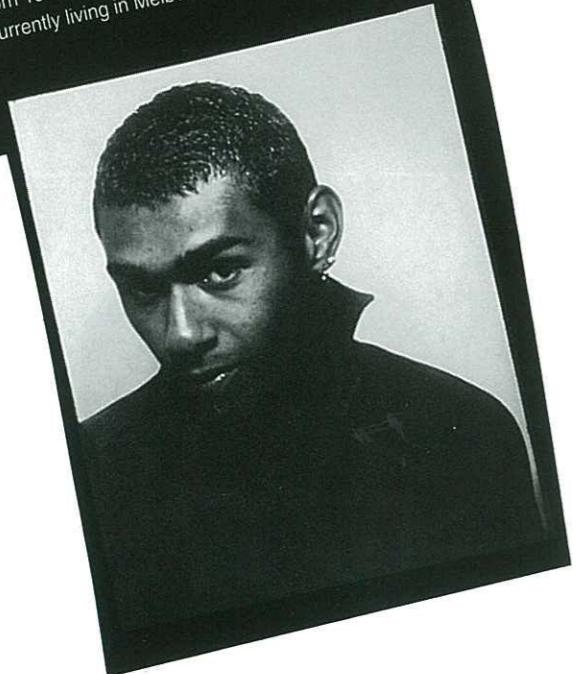
PETER
NOBLE
Reflection/
Introspection
1994
Mixed media
PHOTO
Jonathan
Clabburn



LANGUAGE GROUP Meriam (Torres Strait Islander), Ku-Ku (Aboriginal). **WHAT ARE YOU READING AT THE MOMENT?** The I Hate Madonna Handbook, Ilene Rosenzweig. Queer, William Burroughs. **WHAT MUSIC ARE YOU LISTENING TO?** Club mixes, I like Crystal Waters, Caron Wheeler, Ru Paul, Pauline Henry, Pet Shop Boys: Absolutely Fabulous. **WHAT ARE YOU WATCHING (MOVIES OR TV)?** Denton, NBC Today Show, Oprah Winfrey, Absolutely Fabulous video. **WHAT ARE YOUR FAVOURITE CLOTHES?** A white t-shirt, my underground boots, Calvin Klein underwear. **WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE FOOD?** Fish and rice, bread, pasta, bananas, ice cream, cheese, chocolate and pistachio biscuits, coffee. **WHO ARE YOUR FAVOURITE ARTISTS?** Robert Mapplethorpe, Salvador Dali, Jeff Koons, Georgia O'Keeffe, Destiny Deacon, Frida Kahlo. **QUESTION OF YOUR CHOICE** And I like nice things all arround me. **ANOTHER QUESTION** I also dance, act and model.

Clinton Petersen

Born 1971, Carlton, Melbourne
Currently living in Melbourne



CLINTON
PETERSEN

The Trap
1994 (detail)
Installation:
video,
photograph
and mixed
media

PHOTO
Courtesy
of the artist

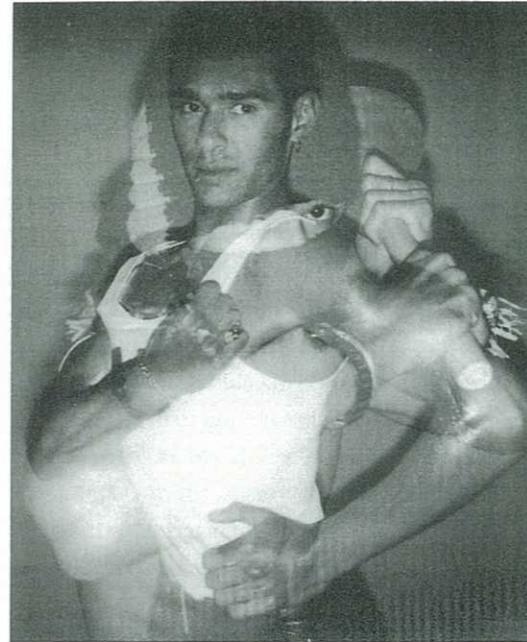
Blakness Blak City Culture!

BY Clare Williamson WITH Hetti Perkins

The moment in which **Blakness: Blak City Culture!** is occurring is one which is worthy of consideration for a number of reasons. Inscribed by the successes and ongoing struggles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it is also marked by Australia's accelerating search for a national identity. In addition, this moment can be gauged as one of great shift within international art practice and theory.

A generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists has emerged in 'the city' during the 1990s, whose presence is attributable largely to the efforts of others before them. College educated, politically aware and sharing a strong cultural identity, Blak* artists are developing new strategies by which to create visibility for Aboriginal people within a social environment in which they have historically been most severely dispossessed. Their assertions of individuality and cultural strength have arisen out of the political activities of Aboriginal people on a mass scale since the 1970s, in particular, the events leading up to white Australia's Bicentennial celebrations in 1988, debate surrounding the introduction of Mabo legislation, and the International Year of Indigenous Peoples in 1993. During these years, Blak artists have been consolidating their position through the establishment of organisations and networks to achieve self-management and representation in the visual arts. As a result, events such as the 1992-93 Sydney Biennale and Australian Perspecta 1993 featured a significant proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists. The fact that many of these artists were city-based indicated mainstream recognition at a national and institutional

DESTINY
DEACON
Worried
Warrior
1994
(detail)
Colour laser
copy of
polaroid
photograph
PHOTO
Courtesy
of the artist



level (building on the critical discourse which had been developing in journals and exhibition catalogues for some time). Blak artists were seen to have 'finally shaken off the "promising newcomer" role'.¹ This overdue acknowledgment of an urban Aboriginal presence and culture is taking place within a social period in which Australia is actively seeking new ways of defining itself. As the republican debate gains momentum, and as Australia prides itself on its diversity and multiculturalism, Aboriginal culture and identity theoretically finds itself in a curious position. Adam Shoemaker describes a 'sort of schizophrenic rhetoric' which defines Australia simultaneously as 'the "world's most ancient continent" and as "a young country"'.² Aboriginal culture is celebrated, but is appropriated and posited as analogous to the backdrops of remote and 'unspoilt' (and tourist inducing) wildernesses of the country it is marketed to represent. Such representation and exploitation further motivates Blak artists to counter with more accurate and balanced images of indigenous identity in all its forms in the 1990s. Within Australia, as in Europe and North America, a number of co-ordinates are shifting on the cultural map. Cornel West defines these global trends as the displacement of European models of high culture, a movement from high to popular culture (specifically American mass culture), and the decolonisation of the third world.³ Within these developments, Blak artists are finding new opportunities and new modes of expression which are both universally current and local-specific. They are conscious of and wise to postmodernism's 'deep and ambivalent fascination with difference',⁴ taking advantage of the opportunities which are created but refusing to speak only in their allotted space or be silenced once more when the agenda shifts. The past decade has witnessed an enormous surge of interest, both nationally and internationally, in Aboriginal art. The scope of this attention, however, has until very recently been limited to so-called

* The term 'Blak', was developed by Destiny Deacon as part of a symbolic but potent strategy of reclaiming colonialist language to create means of self-definition and expression.

traditional works, usually on bark and canvas supports, from Arnhem Land and the Western Desert respectively. This 'classical' Aboriginal art is often not considered by the non-Aboriginal art world in a contemporary sense.⁵ A poignant example of this is the recent decision of the Cologne Art

Fair to deny a place in their next event to a gallery owner on the grounds that the artists who she represents (both urban and remote based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists) are not 'contemporary' (representation was permitted in 1993, the International Year of Indigenous Peoples). Instead, the work was described as 'folk' art, in limbo somewhere between traditional and contemporary.

This treatment of Aboriginal art as the expression of a lost or disappearing culture imbues it with a sense of exotic otherness, as an art which is seen to be passive and non-threatening to the westernised

structures in which it must now operate. Not so urban Aboriginal art, with its use of current visual models, response to international theory and its often highly politicised content. Hence, a tendency to relegate Blak art to a secondary status. Brenda L. Croft quotes a 1991 text which claims that some urban Aboriginal artists 'have undertaken formal art training although none has become a prominent contributor to any of the major tendencies in white Australian art since 1970' and that the arts industry in future 'might expect an increasing contribution from artists mobile between the

cultures...'⁶ Croft asks, '...are we always to be seen as students and never as graduates?'⁷

The artists represented in **Blakness** acknowledge and use as raw material their specific urban environments. Rea has stated, *In the urban culture we're struggling to find the connection with our land and our traditions and each other, and at the same time we're struggling to live in a society, which we weren't given a choice about whether we wanted to live in. But now I'm here, I do have a choice of how I want to live and what I want to do and what I want to say.*⁸

