Griffith UNIVERSITY
Art Museum

Christian Thompson: Ritual Intimacy

20 July – 19 September 2019

Exhibition Labels

CHRISTIAN THOMPSON

RITUAL INTIMACY

Ritual Intimacy is the first major survey of the work of Christian Thompson. The exhibition spans 15 years of his practice, bringing together photography, video, sculpture, performance and sound works to explore the relationship between form and the body through a process of auto-ethnography.

Ritual Intimacy features an ambitious new commission, *Berceuse* 2017. In this immersive three-channel sound and video installation, Thompson sings in Bidjara—his ancestral language that is considered to be 'officially endangered'. Through works such as this, Thompson practices what he describes as 'the simple yet profound idea that if even one word of an endangered language is spoken it continues to be a living language'.

Another key idea explored in *Ritual Intimacy* is Thompson's concept of spiritual repatriation, which he recently developed in his PhD at the University of Oxford while working with the Australian collection of the Pitt Rivers Museum. Rather than appropriating or restaging problematic ethnographic images of Indigenous ancestors held in the Museum's photographic collection, Thompson chose to spend significant periods of time with these images, absorbing their aura and developing a personal artistic and deferential response that is decisively empowered.

CURATORS

Charlotte Day, Director, Monash University Museum of Art | MUMA and Hetti Perkins, Guest Curator

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Christian Thompson

b.1978, lives and works in London

Desert slippers 2006

Single-channel digital colour video, sound: 34 seconds

The Sixth Mile 2006

Single-channel digital colour video, sound: 6:10 minutes

Courtesy: The artist, Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne and Michael Reid, Sydney and Berlin

The Sixth Mile and *Desert slippers* were made at the time the Northern Territory government commissioned research into allegations of the abuse of children in Aboriginal communities. When the 'Little Children are Sacred' report was tabled the following year, the federal government under John Howard staged the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), which quickly became known as 'the intervention'. This action was enacted without consultation with Indigenous people and ignored the substantive recommendations of the report to which it was allegedly responding.

Thompson made these videos, involving his father, brother, niece, nephew and the ceremonial aspects of their daily lives, during this period. *The Sixth Mile* recalls Thompson's father, who was in the Royal Australian Air Force, lining the children up and combing their hair, a tradition passed down through the generations. Its title refers to a creek where the children used to swim. *Desert slippers* features a Bidjara ritual in which a father and son transfer sweat. The desert slipper is a native cactus that symbolises the transferal of the spirit back to earth as the plant grows.

Untitled (red kangaroo paw)

Courtesy: Gilbert + Tobin Contemporary Art Collection, Sydney

Untitled (blue gum)

Courtesy: The artist, Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne and Michael Reid, Sydney and Berlin

Untitled (flannel flower)

Courtesy: The artist, Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne and Michael Reid, Sydney and Berlin

Untitled (banksia)

Monash University Collection, Melbourne

Purchased 2015

Untitled (grey gum)

Private collection, Melbourne

Untitled (banksia leaf)

UTS Art Collection, Melbourne

(From the ‘Australian graffiti’ series) 2007

C-type prints

Australian graffiti was the last body of work that Thompson made before leaving Australia for Europe. It connects with his memories of growing up in the outback and its desert flowers, which he perceives to be both fragile and immensely powerful. By adorning himself with garlands of these flowers and flamboyant garments of the 1980s and 1990s – the period in which he grew up – Thompson juxtaposes these elements against his own Bidjara masculinity. By wearing native flora he also stands in for the landscape, evoking an Indigenous understanding of the landscape as a corporeal, living ancestral being.

Isabella kept her dignity
I’m not going anywhere without you
Dead as a door nail
Hannah’s diary

(From the ‘Lost together’ series) 2009

C-type prints

Courtesy: The artist, Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne and Michael Reid, Sydney and Berlin

On 13 February 2008 then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made an official apology to Aboriginal Australians for the Stolen Generations – the children of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent who were removed from their families between 1910 and 1970 under the respective Federal and State government policies of assimilation. At the time, Thompson was preparing to leave Australia for further studies abroad and felt this historic gesture allowed him to proudly take his culture and history with him as he ventured into the world.

Thompson photographed the series *Lost together* in the Netherlands while studying at the DasArts Academy of Theatre and Dance at Amsterdam University. The theme of orange throughout the series is a reference to the national colour of the Netherlands, while the tartan patterning refers to early clan societies in the United Kingdom. The combination of these different styles is based on counter-cultural aesthetics – particularly punk collage of 1970s London.

