

Post-hybrid: reimagining the Australian self

We find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.

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As residents of this country we are all *Australians* and to some extent, part of a collective national identity. This identity, having emerged from myths around bushrangers, ‘diggers’, sporting heroes and British colonialism, is something to which we relate in varying degrees – for some, not at all. Does this mean we are then, ‘Australian’ to varying degrees? In this year of commemoration when we consider the Centenary of the Gallipoli landing and the ANZAC legacy, conversations around who we are as Australians will, no doubt, abound. It seems timely to add to this discussion, views that have been marginalised or excluded from the frameworks within which Australian national identity has historically been constructed.

At the time of Australia’s Federation, multiculturalism and the celebration of ethnic diversity was far from the national agenda. The ‘White Australia Policy’ would soon come into effect, beginning with Australia’s first act of Legislation, the *Immigration Restriction Act* (1901) which effectively banned all Chinese migration. Further legislation was targeted at the Indigenous population: “Although the ‘Aboriginal problem’ was noted, the general consensus at Federation was that Aboriginal people were a ‘dying’ race – hence unlikely to affect the future of ‘white’ Australia. The eugenic policies of assimilation (introduced from 1910 onwards) sought to further facilitate this process”.ⁱⁱ Many would argue that while social and legislative reform has certainly progressed since Federation, this story continues to unfold and racism, inequality and xenophobia are far from distant problems of the past. Lawyer and Human Rights advocate Julian Burnside asserts, “Australia has constructed a myth about itself which cannot survive unless we forget a number of painful truths. We draw a veil of comforting amnesia over anything which contradicts our self-image.”ⁱⁱⁱ

As the title suggests, *Post-hybrid: reimagining the Australian self* explores a sense of Australian identity that is informed by the hybrid nature of our cultural make-up. Political scientist Benedict Anderson argues that nations are “*imagined*, because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”.^{iv} Is the *nation* not then, open to being re-imagined, allowing “the open poetic becoming of culture”?^v Accepting that nations are not fixed or static, but function within a constant process of negotiation and change – within which there are often uneven distributions of power, representation and agency – this exhibition offers perspectives on place and self that reflect the complexity of our cultural fabric.

Post-hybrid presents thirteen artists living and working in Australia, who explore particular perceptions of this place, and/or their sense of self within it. It does not, however, attempt to locate a homogenised definition of ‘Australianism’. Nor do the artists represented in this exhibition provide a list of answers to the complex issues around personal, ethnic and cultural identity. Common to their work rather, is a speculative approach as they variously ponder: where are we going; why did this happen; what does this mean; and who am I? Whether looking at self, landscape, society or culture, there is a sense of searching, mapping, remembering, of delving in, and of laying down evidence. Collectively, the works in *Post-hybrid* point to a notion of Australian identity as fluid and in flux – a palimpsest, open to being written and re-written.

Descended from French settlers and the Mineng people of the South West of Western Australia, **Christopher Pease** explores the conflation of his mixed ancestry. Reflecting on dispossession, the

disruption of the natural world, the colonised and coloniser, the works featured in this exhibition express two streams of Pease's practice: the representational/narrative in which the artist appropriates the painting style of early European settlers; and the minimal/abstract that utilises traditional materials such as Balga resin and ochres. *Untitled* (2005) examines the ways in which land has been used at a site near Bunbury where Pease's family originates, interleaving plans for a housing subdivision, Jarrah shingles similar to those produced by a local mill, and traditional materials sourced from the site. *Noble Savage 3 (Rejecting Citizenship)* (2013) reflects on the *Native Citizens Rights Act* (1944) in which Noongar people could become citizens of their own country on the proviso that they reject their aboriginality and disassociate themselves from other Aboriginal people as well as their culture. Contained in Pease's works is an insistence that Noongar culture is still strong and vibrant, epitomised by the Mineng man of Pease's *Noble Savage 3*. Riding atop a cow and surrounded by both native and introduced flora and fauna, he sends a relaxed challenge to the viewer through his unflinching gaze: despite efforts to the contrary, he is still here and will not relinquish his identity or his culture.

