

ABORIGINAL STUDIES ASSOCIATION PRESENTS



Reading Art as Historic Text

What you might do at the Yiribana Gallery

by

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Note, May 2020: Though the Yiribana gallery's collection of Aboriginal art is currently not accessible due to the closure of the Art Gallery of NSW as a public health measure during the Covid19 pandemic, this article is intended to assist teachers introduce students to some of the wonderful art in this collection. Hopefully, before too long, the gallery will again be open, and they will once again be able to experience these works more immediately.

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Aboriginal art is a form of *text* that, in the first place, offers deep insights into Aboriginal belief and spirituality.

Indeed, any visitor to the wonderful Yiribana collection at the Art Gallery of New South Wales cannot help but be struck by the deep attachment Aboriginal people from every part of Australia have formed with the land over many thousands of years. Though the display change from time to time, on any visit to the gallery, work after work quietly but emphatically asserts: *The Land is My Mother*.

However, much Aboriginal art is also a form of *historic text* --- the preferred medium of many Aboriginal people for giving their perspective on the history shared by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in this country since the end of the 18th Century - that often confronting history of cross cultural interaction that is at the core of the contemporary Australian identity.

Impossible to avoid in the current display, though not immediately apparent on entering Yiribana, is Jason Wing's brooding 2013 sculpture, *Captain James Crook*.¹

Hopefully this exhibit will remain on display throughout 2020, the 250th anniversary of Cook's arrival on the east coast of Australia and his landing at Botany Bay in April 1770 -- the event that has long been embedded in the public imagination as the foundation event of contemporary Australia.



Captain James Crook (Jason Wing, 2013)

Wing's portrayal of Cook as *Crook* is foreboding and ominous and clearly meant to emphasise his responsibility for the theft of Aboriginal land --- and the *mugging* of Aboriginal people. Thus, *Crook's* face is masked and threatening --- depicting

¹ Wing (b.1977) is a Biripi man. *Captain James Crook* was purchased in 2019 with funds provided by the AGNSW's Aboriginal collective Benefactors Group. The image shown is courtesy of the National Art Gallery of Australia.

him more like a criminal intruder or terrorist than the benign founding father of the nation that he is usually represented to be.

Wing says that his sculpture is not intended to discredit Cook the person. But it clearly shows him as a symbol of colonisation that challenges the dominant and persistently popular narrative, long promoted in school curriculum and resources (and deeply embedded in the collective consciousness) of the peaceful British settlement of a land that was *terra nullius*.

Teachers wanting to follow up this Aboriginal perspective on Cook might encourage their students to compare it with the iconic Emanuel Phillips Fox painting, *The Landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay* (1902) that was painted as a celebration of the actual foundation of the Australian nation at Federation in 1901; and with the parody of that work by Aboriginal artist, Daniel Boyd, in *We Call Them Pirates Out Here* (2006).²

Two other works currently being exhibited at Yiribana that demonstrate the deep fault line and shaky ground between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives of Australia's shared history are Richard Bell's *Pay the Rent* (2009) and Judy Watson's *Deadly Bloom*.³

Despite their distinctly different styles both these artists use their art to provide a confronting perspective on the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians

² Emanuel Phillips Fox (1865-1915) was a prominent artist in Australia in the late colonial, early post colonial era. Daniel Boyd is a contemporary Aboriginal artist born in Cairns in 1982). The source of all works cited are listed at the end of this article

³ Bell (b.1953) is a Kamilaroi man from the Northern Rivers region of NSW. Watson (b.1959) is a Waanyi woman from the gulf of Carpentaria region in Queensland

Bell is an urban Aboriginal artist whose striking political art has provided comment on the colonial and post-colonial relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians for several decades. *Pay the Rent* is a blunt but justifiable assertion that that relationship has left a huge debt owed by the *colonisers* to the *colonised* --- a debt that has yet to be paid.



Pay the Rent (Richard Bell; 2009)⁴

Watson's *Deadly Bloom* was in part inspired by her interest in environmental issues when a red algae bloom developed in Sydney Harbour in the 1990s.

For Watson that evoked subconscious memories of other events where the waters also ran red — events associated with the brutal 19th Century whaling industry and the sites of Aboriginal massacres throughout the colonial era.

It is this colonial history that seeps down and is then expressed in her art.



Deadly Bloom (Judy Watson; 1997)⁵

⁴ *Pay the Rent* is a synthetic polymer on canvas purchased by the AGNSW in 2010. Copyright requests Milani Gallery Brisbane.

⁵ Watson (b.1959) is a Waanyi woman from the gulf of Carpentaria region in Queensland. *Deadly Bloom*, a pigment and pastel work on paper- gift of Amanda Love, donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gift Program. Copyright Judy Watson. Reproduction AGNSW)

This *seeping down* of history is clearly evident in other works on display at Yiribana that point to particular examples of the violent and bloody history to which Wing, Bell and Watson allude.