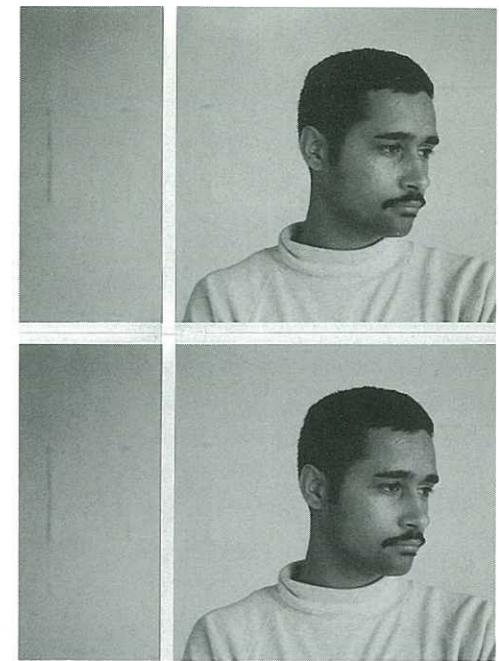
Destiny Deacon has spoken about the voice and the sense of visibility which she has been able to create for herself through her photography. As an urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person, she has often experienced a peculiar sense of invisibility. Through her art practice, she has been shown respect by people who 'wouldn't normally give me the time of day'.⁹ She has also found a means to bring together her immediate personal environment and the history of her people. A 'proud Melbourne girl' (which does not necessarily imply pride of her city and its history), many of her photographs contain sites which are recognisable by her Melbourne viewers and which represent the specific acts of dispossession which have occurred there.

This 'invisibility' which is referred to by Destiny Deacon, along with many other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, is symptomatic of the essentialist notions of an 'authentic' Aboriginal identity which have been promoted by some non-Aboriginal academics and theorists. Ian Anderson, a Muttonbird Koori, now based in Melbourne, says of this tendency, *Invasive cultures not only dispossess people of their land. They must also manage or control remnant indigenous populations. In the pre-federation era this form of power was intertwined with the creation of a particular form of knowledge*

about Aboriginal people. The 'authentic' Aborigine was how the invaders conceived the inhabitants of the other side of the frontier - as the reciprocal 'other' to 'civilised' Europe... Any biological or cultural contamination by the outside world fatally destabilised the existence of authenticity.

*Consequently, the 'authentic' Aborigine was destined to dissolve when confronted by a supposedly superior European culture.*¹⁰

Such theories intensified during the post-war assimilationist decades with their new categories of 'mixed blood', 'urban' or 'non-traditional' Aboriginal people. These attitudes continue to be used today to deny the validity of both urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity and art practice. A number of the artists represented in **Blakness** have recalled the experience of being taught at school about Aboriginal people as half naked 'primitives' who live(d) in the desert or of witnessing Aboriginal people as plaster ornaments in their neighbours' front gardens. Destiny Deacon, whose work revolves around such kitsch representations of Aboriginal people as metaphors for dispossession and discrimination, titled her recent solo exhibition 'My boomerang won't come back'. The title refers to a well-known song of the same name about a young man who is 'a big disgrace to the Aborigine race' because he cannot perform the 'essential' act of being Aboriginal.¹¹ For many, urban indigenous people 'belong to neither race (and are shunned by both), and lacking a racial background they have no history'. As Anderson says of this infamous statement by a historian in the 1970s, the author 'was referring to my families. I read this as a teenager, and it is difficult to describe the feelings this statement evoked. It was something like grieving, but a grieving over a tremendous loss which is in itself then denied as being yours.'¹² The criteria set out in the recent Mabo legislation to determine eligibility for land rights exacerbates these feelings of suspension for urban indigenous people who have been prevented from demonstrating an unbroken association with their tribal lands.



BROOK ANDREW
Mi(e) Sex
1994
(detail)
Series of ten C-Type photographs
PHOTO Courtesy of the artist

To theories of racial purity have been added notions of cultural essentialism, thereby further marginalising the activities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, writers, musicians and performers based in the city and who express themselves through a variety of contemporary media. As Bronwyn Bancroft has said, 'For years we were punished for being black, now we're punished for not being black enough'.¹³ The irony of these criticisms by non-Aboriginal people is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures have always been diverse and constantly in a state of change.

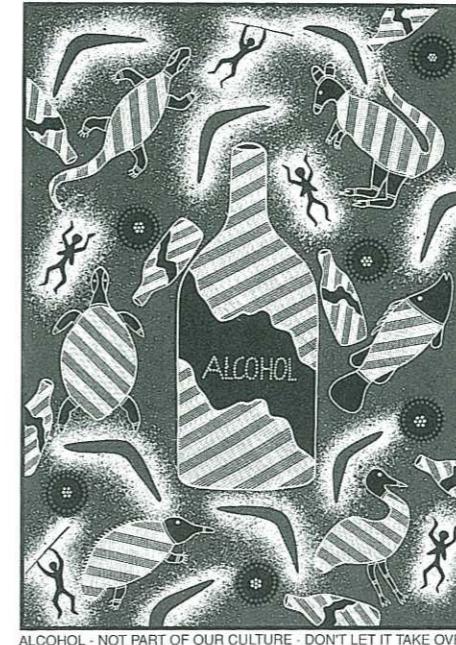
*Many people believe that Aboriginal people once did 'traditional' art and that now people do art that is somehow corrupted, either by use of non-traditional materials or that they are doing it because of 'outside' influences. Contrary to this view, the art of Aboriginal Australia has always been dynamic and changing to reflect people's circumstances. Aboriginal people have always seized opportunities to either express themselves artistically in new ways or for their own ends via art in new situations.*¹⁴