Dhagunyilangu (Brother) 2011

Single-channel digital colour video, sound, subtitled: 2:19 minutes

Gamu Mambu (Blood song) 2010

Single-channel digital colour video, sound, subtitled: 2:02 minutes

Courtesy: The artist, Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne and Michael Reid, Sydney and Berlin

Gamu Mambu (*Blood Song*) and *Dhagunyilangu* (*Brother*) were made in England and in the Netherlands respectively. While studying at the DasArts Academy of Theatre and Dance in Amsterdam, a centre for the study of early musical styles such as the baroque, Thompson realised that his own Bidjara language could be interpreted through the matrix of another cultural context and sphere. He undertook operatic training with this in mind, choosing in the end to work with specialist singers Sonja Gruys and Jeremy Vinogradov to realise these two videos.

Heat 2010

Three-channel digital colour video, sound: 5:52 minutes

Courtesy: The artist, Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne and Michael Reid, Sydney and Berlin

Like the *Australian graffiti* photographs, *Heat* comes out of Thompson's memories of growing up in the desert surrounding Barcaldine in Central West Queensland. Barcaldine is famous for its role in the foundation of organised labour in Queensland and ultimately the formation of the Australian Labor Party. It also holds historical significance for Thompson's family as it is where his great-great-grandfather, Charlie Thompson, surreptitiously bought a block of land before Aboriginal people could legally buy land, creating a safe haven for his own family and other Aboriginal families at a time when Aboriginal people had few legal rights. For Thompson, *Heat* captures the sensation that he associates with being on his country: the dry wind blowing through his hair. It features the three granddaughters of Aboriginal rights pioneer Charlie Perkins, who are the daughters of Thompson's long-time collaborator Hetti Perkins.

Invaded dreams

La Trobe University Art Collection

Purchased 2012

Down Under World

Courtesy: The artist, Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne and Michael Reid, Sydney and Berlin

Desert melon

Monash University Collection

Purchased 2015

Forgiveness of land

Courtesy: The artist, Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne and Michael Reid, Sydney and Berlin

Lamenting the flowers

Courtesy: The artist, Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne and Michael Reid, Sydney and Berlin

Three sisters

Courtesy: The artist, Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne and Michael Reid, Sydney and Berlin

Danger will come

Courtesy: The artist, Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne and Michael Reid, Sydney and Berlin

Energy matter

Courtesy: The artist, Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne and Michael Reid, Sydney and Berlin

(From ‘We bury our own’ series) 2012

C-type Prints

Augustus Pitt Rivers was a nineteenth-century English ethnologist and archaeologist whose collection of some 22,000 objects forms the basis of the Pitt Rivers Museum at the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography in Oxford. Such collections can be seen as the spoils of colonialism and represent painful reminders to First Nations peoples of the impact of colonisation on their own people and families.

While undertaking his PhD at the University of Oxford Thompson was invited to work with the Pitt Rivers Museum's Australian photographic collection. He describes his process of engaging with this collection through a term he coined in his dissertation as 'spiritual repatriation', first employed in the series *We bury our own*:

> My desire was to be a conduit for the Australian photographic collection and to transfer some sense of the aura of the content, and specifically the subjects, of those images. And to emancipate and redirect the focus away from the reverence the authors are given, and to interpret the content of those collections through my autobiography as a Bidjara person living today in that context – to allow for the transferral of some kind of humanity back into those collections and out into the wider world.

Swallow your star

Westpac Corporate Art Collection, Sydney

A western boy

Courtesy: The artist, Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne and Michael Reid, Sydney and Berlin

Molecular melt

Westpac Corporate Art Collection, Sydney

(From ‘Eight limbs’ series) 2014

C-type prints on Fuji Pearl Metallic paper

While studying in England, Thompson became interested in the country's pagan past and the way this intersects with belief systems elsewhere in the world:

> When I made this work I was thinking about ley-lines, historically seen as highly energised spaces, like Stonehenge or West Kennet Long Barrow or Uluru … A lot of the churches in England are built on pagan gathering spaces, so there was knowledge that these spaces were powerful energy centres.

In the series *Eight limbs* the mandala forms create a concentric energy connecting each of the represented Bidjara words to the body and to the space and time of the universe. It continues Thompson's desire to animate language, in this instance through calligraphy, utilising an English font to activate Bidjara words via shapes and designs that are considered to be the building blocks of our universe.

Ellipse
Ariel
Trinity I-III
Siren
Echo I
(From ‘Polari’ series) 2014
C-type prints

Courtesy: The artist, Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne and Michael Reid, Sydney and Berlin

‘Polari’ is a form of cant or cryptic slang that evolved over several centuries from the various languages that converged in London’s theatres, circuses and fairgrounds, the merchant navy and criminal circles. It came to be associated with gay subculture, as many gay men worked in theatrical entertainment or joined ocean liners as waiters, stewards and entertainers at a time when homosexual activity was illegal. This slang rendered the speaker unintelligible to hostile outsiders, such as undercover policemen, but fell out of use after the Sexual Offences Act (1967) effectively decriminalised homosexuality in the United Kingdom. Attracted to the theatricality and defiant nature of Polari (which he likens to the situation of Australian Indigenous languages under assimilationist policies), Thompson borrowed its name for this series which examines how subcultures express themselves.