Mistake Creek Massacre (2000), a collaboration by Timmy Timms and his sister Peggy Patrick⁶, depicts a boab tree at the site of a massacre (possibly several massacres) alleged to have taken place in 1915 near Wyndham in the Kimberleys.



Mistake Creek Massacre
(Timmy Timms and Peggy Patrick; 2000)

Other Aboriginal artists, including Paddy Bedford, Queenie McKenzie and Rover Thomas, have depicted similar incidents around that time in the area and there is some confirmation, at least in part, in police reports. Thus, Aboriginal art and the oral accounts that typically accompany it, is sometimes definitely *historic text* that can complement and affirm more conventional historical records.

⁶ Timms (1915-2000) and Patrick (b. 1928) are Jija (or Kitja) people from the Kimberleys in Western Australia. *Mistake Creek Massacre* is done in natural pigments on a linen canvas. Copyright for the work is ©Timmy Timms, Warmun arts Centre, WA

However, in the early 2000s there was a reaction against the use of art to document the allegations of massacres in the Kimberleys. This demonstrated how, when this Aboriginal *text* is controversial and *contests* the accounts provided in more conventional non-Aboriginal written sources, it can be dismissed as unreliable. However, teachers should encourage their students to engage in this *contest* for such contestation is essential to developing higher order skills in critical analysis and evaluation, necessary skills for History and many other disciplines.

Timms' explanation of *Mistake Creek Massacre* was first published in the catalogue that accompanied its first showing in 2002 in the *Blood on the Spinifex* Exhibition at the Ian Potter Gallery in the University of Melbourne. In it he suggests that at least 8 Aboriginal people were killed in retribution for their slaughtering of a bullock on the cattle station that had been established on their land less than 50 years earlier --- their killing of the bullock an example, more than a century ago, of Bell's suggestion that the coloniser's must *Pay the Rent*.

But Timms' explanation does not shy away from the complexity of the cross cultural relationship for it also pointed to the complicity of at least one Aboriginal station worker with the white station manager in the killings. As well, he details a relatively sympathetic police response, suggesting that the police were horrified by what had been done and determined to bring those responsible to justice.⁷

Though this would appear to be an even-handed recount of the events of 1915 it became the subject of dispute during the *Culture Wars* of the early 2000s after the Aboriginal version of what happened became more widely known when it was supported by the Governor General of the time, Sir William Deane. Further publicity had also come after the Catholic Sisters of Joseph, who had worked in the Kimberleys for many years, erected a small monument near the boab tree and began conducting an annual service on All Souls Day to mourn and pray for the dead.⁸

A number of conservative commentators including Keith Windschuttle, Tom Switzer, Miranda Devine, Paul Sheehan and others responded in the media. They maintained that the killings had resulted from a tribal dispute after a woman had

⁷ Tony Oliver, *Blood on the Spinifex*, (Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne. 2002)

⁸ All Souls Day occurs on November 2nd, the day after All saints day in the Christian liturgical calendar

left her husband for another man and that no non-Aboriginal people had been involved.⁹

Where is the truth in all this? Without further research I can't be sure. But using Aboriginal art as *historic text* gives teachers and students another perspective and much to get their teeth into. Not least, the way in which the medium used to recount History can privilege some views over others. This is a topic that would repay considerable research.

Wally Wilfred's *Dhyakiyarr Vs the King* (2018) is another example of Aboriginal art as *historic text* but it does not fully relate the significance of the event it depicts and its interpretation demands further research by teachers and students.¹⁰



Dhyakiyarr Vs the King (Wally Wilfred;2018)
(image by author)

Dhyakiyarr Vs the King (Wally Wilfred 2018)¹¹

It shows a police party bringing Dhyakiyarr and several other men in chains from Arnhem Land to Darwin in 1933 to stand trial for several murders at Blue Mud

⁹ See Windschuttle, *Manne Vs Free Speech* (*Quadrant*, 19th September, 2011). Accessible online at: <https://quadrant.org.au/opinion/qed/2011/09/manne-vs-free-speech/>

¹⁰ A good starting point is Mickey Dewar's entry on Dhyakiyarr Wirrpanda in the Australian Dictionary of Biography - <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/dhakiyarr-wirrpanda-12885>

¹¹ Wilfred (b.1958) is a Wagilak speaker from south-east Arnhem Land. *Dhyakiyarr Vs the King*, a synthetic polymer paint on multi-piece wood sculpture was purchased by the AGNSW in 2019 with funds provided by Vicki Olson. The name *Dhyakiarris* also written as *Tuckiar*

Bay. Eastern Arnhem Land at that time was a place where very few non-Aboriginal people ventured and, for those who did, disputes with the local Aboriginal people were not uncommon.

In September 1932 several Japanese trepangers were killed in a clash and, in mid-1933, two white fishermen were also killed near Woodah Island in Blue Mud Bay, south of Yirrkala. Aboriginal accounts suggested that all these killings were in response to threats and aggression, including the mistreatment of Aboriginal women, by those who were killed.