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are increasingly demonstrating that they are not prepared to accept marginal positions or 'hybrid' identities which are prescribed by the dominant non-Aboriginal community. Recently, Brenda L. Croft created a multimedia installation which explored the implications and possibilities of 'hybridity' - one of the catchphrases of the 1990s. As its title suggests, 'Strange Fruit' refuted determinist perceptions of Aboriginality by drawing on the real and assumed identities of herself and her friends. 'With "Hybridity" and "Strange Fruit" it's that notion of sectioning people, collecting them in quadrants and fractions and where you're supposed to fit yourself in, how you're supposed to look, act and feel.'¹⁵ Artists like Croft and those in **Blakness** are discounting the criteria proposed by non-Aboriginal people such as skin colour in determining Aboriginality. 'As Koori people often say: identity is a feeling within and not just the colour of your skin.'¹⁶ Their assertion of personal history, of family and of self-identification is gradually gaining wider acceptance as more accurate criteria than those which inform criticisms that fail to recognise the extreme forms of racism experienced by individuals who are denied their very existence.

*As I am an Aborigine, I inhabit an Aboriginal body, and not a combination of features which may or may not cancel each other. Whatever language I speak, I speak an Aboriginal language, because a lot of Aboriginal people I know speak like me...we need to develop strategies which undermine those forms of representation which deny our ability to develop identities which are both coherent and sustaining.*¹⁷

Destiny Deacon collapses stereotypical views of her identity and culture through strategies of exaggeration and mockery. Destiny's 'Home video' plays along with (and thereby exposes) a whole range of expectations of Aboriginal people. With friends and family, she recreates the stereotypes of the drunk, the bad mother, the criminal, the welfare recipient. The results are hilarious and the joke is on those who hold such stereotypical views. Deacon also regularly draws from her extensive collection of white-produced Aboriginal kitsch (ceramics, ashtrays, paintings on 'black velvet') or casts friends or family in stereotypical black roles such as the noble savage or welcoming islander in her photo-based work. The siting of all of Deacon's work either within her own domestic

JOANNE CURRIE
Drowning in Alcohol 1993 (detail)
Installation:
car seat,
bottles,
earth and
screenprinted
poster
PHOTO
Courtesy of
Inkahoots,
Brisbane



environment in suburban Brunswick or in recognisable public areas of Melbourne further emphasise her own reality and presence as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person in a Euro-dominated city.

Peter Noble has also spoken of the desire to express his own reality rather than one expected

of him by others. Born and raised on Queensland's Gold Coast and now living in Sydney, he is conscious of the inappropriateness of adopting an art practice which replicates the traditional styles that are generally accepted as being 'authentic'. Brook Andrew has previously produced works which manipulate non-Aboriginal reverence for artworks which embody the exoticness of 'traditional' culture. In 1993, he created 'Black Words I', a text piece which was signed 'Naraga Yarmbul Bungle-guru-guru'. Believing this to be the work of a tribal elder or to signify a title of great spiritual significance, many white viewers fell victim to their own stereotypical expectations (the actual translation of the supposed artist's name reads 'Crazy lie all over the place').

The artists' answers to the series of questions posed to each of them by the curators further reveal the absurdity of essentialist notions of Aboriginal culture as surviving 'untainted' by other influences (refer artists pages in this catalogue). Influences such as Eva Hesse and Robert Mapplethorpe together with Emily Kngwarreye and Rover Thomas, and interests in U2, Archie Roach, THE FACE, 'Home and Away' and 'Dr Who' indicate the artists' immersion in a diversity of cultures, both high and popular, while retaining a distinct sense of their Aboriginality.

The concept of 'Aboriginality' itself has, of course, only existed since European settlement. It is a construct used to homogenise the many indigenous nations which resided in Australia into a single 'other'. Koori, Murri, Nyoongah, Nunga and other urban-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists are today responding emphatically to post-colonial assumptions of Aboriginality and authenticity, denying racist essentialism and becoming a powerful force in contemporary

Australian art. Rea states her position thus: *It doesn't really matter what anybody else really says or thinks because I'm speaking for myself. These are my opinions and feelings on how this white patriarchal society has committed genocide and ethnocide. This society continues to do so in less obvious ways, one of these ways is how I am categorised as 'the other'.*¹⁸

Blak artists and academics have developed their own symbols of Aboriginality or 'Blakness' to counter those created by non-Aboriginal people and perpetuated through mainstream vehicles such as film and television. Marcia Langton describes these images as 'safe, distant distortions of an actual world of people who will not bring down the neighbourhood real estate values'. They have not been developed from actual experiences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people but from relationships 'between white Australians and the symbols created by their predecessors...

