

blak lik mi¹

BY DJON MUNDINE OAM

Queensland Waanyi Aboriginal artist Gordon Hookey (b. 1961) once told me that when he attended art school in the 1990s, he was instructed to look at his face in the mirror, and to honestly paint what he saw. He was assured that, if he could achieve that everything after that would be possible as an artist.

This following essay is a compilation of my thoughts, ideas and reflections on conversations and propositions around the question of what portraiture means for Aboriginal people.

from a white and a blak perspective

The question of what constitutes a portrait involves a complex understanding of what identity and representation mean to, and how they are portrayed by, Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander artists, compared with white Anglo Saxon artists growing up in Australia.

All portraits are a form of remembering - of memorising and memorialising. People reach into the past looking for reminders of those they knew in portraits - objects that are *pars pro toto*.³ Photographs and letters are precious objects - like medals of a war we survived. And of course, human beings are the most precious, and images of them act as powerfully evocative devices.

Badtjala artist Fiona Foley's PhD photographic series on the presence of the Chief Protector of Aborigines (Queensland), Walter Edmund Roth (1861-1933), on her 'country', K'gari (Fraser Island), was titled *Horror Has a Face* 2017 - the Protector's face is a metaphoric portrait of the face of colonialism.

In conventional Western art terms, a portrait is an image that is taller than it is wide. The portrait image is usually focused on the face, but it can include the head and shoulders and sometimes even the entire body. In Western

The first thing I saw in the morning when I woke up was my black face in the bathroom mirror, and that fixed the way I felt about myself the rest of the day...²

Nina Simone

art, a portrait is deemed successful if it renders more than a likeness, but also captures that person's 'character' or their persona. When asked what a portrait means to him, colleague Alan Choldenko referred me to the Oxford English Dictionary for a definition, which is that it comes from the word 'portray' - the prefix *por*, and then *trait*, as a drawing, as a drawing forth. He went on to explain that every drawing forth of this trait is a trace of something that withdraws in the very drawing forth - what is present never not shadowed by what is absent.⁴ In short, 'a portrait is a simulation masquerading as simply a representation'.⁵

Our personality is partly something innate, but it also comes from our process of social development, from the society we live in. But how does any artist capture the essence of a person or their character? David Henson once told me that, for him, a portrait is a likeness with associations. I like this definition as it explains how portraits can 'capture' a person beyond just their facial expression. It explains how very simple elements such as their apparel, their stance, the location and even the setting can convey their social-power-status. In order to relax the subject, to lower their guard and expose their persona, a relationship develops between the subject-sitter and artist, such that portraiture could be said to be a form of biography.

At the time of the arrival of the British in Australia, commissioned portrait paintings could only be afforded by the British upper class. Practical photography was not developed until 1839, in France. With its advent, and subsequent technological advancements, it soon became an accessible and affordable way to capture images of people, record memories and create remembrances.

The first black and white photographic images of Aboriginal people that we know about were recorded in South Australia in 1846, but they no longer exist. The earliest ones that do still exist were taken in Victoria in 1847.

Photography has been an oppressive tool of colonisation, used to define and stereotype us as primitive, inferior and sub-human objects. Photographers of the time

were preoccupied with searching for images of the stereotyped 'primitive' and posed their Aboriginal subjects accordingly. From this time forward we were positioned at the 'victim' end of the lens, posed and framed, by a 'white' man looking through the aperture, across the colonial divide, for an already defined, expected image.

It was only towards the end of the 1800s, with a quantum change in technology, cost, and practicality, which resulted in the advent of affordable cameras such as the Kodak Box Brownie and other portable cameras, that some yet unrecognised Aboriginal person moved behind the camera to record him or herself, to define their own image. From then on we began to look at ways of seeing ourselves in ways we chose to be seen.

portraits as cultural and social markings

Many Aboriginal creation stories begin with a rising sun and a being who crosses the sea and/or land, either landing from the sea and then moving along the coast or travelling from the hinterland and following a river's meandering course down to the coast. As they moved, the beings mapped the 'land' (and sea) and left handprints and hand stencils, footprints, traces - substances and extrusions - of themselves. These red ochre hand prints exist in many places all over the continent, including in the Laura rock art sites in Cape York, Far North Queensland. I was once told by a research colleague that, on western Cape York in the 1970s, a woman relative acting as midwife would place the newborn child's foot on the earth and the resultant footprint would confirm the child's father and thereby declare their identity and lineage connections.