However, when reports of what had happened got back to Roper River, the nearest white settlement, a police party was sent out to investigate and bring the alleged murderers back to Darwin to stand trial. The police first arrested several women, including Dhyakiarr's wife, Djarri, on Woodah Island. Seeing this, Dhyakiarr¹² laid an ambush and, after being shot at several times, he speared and killed the police constable, Albert Stewart McColl, who had arrested his wife. The fact that McColl was alone with her led to accusations, later retracted, that he had raped her.

When news of McColl's death reached Darwin a lynch mentality quickly emerged and a police punitive expedition was planned. Fortunately, this was prevented by the lobbying of church and humanitarian groups in Sydney and Melbourne. Nevertheless, Dhyakiarr and 3 others were persuaded to surrender and brought back to Darwin for trial.

However, they did not walk under police guard, as shown in Wilfred's sculpture. In fact, they were brought to Darwin by boat by the Rev. A. J. Dyer, a Methodist missionary, who with others, had organised a Church Missionary Society *Peace Expedition* to circumvent the plans for a police punitive expedition and a possible massacre.

Nevertheless, when the trial went ahead all those who had voluntarily surrendered to Dyer were found guilty of murder. Dhyakiarr was sentenced to death and the other three accused to 20 years in gaol. However, further intense lobbying by Dyer and his colleagues in church and humanitarian groups in the south saw the case taken to the Supreme Court. This resulted in the original verdicts being overturned and all the accused were pardoned and released.

¹² The name *Dhyakiarr* is also often written as *Tuckiar*

Dhyakiyarr then set out to walk back to his home in east Arnhem Land. But he disappeared and was never seen again. Some accounts suggest that he was followed and killed by an Aboriginal tracker.

Clearly there is a need to remember that any historic text can be misleading and all historic text must be critically analysed and evaluated. Wilfred's art is a reminder of terrible events but there is much value in researching this incident in detail so that the authenticity of his *text* can be genuinely evaluated.

A final work currently on display at Yiribana that should be of interest to teachers and students of Aboriginal studies is Vincent Namatjira's *Studio Self Portrait*.¹³



Studio Self Portrait (Vincent Namatjira, 2018)

This is a far more playful work than others discussed in this article but it too demonstrates the importance of cultural and historical influences in Aboriginal art.

¹³ Vincent Namatjira (b. 1983) is a Western Arrente man from Central Australia.

Namatjira describes the work as showing him *sitting and thinking after a hard day's painting*. He explains how listening to music helps him when he paints and how he might often listen to *country, gospel or 'inma' (cultural songs in language)*. But on this particular day, he says he thought he must have been listening to rock and roll. Hence the Kiss tee shirt he is wearing and the inclusion of an image of Chuck Berry sitting on his lounge and playing his guitar.

But history and culture is never far away for, there in the background of the scene is Vincent's grandfather, Albert Namatjira driving an old green truck.¹⁴

Which brings us back to where we started this short tour of Yiribana --- Captain Cook and his significance to Aboriginal artists, a subject Vincent Namatjira alludes to in a more recent self-portrait featuring Cook.

Close Contact (Vincent Namatjira; 2019).

<https://www.agsa.sa.gov.au/whats-on/exhibitions/ramsay-art-prize/vincent-namatjira/>

Close Contact (Vincent Namatjira; 2019)

Namatjira's *Close Contact* won the 2019 Ramsay Prize in South Australia and suggests that Aboriginal artists are still aware of the long historical shadow cast by Captain Cook --- and at the same time the resilience to be gained from using art to contest that shadow.

Perhaps teachers and students could finish this Cook's Tour of Yiribana by considering whether Vincent and other Aboriginal artists are more at ease with the shadows cast by their ancestors than with the shadows of history cast by Cook and others.

¹⁴ Albert Namatjira (1920-1959) was perhaps the most famous Aboriginal artist, certainly among those who painted in the western style. He was one of the first Aboriginal people to be recognised for his artistic ability and to be granted citizenship. His conviction for providing alcohol to a relative was a landmark event in the Aboriginal struggle for citizenship

A visit to Yiribana is guaranteed to promote discussion of many questions like this. Be sure to include an excursion there in your programming once schools return to normal.

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March 2020

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Sources of Cited Art Works

Note: Unless otherwise stated each work is located at Yiribana in the AGNSW

1. *Captain Crook*. (Jason Crook; 2013).
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2. *The Landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay* (Emanuel Phillips Fox; 1902. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/5576/> .
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5. *Deadly Bloom* (Judy Watson, 1997) <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/209.2011/>
6. *Mistake Creek Massacre* (Timmy Timms and Peggy Patrick; 2000)
<https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/72.2003/>
7. *Dhyakiyarr Vs the King* (Wally Wifred; 2018) Image not available
8. *Studio Self Portrait* (Vincent Namatjira; 2018)
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