"Aboriginality", therefore, is a field of intersubjectivity in that it is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation.¹⁹ This dialogue is changing as more Aboriginal people enter the exchange and add their own voices. In this situation, each party will 'test imagined models of the other, repeatedly adjusting the models as the responses are processed, to find some satisfactory way of comprehending the other'.²⁰

The term 'Blakness' represents these strategies of self-determination and self-representation by indigenous people. Images of the 'self' figure strongly in this exhibition, using varied processes of the city: photography (including polaroids and booth photos), video, photocopy, computer-generated images. Destiny Deacon has said of the value of photography as a means of self-representation for Koori people, 'It's exciting opening that fat envelope of moments caught. Snaps of history. Documents proving: "I was there!" Kooris will spend their last cracker getting photos developed from the Chemist.'²¹ Financial resources and educational opportunities have often come between Aboriginal people and artistic expression. While still involving costs, processes such as polaroid photography, booth photos and photocopying are providing means of visual expression without the need of studio or darkroom.

Photography is white people's invention. Lots of things seem really technical, for example the camera and the darkroom. Plus it's expensive. Plus I think it's not fair that only white people should be the only ones who can do 'photography'. I've started taking the sort of pictures I do because I can't paint... and then I discovered it was a good way of expressing some feelings that lurk inside.

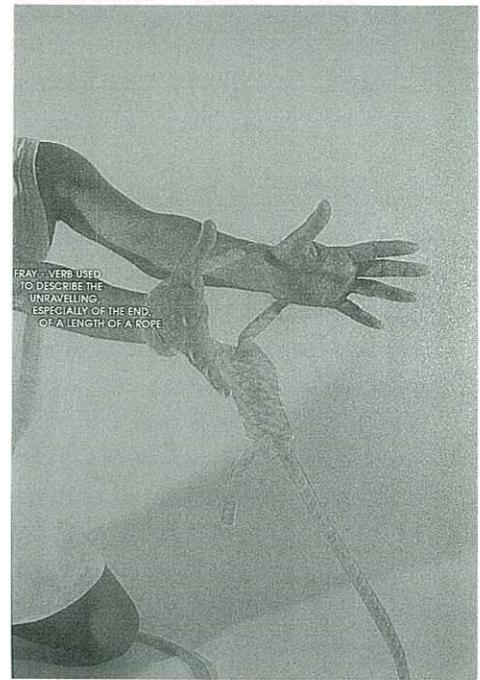
*Taking pictures is hard yakka for me.*²²

Blak artists are increasingly expressing these 'feelings that lurk inside' rather than producing work which, by obligation or expectation, somehow represents pan-Aboriginal culture. As Michele Wallace has pointed out, such constraints are generally set by the dominant culture which assumes that the first task of any 'minority' culture 'should be to "uplift the race", or to salvage the denigrated image of blacks... As a consequence, judgements...tend to circulate around the failure or success of this usually explicit project.'²³ Darlene Johnson has also warned of the dangers of tokenism, in which

'the token Aboriginal person is expected to speak on behalf of the entire Aboriginal nation and risks reinscribing the position and the structure of the dominated.'²⁴

Brook Andrew subverts expectations of his Aboriginal viewers as much as white audiences through his celebrations of diverse sexual identities. His friends, who he uses as models, are complicit in his strategy, dressing up, acting up, and often adopting an 'in your face' stance which is both joyful and provocative. At other times, Andrew presents more intimate or 'everyday' portraits of his subjects, which themselves expose the stereotyping inherent in mainstream images of gay men as constantly outrageous or flamboyant (as though their lives are spent permanently within a Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade). A doubly defined sense of (gay and black) 'pride' has been evoked in previous works by Andrew such as 'Survey this, baby!', a photograph of a group of Koori friends in drag 'camping it up' on a median strip in Sydney. The fact that one of Andrew's friends depicted in this photograph has since died of AIDS reveals the serious undertones of such images and the courage expressed by their subjects in asserting their identities. By siting his models in recognisable public spaces as well as in the studio, Andrew asserts the defiant presence of a complex diversity of Blak individuals within the urban environment.