More than thirty years ago, I lived in a small traditional community (Milingimbi in the NT) where everyone could recognise everyone else in the community by their footprint. It's a skill many people would value highly today. Today, many residents in the community wear shoes and

apparently only half the residents still have the skill to read and identify the 'portrait' footprints of community members. Also, thirty years ago, and in that same community, children knew everyone in the community by their 'skin' name and, by extension, their relationship to each other. But that knowledge has similarly declined. So, for us, portraits begin to take on a dimension far greater than that of a face or a likeness.

The 'portrait' in historical Aboriginal terms is not an individual face. Rather it is a body painting, pattern or design - an image of the unchanging soul only seen in special moments, or in movements at specific rituals. In former times the actual name of the person designated a physical place, a bird, plant, animal, fish or fowl; really a word describing God, the ultimate creative spirit. Such names were traditionally chanted and sung. More recently, contemporary Aboriginal artists are choosing to follow this practice, but are singing lyrical poetry about contemporary heroes, as in Joe Geia's song *Uncle Willie* (Thaiday 1930-2002), and Oodgeroo Noonuccal's poem *Son of mine (for Dennis)* (Cat Ref. 246, illustrated p. 87), her activist son (1947-2017).

All Aboriginal people are created in a form of the original creative spirit (God's image), as stated here by Wandjuk Marika and Thanakupi,

I am Djang'kawu (Creative Dhuwa honey spirit).

Wandjuk Marika (1927-1987), Opening of Hogarth Galleries, Sydney, 1982.

I am Thanakupi (flower of the wattle) ... You are here in a lifetime to help, to understand... that is intelligence. And only intelligent people have strong friendships. I wish we all have that.

Dr Thanakupi Gloria Fletcher (1937-2011) ABC *Message Stick*, 2004.

the spiritual value of portraiture and eyes as windows to the soul

The photographic image could be described as coming out of light and shadow. In Junichiro Tanizaki's essay *In Praise of Shadows* (1933), he describes how in Japan, ghosts and spirits appear as shadows that float and glide. In Aboriginal society ghosts also appear as shadows. Photography is a reaction between light and shadow. In the (Yolngu) Djambarrpuyngu language the word 'wunggalli' means a powerful creative spirit that appears as a shadow, and when Yolngu people first saw black and white photographs of people, they also called them Wunggalli.

It is said in Western terms that the eyes in a portrait are the windows to the soul. If the eyes are indeed the windows to the soul, then this may explain why photographers often focus on the eyes to capture more of the character or persona of their subject. In Aboriginal culture this is also true to some extent. The Djambarrpuyngu language word 'mangutji' or 'mel' means 'waterhole' as well as 'seed' and 'eye'. Some Aboriginal people believe that waterholes, wells and springs contain the souls of unborn people. So, to look into the waterhole is to find the soul.

Between 1938-1939 the Harvard and Adelaide Universities made an anthropological expedition to field stations in Queensland. Noted anthropologist Norman Tindale (with Joseph Birdsell) visited the Queensland Aboriginal reserve communities of Cherbourg, Yarrabah, Mona Mona, Palm Island, Woorabinda, Bentinck Island, Doomadgee and Mornington Island collecting significant cultural material and recording a large number of Aboriginal genealogies for Aboriginal residents, and photographing Aboriginal people who had been rounded up to live on the reserves. Many of these photographs continue to exist today and are treasured as memories by families.

The gaze is important in portrait photography. In some photographic portraits of Aboriginal people, the subject's eyes stare strongly back at the camera, in control of their image. I think this is evident in the eyes of Danie Mellor's grandmother, in the portrait *A gaze still dark (a black portrait of intimacy)* 2019 commissioned for the exhibition by the Cairns Art Gallery (cat Ref. 74). This portrait is based on an early photograph in which the grandmother of the artist stares directly back at the camera.