Refuge 2014

Single-channel digital colour video, sound: 4:19 minutes

Courtesy: The artist, Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne and Michael Reid, Sydney and Berlin

Thompson describes the video *Refuge* as a pop interpretation of his earlier work *Dhagunyilangu* (*Brother*) 2011. The work also demonstrates his growing confidence as a singer after studying at the DasArts Academy of Theatre and Dance, Amsterdam University. As Thompson explains:

> I started making songs in Bidjara for the band Red Knight Night that my friend Chris O'Halloran and I had in Melbourne. Our band comprised a Doctor Rhythm drum machine, a drum and vocals. It was very minimalist, very loud, very screamy, very electronic punk sort of stuff.
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> At DasArts, I would basically create melodies and then I would collaborate with people to turn them into songs by interpreting my sonic sketches via piano and violin into new renditions. Because I incorporated language into it there was always an interesting juxtaposition between this screaming, loud, thumping sound and the traditional language over the top. I found it very natural and very liberating to sing in my native tongue.

Silence is golden 2015

Single-channel HD colour video, sound: 3:31 minutes

Dead tongue 2015

Single-channel HD colour video, sound: 3:03 minutes

Courtesy: The artist, Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne and Michael Reid, Sydney and Berlin

While living in Oxford Thompson took the opportunity to look into his English ancestry, in particular the origins of his mother's family in South London and Bampton, a town just outside of Oxford that has a unique tradition of Morris dancing. This centuries-old English folk tradition is believed to have originated in a court setting but may also have ties to pagan fertility rites. Morris dancers are typically adorned with bells, handkerchiefs, sticks or swords, and step rhythmically to a musical accompaniment. Already fascinated by the pre-Christian, pagan history of England, here Thompson performs one of the dances of his English ancestors.

In *Dead tongue* Thompson continues to interrogate the implications of England's empirical quest on the former colonies of the British Empire through the threat to or loss of Indigenous languages. In works such as this, Thompson actively challenges the perception that Aboriginal culture has become reduced to a captured trophy of Empire.

As Marina Warner observes in the exhibition catalogue:

> Every now and then Thompson closes his eyes slowly, as if reminding us that he is a living person, not an effigy. And like the *angelus novus* of Paul Klee's painting, he is facing into a gale blowing from the future, as evoked by Walter Benjamin, which will drive all before it and grind the artist's culture into ruins.

Equilibrium
Museum of others (othering the explorer, James Cook)
Museum of others (othering the art critic, John Ruskin)
Museum of others (othering the anthropologist, Walter Baldwin Spencer)
Museum of others (othering the ethnologist, Augustus Pitt Rivers)
(From ‘Museum of others’ series)
C-Type prints

Courtesy: The artist, Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne and Michael Reid, Sydney and Berlin

Museum of others is Thompson's most recent photographic series and continues to reflect on his time at the University of Oxford. It features several 'dead white males' from the pantheons of British and Australian culture. The explorer, the ethnologist and the anthropologist all had roles in the process of colonisation in Australia but the art critic is particular to Thompson; Ruskin was the first Slade Professor of Fine Art at University of Oxford, just as Thompson was one of its first Australian Aboriginal students. Thompson explains his motivation for the series:

> Historically, it was the western gaze that was projected onto the ethnic other and I thought I'll create a 'museum of others' and I'll be the one othering, so to speak. *Equilibrium* is based around the idea that the vessel is the equaliser. The vessel is the cradle of all civilisations. We all have that in common.

Berceuse 2017

Three-channel digital colour video, sound: 5:47minutes

Sound design: Duane Morrison

Courtesy: The artist, Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne, and Michael Reid, Sydney and Berlin

This project has been supported by the Victorian Government through Creative Victoria

In this newly commissioned work, Thompson sings a *berceuse* – a cradle song or lullaby – that combines evocative chanting and electronic elements to invoke the cultural experiences and narratives of his Bidjara culture. Intended as a gesture of re-imagining his traditional Bidjara language, which has been categorised as extinct, the work is premised on the notion that if one word of Bidjara is spoken, or in this case sung, it remains a living language.

Thompson makes subtle reference to his maternal Sephardic Jewish roots by ruminating in this work on the lullaby Nani Nani:

Lullaby, lullaby
The boy wants a lullaby,
The mother's son,
Who although small will grow.

Oh, oh my lady open,
Open the door,
I come home tired,
From ploughing the fields.

Oh, I won't open them,
You don't come home tired,
You've just come back,
From seeing your new lover.