Declaring a position of authority, the 'colonist' claims a desire to improve and educate. The extent to which the colonised are 'civilised' is judged upon the relinquishing of language, dress and ways of living: the demand is to model oneself entirely upon the coloniser. There is a line however, and the colonised must be 'like' but not identical, as this would undermine power structures predicated on notions of the superior/inferior.^{vi} Of both Indigenous and Dutch descent, photo-media artist **Darren Siwes** goes a step further, inverting the colonial premise of sovereignty and comically mimicking the seriousness and solemnity of colonial discourse. In his work *Dalabon Braun Blood* (Arnhem Land Brown Blood) (2013), Her Majesty the Queen of Australia (sitting alongside her Prince), pins us as her subjects with her commanding gaze. Her 'whitened' skin is unsettling and uncanny, her stare is regal and supreme. We want to laugh or look away and at the heart of our discomfort is the question: could we (allow ourselves to) be subjugated to an Aboriginal Queen? Here, the artist confronts the deepest corners of our psyche. Shining a light on our most secret (and denied) racist assumptions, Siwes sets forth this proposition asking 'what if?'

Abdul Abdullah describes growing up in a post 9/11 world. In this new order, there is an apparent fear of all Muslims as potential terrorists and ideas of being both a proud Muslim and a proud Australian seem incongruous. Abdullah's father, the subject of his work *Assimilate* (2011), is a sixth generation Australian who converted to Islam after meeting his Malay wife. Abdullah's portrait raises many questions, not least, how can you assimilate if you have a history that can be traced back to a convict who arrived here 1815? Presumably it is his father's dress that requires modification, in that Muslim attire is now more likely to be seen as a political choice, rather than a spiritual one. Abdullah teases the viewer, employing even more ambivalent references: the image reads like a Byzantium icon as the haloed figure gazes upward in joyous rapture. Abdullah's striking portraits seem to pose the question: 'This is who I am, can you accept me?', while also implying that the answer to that question is irrelevant. Beneath the political challenge, Abdullah pushes against the mentality of division and reveals instead, a desire to humanise his subjects. Is it not after all, impossible to hate someone *simply* because they are Muslim, black, white or a 'bogan' if you take the time to know them?

Family and identity are similarly at the core of **Abdul-Rahman Abdullah's** practice, however his approach is more poetic than political, drawing upon memory and the felt experience of childhood to create sculptures and installations that unfold like uncanny dreamscapes. The *domestic* figures strongly in his narratives and you get the sense that 'inside' (the home or family sphere) was a safe place where the self was intact and clearly defined – there is an absence of fragmentation that is felt by many Asian-Australians when within public realms, as being simultaneously from here and *other*. Abdullah draws upon the animism of Malay culture (animals are used throughout his works) and the religious rituals of his early life. In his work *Before the Dawn* (2014), floorboards and prayer rug merge, overlooked by a raven who stands expectantly like a talisman or harbinger of secrets. Abdullah describes hearing the raven's call as a

child, regularly coinciding with the *Azaan* (call to prayer). For Jung, the raven represents one's 'shadow self' and this seems an appropriate companion to that space between night to day, where dreams, prayers, sleep and waking meet.

At the age of eight, **Laurel Nannup** was separated from her family in Pinjarra and was sent to live at Wandering Mission with her six-year-old sister. Her prints reveal a very personal history and intimate portrait of her early life, documenting her life before and during her time at the mission, including occasional visits to her family. Nannup's stories validate a contemporary experience of Australian Aboriginality that includes loss of access to family and culture. "My son would often ask me things about my culture and I felt I had no stories to tell. But once I... got talking with other Noongars, I began to remember certain things that happened in my life and I realised, these are my stories. They are my life."^{vii} Her works are deeply poignant because they are so relatable: we place ourselves as the child in the story, feel her joy, cheekiness, fear and innocence throughout the various narratives, yet we are also aware of the imminent or continuing loss that surrounds them. In reclaiming her past, Nannup addresses the power structures that have written the history of this country – in which Indigenous Australians have been largely invisible.