Today, the painted portrait of Mellor's grandmother stares equally detached from the artist's painting, returning the viewer's gaze as it did more than seventy years ago. This image appears to me to be in contrast to photos of Vernon Ah Kee's forebears that were taken by Norman Tindale. In these photos, and the subsequent artist's portraits, the gaze is returned with a

calmness that suggests the experience of sitting for the photographs was not one that caused concern to the subject. Through a reading of the eyes, and of the gaze, I think it is perhaps possible to learn so much more about the persona of the sitter than a simple reading of the facial image can ever offer.

As an aside, I would note that I was once told by an art mentor that the first 'mark' made by humans is that of crossing one line with another. It is for this reason that many illiterate people (including Aboriginal people) 'sign' their names with this cross. The 'x' is also the mark of death. Interestingly, Vernon Ah Kee constructs his portraits with a clustering of varying sized crosses to create areas of light and shadow. Through the little criss-cross strokes, his actions are akin to warmly brushing, grooming and stroking his relatives. He humanises what were essentially Tindale's 1940s mugshots of his relatives into large-scale beloved images of his family members.

shifting the blak paradigm

In Frantz Fanon's (1925-1961) *Wretched of the Earth* 1961, the writer posited that a colonised society culturally moves through three phases. Firstly, by force or acquiescence, the 'native' population adopts the cultural norms of the colonising power. In the second stage they move to a form of independence/recognition, where the population reverts to their historical, pre-colonial, original culture, language, and other social mores. The third stage is one of rationalisation, where a new superior form comes into being. Fanon was part of the negritude (black is beautiful) movement that started in the 1930s and came into western consciousness in the USA in the 1960s. This movement realised that, to effect change, positive black images had to be more prominent in visual art, writing, theatre, and film.

The portrait, *Blak Lik Mi* 1991/2003 by Aboriginal activist artist Destiny Deacon, is a triptych that depicts the faces of three black dolls and comments on the prevalence of 'white' blue-eyed dolls and similar images that still prevailed in Australian society in the 1990s. Another work of the same period, *I Seen Myself*, is a diptych that similarly addresses issues of self-definitional recognition.

At the same time that Deacon was commenting on social norms, in 1992 Queensland-born dancer and choreographer Marilyn Miller performed in a Stephen Page performance piece to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the 1967 Referendum. That Referendum overwhelmingly voted in favour of recognising Aboriginal people as human beings and not as plants or animals, meaning that, for the first time in Australian history, Indigenous people would be counted in the national Census. In the same year (1992) the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney presented an exhibition that I co-curated with artist Fiona Foley. Marilyn

Miller's aforementioned strong, short performance at the opening of this exhibition, titled *Tyerabarbowaryaou (I shall never become a white man)* climaxed with a pail of honey-coloured fluid poured slowly over Marilyn's head, onto her face and over her body. As this progressed, the translucent liquid dramatically changed to black, changing the colour of both her face and body to black.

The title of the exhibition raises some interesting questions as to why the penal colony, that was established in 1824 at Moreton Bay (Brisbane), was re-named Queensland when it became a separate British colony in 1859. It does suggest an honouring of Queen Victoria, indicating a certain form of colonial patronage. In 1959 Sir Raphael Cilento's publication *Triumph in the Tropics: an historical sketch of Queensland* highlighted how the 'white' European races had overcome the heat of the tropics. Somewhat slanted, it was thought that, after a huge effort to annihilate the Indigenous population to 'clear the land', and decades of using slave labour from the Pacific, industry and society could now exist without black labour. Queensland, consequently, has a particular identity. For better or worse, it has struggled to fit into a world-view in an art and social sense. Colloquially, since the 1960s, Queensland has been called 'the deep north' of Australia and thought of as a 'banana republic'. It is this steamy, subtropical, corrupted social and political environment that is referred to in Tracey Moffatt's somewhat autobiographical *Something More* series 1989 (cat Ref. 77). Moffatt's observations and impersonations create an ever-delightful, continuous guessing game, as her persona moves from a happy young girl's comments on the quirky aspects of everyday people, to a dark, lurking, hidden figure within all of us, as frightening as Norman Bates's mother in the classic film *Psycho* 1960 by Alfred Hitchcock.