Rea also explores issues of sexuality together with the representation of the black female body. Rather than feeling compelled to always speak on behalf of Aboriginal people, she finds that she 'steps in and out of different aspects of my identity',²⁵ which may be inscribed by her ethnicity, gender or sexuality, to produce works which deal with a particular issue. '...it doesn't really matter if a black or white or red person didn't like my work... My work is about me having a voice, and having a right to speak, and not being affected by those people who say that you can't do this and you can't do that.'²⁶ Such positions defy the one-dimensionality of Aboriginal identity which is often



REA
Definitions
of Difference
1994 (detail)
Series of six
computer-
manipulated
C-Type
photographs
PHOTO
Jonathan
Clabburn

imposed from without. There is an assumption that Aboriginal artists deal always and only with their Aboriginality, and that if they do not, their work is not 'Aboriginal art'.

As human beings we need to eat, to experience emotion, to find relief for distress. How we are propelled through life is shaped by our sense of a changing world, by our symbolic life and by an experience of being able to mobilise resources. Yet in the ethnographic context, this widespread and contemporary Aboriginal experience is portrayed only as a titanic struggle between the opposing black and white bits.²⁷

These assertions of the rights to express a broad range of issues and ideas does not discount the ongoing desire to communicate in particular with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. These artists are conscious of the power of artistic expression to pass on to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people feelings of pride and strength in their identity. Peter Noble's works often contain 'inside jokes' or messages for Aboriginal viewers through specific symbols or phrases which may not be recognisable to non-Aboriginal audiences. For example, he shares with Murri

artist Richard Bell a suspicion of a 'dot conspiracy' operating within Australia. Rea draws on glamorous representations of black women in the mainstream media to produce works which will be interpreted differently by Aboriginal women than they will by other viewers. The inclusion of a mirror within her sculptural piece, 'Black Box' (which also contains images of Rea's family and bottles representing social ills such as alcoholism, trachoma and deaths in custody), transforms the nature of the work by incorporating the viewer in the piece itself.

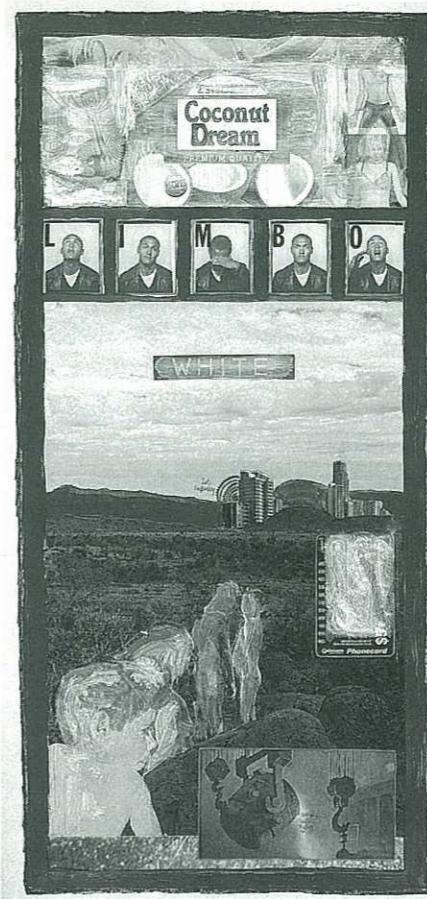
Clinton Petersen's installation, with its depiction of a judge's wig within a sea of crumpets, conveys particular resonance and enjoyment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewers, and plays

upon the reverence which is shown towards indigenous ceremonial regalia. Joanne Currie's installation, 'Drowning in Alcohol', contains a powerful and direct message to Aboriginal people in particular (although aimed at white viewers also) about the effects of alcohol abuse on family life.

As she states, 'I am not saying all Aboriginal people drink alcohol. But I am concerned about the ones that are and their children' (refer artists' pages).

Issues of gender and sexuality, such as those explored by Rea, Destiny Deacon and Brook Andrew, cut neatly across any binary divisions predicated on race. Black women in particular appear to fall outside these constructs which establish oppositions of black-white and male-female. Rea points out that Aboriginal women were invisible within the white male produced documentaries about Aboriginal culture and that they have since emerged, first thanks to feminist filmmakers in the 1970s and now to Aboriginal women themselves.²⁸ Rea's series 'Definitions of Difference' deals with the invisibility of the black female body and examines roles and appearances which women in general are expected to assume. Images of a black woman's neck, arms and legs are presented individually, each bound into positions either by items of women's clothing or by the symbolically loaded hangman's noose. Each image includes lines of text, for example, 'Capsize - Verb used to describe the distortion in the shape of a knot that loosens or slips when it is under stress'.