Whether depicting the water filled landscape of his home south of Mandurah through painted line and pattern, or responding to the vast and spectacular expanses of the East Pilbara, **Galliano Fardin** is connected to place with a *belongingness* that appears as much spiritually as environmentally driven. There is no visible longing for a 'homeland' present in Fardin's work – he arrived here from Italy at the age of 24 – rather, a love of the Western Australian landscape is his enduring focus. *Horizon Line* (1992) is a collection of discarded objects: mass-produced and slow to disintegrate items of consumption that Fardin has placed on a background of red sand taken from the Western Desert. The work reflects on the infiltration of alien cultures and values (and detritus) to even the most remote of places. Fardin has been visiting the East Pilbara since the 1990's, spending time with the Martu people of that region. He empathises with an Aboriginal conception of *being* in which, "land, animals and people are all part of the same spiritual legacy."^{viii} Fardin's work articulates a moral imperative to shift away from a (post)colonial perception of place and people, that has historically been characterised by individualism and exploitation. Of his own project to rehabilitate the threatened ecosystem around his home in Lake Clifton, Fardin says: "This is my 'small' version of the story; the big picture belongs to the Noongar people of this region."^{ix}

The foundation and continuation of Australia's economic growth has emerged from the contention that the land belonged to no-one and its resources were/are available to be exploited by any who successfully stake a claim to them. Sharing Indigenous and Scandinavian ancestry, **Ryan Presley** draws from experiences of his own mixed heritage to scrutinise the cultural nature of past and present colonial Australia. His series *Blood Money* (2011) confronts conceptions of ownership, wealth and power, questioning "the legitimacy of the nation state and the moral status of wealth acquired by invasion, annexation and genocide".^x The subjects of his series, painstakingly rendered in watercolour, have been selected as powerful and heroic figures of Australian history who actively resisted their loss of agency and ownership over their traditional lands. Whadjuk woman Fanny Baluk (1840 – 1907) for example, publicly raged against her loss of access to her grandmother's burial grounds and the tracks that led to lands where she had gathered food, these important sites having been subsumed by Perth's Government House and residential construction. The legacy of Fanny Balbuk's actions, recorded at the time by anthropologist Daisy Bates, has played an important role in establishing native title claim to the Perth Metropolitan area. In a historic decision, this year six Noongar claim groups accepted the State Government's 'South West Settlement' offer in the largest native title settlement in Australian history.

Elizabeth Gertsakis immigrated to Australia as a baby in the mid-1950's. In her series of cibachromes, Gertsakis reproduces images of her family in Greece alongside American popular culture images and fine

art masterpieces. The historical and biographical narratives that Gertsakis creates, mix together public and private realms, creating a kind of “hysterical disorder”, re-positioning the personal to give “ephemeral everyday identity an importance, a power in its own right”.^{xi} Sitting alongside the modest and somewhat barren rural vistas of Gertsakis’ family portraits, the luscious oil paintings are filled with elegance and prosperity; the Hollywood shots are often humorous and would have appeared strikingly modern and glamorous at the time of their production. This juxtaposition amplifies the poignancy of Gertsakis’ humble personal photo-history. Blemished with age and showing signs of wear, the images show people who, next to their stylized companions, are confrontingly *real*. Unlike the immortal public figures, the private selves remind us that life is short and a particular place and time really only exists in our minds. Gertsakis’ probing investigation of her own history and the constructed histories around us presents the process of identity formation as a kind of myth, “collapse(ing) theories of immigrant identity in this country as a simple binary construction of an original culture from ‘home’ combined with a new ‘Australian’ culture.”^{xii} Clearly, the reality is far more complex.

Lorraine Connolly-Northey grew up on a farm in Victoria’s Swan Hill region; her mother is a Waradgerie woman from central and South-west NSW, her father the descendant of Irish farmers. The artist’s parents taught her of Waradgerie culture, but as with many Indigenous peoples who have lost a great deal of living knowledge of their culture, there was much they could not pass on and Connolly-Northey has supplemented their knowledge with her own research. Connolly-Northey’s interest in Waradgerie language and culture has led her to traditional weaving techniques, but rather than take bush materials from an area to which her mother’s family did not belong, Connolly-Northey turned instead to the refuse of the rural industry – literally fusing together the two sides of her heritage. In contrast to the massive objects Connolly-Northey often creates, the Narrbongs in this exhibition (meaning ‘pouch of the marsupial’) are small and intimate. At once delicate and rough, decorative and minimal, old and new, they set up a deceptive dance of simplicity, underneath which lies a history of loss, change and becoming. True hybrids, the power of these objects emerges in the interstices of their cultural and material references, offering a space of holding for something entirely new.

