

Brutal Truths

19 November 2015 - 9 April
2016

Exhibition
Labels

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'Brutal Truths' presents preeminent voices in contemporary Australian art: Vernon Ah Kee, the late Gordon Bennett, and collaborative artists Destiny Deacon and Virginia Fraser. Grounded in debates relating to Australia's Indigenous histories, these artists present provocations that also relate to global contexts of displacement and oppression.

The earliest works in this exhibition are by the late Gordon Bennett, who has been at the forefront of contemporary Australian art for the last three decades for his interrogations of identity, culture, history and language. Bennett's seminal video work *Performance with Object for the Expiation of Guilt (Apple Premiere Mix)* from 1995 is accompanied by related objects – a suit made from painted canvas tailored to the artist's body, a stock whip and the painted object seen in the video, also made to the artist's dimensions.

A group of recent works in diverse media by Vernon Ah Kee includes the paintings *brutalities (triptych)* 2014 and the text work *authorsofdevastation* 2015 as well as two new drawings *lynching 1* and *lynching 2* 2015 made in situ on raw Belgian linen.

Destiny Deacon and Virginia Fraser's *Snap out of it* 2014 presents images of towering public housing flats in Melbourne covering the gallery walls. Deacon's signature photographic vignettes with dolls and family members are placed against an environment of brutalist architecture that has become internationally synonymous with disadvantage and failed utopian ideals. The accompanying silent video is both comical yet suggestive of tension and breaking points.

The installations in 'Brutal truths' position these major practitioners in close proximity, allowing commonalities and divergences to emerge through images and texts that bear witness to Indigenous Australian subjectivities while also working across multiple cultural and political references.

Vernon Ah Kee

b.1967, Innisfail, North Queensland

brutalities (triptych) 2014

Acrylic on canvas

authorsofdevastation 2015

Vinyl on painted wall

lynching 1 2015

Charcoal on Belgian linen, wooden plinth

lynching 2 2015

Charcoal on Belgian linen, wooden plinth

Courtesy: The artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Vernon Ah Kee's incisive art challenges pervasive forms of colonial racism and ideologies in Australia's contemporary culture. Ah Kee has adopted diverse media and visual language drawing upon Western art-historical styles as well as literary works and civil rights activism within Australia and the Americas.

Text, and a particular disruption of font, spacing and kerning, has been recurrent in Ah Kee's work since his first solo exhibition *If I Was White* at Metro Arts, Brisbane in 1999. His texts have included excerpts from speakers, writers and poets including Malcolm X, Stephen Crane, Chief Seattle or Shakespeare. The phrase used in *authorsofdevastation* is from the American writer and civil rights activist James Baldwin's 'Letter to my nephew', published in 'The Progressive' magazine in December 1962.

Ah Kee is also known for his drawings. Many recall photographic documentation by anthropologist Norman Tindale, however Ah Kee's more recent drawings include images of lynchings and slumped figures reminiscent of hostages or prisoners. *lynching 1* and *lynching 2* 2015 were drawn by Ah Kee at Griffith University Art Gallery. Ah Kee's rendering of images took form as the charcoal powder fell below, a residue of his unseen creative act.

The large-scale *brutalities (triptych)* 2014 is related to the group of paintings conceived for the 14th Istanbul Biennial, held earlier in 2015. The series is a response to what Ah Kee describes as the brutality that ties the treatment of Aboriginal people to the persecution of Armenians in Turkey's past and its Kurdish population and neighbours in the present.