PETER
NOBLE
Coconut
Dream
1994
Collage
PHOTO
Jonathan
Claburn



The nature of this text as almost incidental to the image symbolises the irony of the development of such serious work out of the artist's interest in fishing and knots. As Rea explains, the associations between rope, knots and oppression were automatic for her because she is a black woman. While Rea does not discount these works' obvious references to Aboriginal deaths in custody, they go beyond this one interpretation to examine a complex range of issues surrounding the positioning of black women within contemporary urban society. 'I'm focussing on the deaths of black women in custody because nobody really talks about women. I feel that

society traps black women as domestic, servant and slave and that to be trapped you don't have to go to jail.'²⁹

Much of Destiny Deacon's work also deals with representations of black women. By stereotyping images of black women as Venus Half Caste (taken from 1950s popular fiction), as 'black velvet' or as little black doll, and by placing herself or her friends in the picture, she disables the power that these images have previously had in defining white views of black women. Destiny 'denies the aural, sexual and colonialist conquest...She makes impotent the white male fantasy of "black velvet"'.³⁰

In 1993, Brook Andrew produced 'White Words I', a diptych of vinyl lettering on large panels of white and black velvet which read, in repeating sequences, 'White words' and 'Coon' respectively. These artists are gradually feeling empowered to talk about these issues which have previously been too painful or too shameful to express.

The use of non-traditional materials and processes by the artists in this exhibition is relevant to the contemporary and global nature of their work. By adopting Western and Japanese technology or using current 'mainstream' art forms such as installation, video or performance, Blak artists are able to play upon dominant structures through replication and parody. The products of large multinational computer and photographic industries become sites for resistance. Clinton Petersen's short video which records a friend re-enacting a curious suburban ritual which he once witnessed (a neighbour emerged from her garage and proceeded to varnish with a spray can a tribal 'artefact') mimics western documentaries of the exotic lives of 'natives'. Destiny Deacon's laser copied photographs and videos and Rea's computer-generated images make use of their form as much as their content to speak about mainstream representations of black women. Joanne Currie successfully brings together contemporary forms of installation with traditional materials to convey a potent message about alcohol abuse. Her work's combination of found and introduced objects (car seat, beer bottles) with indigenous elements (ochres, red earth, painting) resonates with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences.

The political power of much of this work rests with the fact that it communicates through means other than didacticism or antagonism. Rather than overtly confront or provoke their audiences, the artists in **Blakness** use strategies of humour and references to popular culture to engage viewers on a personal level. Destiny Deacon's humour is particularly 'Blak'. The initial lightness and accessibility of her images invite the viewer to draw close. It is at that moment that the disturbing undertones of violence, sexual threat, isolation and injustice come into effect, hitting the viewer squarely in the eye (and reverberating deeper within). 'I take G-rated photographs', she says; their themes and topics, however, are more often PG or M-rated.³¹ A healthy dose of irreverence also informs much of this work. Clinton Petersen's installation alludes to a representative of

Australia's legal system as 'Crumpet Head' and surrounds him with plastic Mickey Mouse ears. Brook Andrew also takes the 'Mickey' out of white expectations of Aboriginal culture as rarefied and safely removed from daily experience with his word plays and with his large photographic images of Koori friends acting (and camping) up before the camera.

Blak artists are creatively sidestepping the 'endism' of art practice and critical theory which has come out of the art world centres during the past two decades. Combining innovative form with powerful content, their work denies the premise that art has lost its ability to speak, to move, to excite. While their practices reveal a knowing engagement with feminist, postcolonial and poststructuralist theories, they move beyond these to critique the institutions of production and reception themselves and reaffirm the potency of the personal and the particular. Refusing to operate within the margins constructed by the Centre ('white spaces for black people'³²), or play the role of 'a touch of ethnicity, a taste of the exotic... "a bit of the other"',³³ Blak artists are claiming new territories which are self-defined. Cecilia Cmielewski's description of Destiny Deacon's art applies equally well to the

six artists represented in **Blakness**: '[Their work] intervenes (in all the right places), humours, resists, celebrates, mimics, makes cultural ambiguity less opaque and allows the gap to slide.'³⁴ The location of this work between high art and popular culture, together with its rich diversity of subject matter, denies any imposed notions of essentialism and demonstrates the vitality of contemporary urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. *Aboriginal art today is a success story of the first order. Aboriginal artists demonstrate through their work that they are not victims of the 'art machine' or of post-colonial exploitation. Rather, they are actively dealing with their surroundings through means of their cultural heritage.*³⁵