In 1952 at the age of 10, **Hans Arkeveld** arrived in Australia with his family after a long journey by ship. Devastated by the Second World War, the Dutch government was encouraging its citizens to leave and Australia, desperate for skilled migrants, was promising a welcoming land of plenty. Unlike their fellow ‘10 Pound Poms’, migrants whose first language was not English were initially interned in camps and the artist’s family spent time in detention first in Wodonga and then in Northam in very poor conditions. Arkeveld, whose own father had been forced to work in labour camps during the war, was deeply affected by this experience and the realities of his new life that contrasted starkly with vision they had been promised. The highlight of his migrancy was the ship ride – Arkeveld has a love of boats and describes the trip as one of the best moments of his life.^{xiii} Boats are used repeatedly in Arkeveld’s work, along with wings, cages and embryos, rendered in precise detail – his technical skill and interests have been fostered for over 40 years as an artist in residence at the University of Western Australia’s Department of Anatomy. Not surprisingly, Arkeveld feels a connection to refugees and asylum seekers fleeing the horror of war by water, who find that far from being welcomed by those complicit in their situation, they have somehow become the enemy. Arkeveld’s commentary on this issue begins with the Vietnam War but is no less relevant today. Arkeveld is a humanitarian in the truest sense and is interested in the way in which political concerns often find priority over compassion, yet in all this there is a joyousness that sings out from his work. Despite the darkness of his material, the symbology of his oeuvre speaks of freedom, hope and the potent vulnerability and perfection of new life.

As an increasing number of migrants and refugees settle in Australia having experienced displacement, violence and war, we are left to ponder, what is the legacy of trauma? In the case of **Dadang Christanto**, it is a deep compassion and concern for his fellow human beings. In the anti-communist purges of the mid-

1960's countless Indonesians were killed at the hands of government authorities. Now living in Darwin, Christanto's father was taken away while the artist (then aged eight) and his siblings were sleeping in their home in Java – they never saw him again. Over half a million people are suspected to have been killed and this vast tragedy, along other political and natural disasters that have resulted in tragic loss of life, forms the core motivation of Christanto's practice. Christanto's floating heads are powerful symbols of anguish and brutality but surprisingly, viewing his objects and paintings is not a disturbing experience – on the contrary, it is ultimately uplifting. Somehow, the pain and dislocation of the bodiless heads is subverted by the vibrancy and dynamism of the totems that seem to surround and embrace them. This hopefulness underscores Christanto's desire to move beyond the past and find a human connection that transcends political, religious or cultural difference: "I want to initiate communication that liberates. Liberation from what? Liberation from the burden of history filled with wastelands of blood and tears. A history that is played out in the homeland of humankind."^{xiv}

Acknowledging Australia's shared history, and indeed the varied gene pool that contributes to his own lineage (including the Manu and Ngagen people of his maternal ancestry), **Danie Mellor** visualises the problematic forced coexistence of cultures that colonialism creates. Mellor's exquisite and elaborate objects seduce the eye and draw us in to a paradoxical landscape that is both compelling and confusing. The decoratively bordered manicured gardens and European architecture, rendered by Mellor in hues of blue, are reminiscent of the porcelain that was manufactured in Europe in the 18th century, having emerged from a fascination with and appropriation of China's blue ware. This landscape *is* appropriated and controlled: it is a colonial landscape, testament to the authority of 'Man' over nature. The native animals and aboriginal figures have become foreign; in a disorienting inversion, *they* are the transgressor, imposed on this new/old place. Adding to this dialogue around foreignness and the imposition of alien culture, Mellor's choice of palette acknowledges that fact that there appears to be no word for the colour blue in any Indigenous Australian language. Mellor's work highlights the divide between the (godless) scientific taxonomy of European natural history and the spiritual connection to country felt by Indigenous Australians that includes an understanding of an unseen world and metaphysical presence. As they appear in Mellor's works, these two worlds seem irreconcilable, and they are. It seems that only by forging a new reality (and one that recognises the validity of Aboriginal knowing), can we move beyond the limitations of our past.