Gordon Bennett

b.1955 Monto, Queensland; d.2014, Brisbane, Queensland

Performance with Object for the Expiation of Guilt (Apple Premiere Mix) 1995

Video, 4:3, colour, sound, 3:25 minutes, looped

Object for the Expiation of Guilt 1993

Acrylic on cotton duck over wood frame

Collection: The Estate of Gordon Bennett

Courtesy: Milani Gallery, Brisbane and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

Gordon Bennett

b.1955 Monto, Queensland; d.2014, Brisbane, Queensland

assisted by

Leanne Bennett

b.1957 Brisbane, Queensland

Self Portrait (Suit) 1996

Acrylic and Flashe paint on tailored canvas, coat hanger, stock whip, felt pen on paper tags

Collection: The Estate of Gordon Bennett

Courtesy: Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Since his first solo exhibition in Brisbane in 1989, Gordon Bennett's work has been at the forefront of contemporary Australian art and has been recognised internationally, evident in his selection in the prestigious dOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel, Germany in 2012 and the 8th Berlin Biennale in 2014. Through an interdisciplinary practice, Bennett's art is grounded in his personal journey to establish his identity as an Australian of Indigenous and Anglo-Celtic descent, presenting and examining a broad range of philosophical questions related to the construction of identity, perception and knowledge.

Performance with Object for the Expiation of Guilt (Apple Premiere Mix) 1995, is a rare performance, documented privately inside Bellas Gallery, Brisbane in 1994. His face bound in white bandages, Bennett thrashes a prone box, made to his own height and width, with a stock whip. He shouts abusive commands interspersed with sweet talk and apologies. Details from Bennett's own paintings are inserted in the vertiginous background animation, traversed by an 'a, b, c, d' alphabet of racist derogatory terms and along with hovering bold text such as 'lies', 'justice', and 'invention'.

The box, *Object for the Expiation of Guilt* 1993, used in the performance (actually a painted canvas stretched over a timber frame) is positioned nearby, along with the related work *Self Portrait (Suit)* 1996 tailored by the artist's partner Leanne to Bennett's body size, and an Australian stock whip. The Jackson Pollock style dripped and splattered paint surfaces of the suit and the box resemble raised welts of whipped flesh, or following incision and scarring during Indigenous men's ceremonial business.

A later version of the video, *(Violence and Grief Remix)* 1996, includes additional interactions of text, music and images. The original version displayed here highlights the bare footed figure of the artist, pursued by his shadow, in a complex cycle of relations; at once the performer, protagonist and victor/victim.

Destiny Deacon

b.1957 Melbourne, Victoria
K'ua K'ua and Erub/Mer peoples

Virginia Fraser

Melbourne, Victoria

Fitzroy Flats 2014

Wallpaper

Snap out of it 2014

Video: 16:9, colour, silent

Courtesy: The artists and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Destiny Deacon

b.1957 Melbourne, Victoria
K'ua K'ua and Erub/Mer peoples

From the series *Snap out of it* 2014

All Hahnemuhle photo rag

Courtesy: The artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Destiny Deacon and Virginia Fraser's installation *Snap out of it* 2014 presents images of the distinctive Atherton Gardens public housing towers in Fitzroy, Melbourne. Similar high-rises from the 1960s also stud other inner suburbs of both Melbourne and Sydney. The 'brutalist' style of these towers drew upon post-war architectural theory that aspired to build harmonious and vibrant communities. These compounds have almost always spectacularly failed, and have instead become an international shorthand symbol of disadvantage and oppression.

Deacon and Fraser's collaborative work began in 2001. Fraser trained originally as a journalist and now works as an artist, writer, editor and occasional curator. She has a longstanding research interest in women as producers, technicians and entrepreneurs in very early Australian film.

Deacon is an artist, performer and activist, highly esteemed for her photographic tableaux, role-play scenarios, and her early soft-focus Polaroid images featuring dolls, Aboriginal and Australiana kitsch objects and family members. Her use of 'blak' humour, constructed with filmic, art-historical, literary and pop culture references, hones attention towards the realities of Indigenous Australian men, women and children.

Members of Deacon's family take on roles as inhabitants of the estate near breaking point, pictured as if by a photo-journalist. The silent video of hands squeezing water balloons appears comical, however tension builds as we wait for the bang.

A winter show of displacement.
Some people just snap.
Some people take snaps.
Most people just snap out of it.

Destiny Deacon, June 2014