September 1994

Notes

- 1 Vivien Johnson, 'The Unbounded Biennale: Contemporary Aboriginal Art', *Art and Australia* 31 (1), Spring 1993, p. 50
- 2 Adam Shoemaker, 'Selling Yothu Yindi', *Republica*, ed. by George Papadellianis, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1994, p. 24
- 3 Stuart Hall, 'What is this "Black" in Black Popular Culture?', in Michele Wallace and Gina Dent, eds., *Black Popular Culture*. Bay Press, Seattle, 1992, p. 21
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 Djon Mundine, 'Spot the Primitive', *Art Monthly* 56, Dec-Feb 1992-93 (Special Aboriginal Supplement), p. 5
- 6 Quoted in Brenda L. Croft, 'A very brief bit of an overview of the Aboriginal Arts/cultural industry by a sort of renegade, or The cultural correctness of certain issues', *Art Monthly* 56, Dec-Feb 1992-93 (Special Aboriginal Supplement), p. 22
- 7 Brenda L. Croft, *ibid.*
- 8 Rea, 'A change is gonna come', interview by Sandra Phillips, in *Racism, Representation and Photography*, Inner City Education Centre, Sydney, 1994, p. 101
- 9 Destiny Deacon, public lecture, RMIT Union Arts (in memory of John Monogios), 2 September 1994
- 10 Ian Anderson, 'Re-claiming Tru-ger-nan-ner: decolonising the symbol', *Art Monthly* 66, Dec-Feb 1993-94, pp. 10-11
- 11 Virginia Fraser, catalogue essay, Destiny Deacon, *My boomerang won't come back*, Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide, May 1994
- 12 Ian Anderson, 'Black bit, white bit', *Republica*, *op. cit.*, p. 117
- 13 Bronwyn Bancroft, quoted in Hetti Perkins, 'Seeing and seaming: Contemporary Aboriginal Art', *Art Monthly* 66, Dec-Feb 1993-94, p. 24
- 14 Francesca Alberts, 'Aboriginal Art, Artistic Aboriginals: Where is the Dilemma?', *Periphery* 19, May 1994, p. 18
- 15 Brenda L. Croft, 'Strange Fruit', interview by Hetti Perkins and Billy Crawford, *The Performance Space*, 2, Winter 1994, p. 7.
- 16 Ian Anderson, 'Reclaiming Tru-ger-nan-ner', *op. cit.*, p. 13



CLINTON PETERSEN
The Trap
1994 (detail)
Installation:
video,
photograph
and mixed
media
PHOTO
Courtesy
of the artist



Clare Williamson

Born 1962, Brisbane
Currently living in Melbourne

WHAT ARE YOU READING AT THE MOMENT? Modern Nature, Derek Jarman; The Volcano Lover, Susan Sontag; the Saturday papers. **WHAT MUSIC ARE YOU LISTENING TO?** Salt n Pepa, Sisters Underground, Falling Joys, Flicker, Blur, Dawn Penn, Bach, Telemann.

WHAT ARE YOU WATCHING (MOVIES OR TV)? Video Hits, Review, documentaries, Tales of the City, Essendon matches, Man O Man (Tuesday nights are a void since the end of Melrose Place). **WHAT ARE YOUR FAVOURITE CLOTHES?**

501s, black lace-up Blundstones, 'Private Idaho' jacket, Marcs T-shirts. **WHAT IS**

YOUR FAVOURITE FOOD? Sushi, prawns, Thai chicken, Chinotto (not all together). **WHO ARE YOUR FAVOURITE ARTISTS?** Unprofessional to mention the contemporaries.

Mantegna, Piero della Francesca, Helen Levitt, Robert Frank.

17 Ian Anderson 'Black bit, white bit', *op. cit.*, pp. 121- 122 **18** Rea, *op. cit.*, p. 101 **19** Marcia Langton, *Well, I heard it on the radio, and I saw it on the television...*, Australian Film Commission, Sydney, 1993, p. 33 **20** *ibid.*, p. 35 **21** Destiny Deacon, artist's statement, *Caste-Offs*, exhibition, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, July 1993 **22** *ibid.* **23** Michele Wallace, quoted in Marcia Langton, *op. cit.*, p. 41 **24** Darlene Johnson, 'Aboriginality and the Politics of Representation', *Photofile* 40, Nov 1993, p. 34 **25** Rea, in conversation with Clare Williamson, 5 September 1994 **26** Rea, *op. cit.*, p. 109 **27** Ian Anderson, 'Black bit, white bit', *op. cit.*, p. 121 **28** Rea, 'Mirror - Mirror', paper presented at Artists Week, Adelaide Festival, February 1994 (unpublished) **29** Rea, 'A change is gonna come', *op. cit.*, p. 109 **30** Marcia Langton, *op. cit.*, p. 51 **31** Virginia Fraser, exhibition catalogue, *My boomerang won't come back*, *op. cit.* **32** Hetti Perkins, *Wiyana/Perisferia (Periphery)*, exhibition, Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative at the Performance Space, Sydney, 1992 (9th Biennale of Sydney Satellite event), p. 6 **33** Stuart Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 23 **34** Cecilia Cmielewski, 'My boomerang won't come back', review, *Photofile* 42, June 1994, p. 43 **35** Francesca Alberts, *op. cit.*, p. 19