Forcibly removed from his family in the Northern Territory as a baby, **Brenda L. Croft**'s father eventually found his way to NSW, working on the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme in the late 1950's – early 1960's, where he met Croft's mother. Here, he worked beside other dispossessed – post WWII European migrants who left their tattered towns for the promise of a better life. In contrast to the more recent fear-based politics around migrants and asylum seekers that gained popular currency with Pauline Hansen's One Nation Party (and has continued unabated in various forms since), Croft's parents described to her an almost utopian community in which its members supported each other staunchly and ethnic or religious differences mattered little. The archival photographs of Croft's series *She'll be right mate: strangers in a strange land* (1999) speak of comradeship, hard work and hope for the future. Transformed from tiny snapshots, these large-scale prints are overlaid with text: reflections about the time and place they record, and other words that are less familiar – the names of indigenous nations that had once inhabited the area. Little known to the workers, they themselves were unintentionally complicit in another dispossession. The Indigenous peoples of this region – the Jaimathang, Yuin, Kurnai and others that give their names to Croft's titles – had been driven from their lands many years before to make way for this monumental construction. In this feat of modern economics and engineering, the land too was irrevocably changed, forever altering the sustainable patterns of dry and flood. The layered realities of events such as these are tricky to negotiate, as Croft states, "These stories are ongoing: there is no beginning middle or end."

Wherever we travel in our future, our shadows cast our individual and collective past, and the shadows of those who came before us".^{xv}

The concept of 'nation' brings with it great political and social power. It can also provide a sense of *belonging*. But when the cultural terrain inevitably shifts and changes, an experience of alienation may occur. Perhaps this is why for many people, there is a desire for their country (or at least their perception of it) to remain static and unchanging; and correspondingly, that there is a deep underlying fear of anything that threatens this. For those who feel excluded by a dominant and homogenised national identity the opposite dynamic may occur, yet with the same destructive outcome: an experience of alienation. When driven by fear and control, nationalism can be a divisive concept. Many works in this exhibition urge us to look deeper at ourselves and our fellow Australians, demonstrating the kind of openness and bravery that is required to adapt to the evolving nature of our cultural landscape.

The view of Australian identity that *Post-Hybrid* presents, highlights that the taxonomy of multiculturalism is far too simplistic, in that it often promotes a single dominant ethnic self above all other aspects of identity. In reality, ones sense of self is likely to be far more complex. After all, we are all many things: we slip in and out of various roles within the changing contexts of our lives. The questioning and open nature of the artworks in this exhibition offers an expansive perspective of nation and identity – one that recognises the flaws of our society (we are after all, all human and imperfect) and acknowledges our many selves. The language of guilt is crippling and not useful in this conversation, instead there is a gentle encouragement to look at ourselves with humour and forgiveness . . . ultimately, to see *ourselves* in every 'other'.

Lia McKnight, 2015
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ⁱ Bhabha, H. K. 1994, *The Location of Culture*, London; New York: Routledge, p 1

ⁱⁱ Edmundson, A. 2009 *But where are you really from? The 'crisis' of multiculturalism examined through the work of four Asian-Australian artists*, retrieved 1/04/2015 from:
http://press.anu.edu.au/hrj/2009_02/mobile_devices/ch07.html

ⁱⁱⁱ Burnside, J. 2013, *Julian Burnside: Alienation to alien nation*, retrieved 13/05/15 from:
<http://theconversation.com/julian-burnside-alienation-to-alien-nation-18290>

^{iv} Anderson, B. 2006 *Imagined Communities*, (revised edition), London: Verso, p 6

^v Huddart, D. 2006 *Homi K. Bhabha*, London; New York: Routledge, p 135

^{vi} Huddart, D. 2006 *Homi K. Bhabha*, London; New York: Routledge, pp 57-59

^{vii} Nannup, L. 2006 *A Story to Tell*, Crawley: University of Western Australia Press

^{viii} Fardin, G. 1992 *Horizon Line*, Mosman Park: Galerie Dusseldorf

^{ix} Retrieved 19/05/15 from: <http://www.symbiotica.uwa.edu.au/residents/galliano-fardin,-yalgorup>

^x Browning, D 2013, "New Currency", *Artlink*, Vol 33 # 2 [2013], Adelaide: Artlink Australia, p 100

^{xi} Gertsakis, E. 1992 'A glamorous private history', *Third Text*, no 19, Summer 1992, p 49

^{xii} Williamson, C. 1995 *Seven Histories of Australia*, Melbourne: Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, p 16

^{xiii} *Makers: The artists, their work, their lives, Episode 1: Hans Arkeveld*. <http://www.artistschronicle.com/>

^{xiv} Christanto, D. 1998, *Artist statement*, retrieved 24/05/2015 from: <https://prezi.com/dn1a6meaubup/political-repression-consumerism/>

^{xv} Croft, B. 1992-2009, *She'll be right mate: strangers in a strange land*, Adelaide: Greenaway Art Gallery, P 6