in and out of focus

The Aboriginal concept of time is cyclical and not the European linear path. However, it seems to me that every decade or so the Australian national society goes through this existential question - who are Australians really, are we aware of our history - warts and all, what do we believe in, how do we (as a society) relate to Aboriginal people who were robbed of everything including their dignity in the criminal colonial action, and, where do we, as a nation and society, want to go (morally, legally, and philosophically, as well as economically)? Since 'white' colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples seemingly periodically drift into the focal point of this question, before being moved off into the 'vanishing point' in the historic distance. It is imperative however, that as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, we must remain the centre point of this question. We must remain in focus.

In 1890, Oscar Wilde, another person on the edge of being an outsider in British society, wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It tells the story of a respectable young upper-class British man who has a conventional complementary

portrait to suit his status and lifestyle. However, as his moral life falls, the portrait acquires all the sores, wounds, and decay as he tries to maintain a public stain-free face. The analogy that I draw here is that, in 1897 the Queensland Parliament passed *The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act*, which established the frame work of government policy relating to the control of Aboriginal reserves and Aboriginal affairs in Queensland. Comprising thirty-three clauses plus later amendments, the Act defined who Aboriginal people were, where they could live, work, and travel, who they could marry, and what they could or could not own. Like Dorian Gray's portrait, Australian colonial society presented a perfect moral face while keeping hidden a decaying, morally disease-ravaged other - the real image of the history of the nation.

In 1939 the *Opium Act* was repealed and replaced by the *Queensland Aboriginals Preservation and Protection Act* that made provision for a Director of Native Affairs who assumed the role of 'the legal guardian of every child under 21'. This new Act made it unlawful for any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person in Queensland to vote in state elections, receive or possess alcohol, and restricted movement, denied right to the lands of their birth, curtailed access to normal judicial processes, and gave relevant authorities the power to resettle by force, remove children without proof of neglect, forbid marriage without approval, censor mail, compel reserve residents to work for low or no wages, and seize property without consent.

This is a history of shame and subjugation, one which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to fight to redress. For artists represented in *Queen's Land Blak Portraiture*, it is evident that the journey of more than one hundred and fifty years has been long and fraught. This journey is perhaps best described by Bob Maza (1939-2000) an actor, playwright, and activist who was born on Palm Island in North Queensland and whose father was from Mer in the Torres Strait,

I only hope that when I die I can say I'm black and it's beautiful to be black. It is this sense of pride which we are trying to give back to the aborigine [sic] today.⁶

ENDNOTES

1. Destiny Deacon, *Blak lik mi*. 1991/2003, light jet print from Polaroid original. Edition of 15 triptychs of faces of black dolls.
2. Nadine Cohodas, *Princess Nôtre: The Tumultuous Reign of Nina Simone*, 2012.
3. Pars pro toto is a figure of speech in Latin for 'a part (taken) for the whole'.
4. Etymology: < Anglo-Norman *portraire*, *purtraire*, *purtrere*, *purtrayer* and Middle French *portraire*, *purtraire*, *pourtraire* (French *portraire*) to draw, to represent (1154 in Old French in past participle, *purtrait*), to describe (12th cent.), to shape, fashion (12th cent. in Anglo-Norman), to decorate, to paint (12th cent.), to imagine, to form a mental image of (12th cent.) < pur-/-por-/-pur- prefix + *traire* to draw (a line, etc.), spec. use of *traire* to draw, drag (see *train* v.1). Compare classical Latin *protrahere* to draw forward, to reveal, to extend, to prolong, in post-classical Latin also to draw, portray, paint (see *protract* v.).
5. Email conversation with Alan Cholodenko, 20 May 2019.
6. Lothian, Kathy (2007), *Moving Blackwards: Black Power and the Aboriginal Embassy* (PDF), in Macfarlane, Ingereth; Hannah, Mark. *Transgressions: Critical Australian Indigenous histories*. Australian National University and Aboriginal History Inc. ISBN 9781921313448.