

The Aboriginal Memorial to Australia's forgotten war

Author: Djon Mundine

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There are places around Australia where the evil of murder, massacre, rape and other brutalities seem to have leached into the very soil.

John Huxley reviewing Ross Gibson's *Seven Versions of An Australian Badland* for the Sydney Morning Herald, 26 November 2002

In Ross Gibson's *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (2002), an exploration of serial murders along the "Horror Stretch" between Rockhampton and Mackay, he bumped into the bigger question of large-scale massacres and the attempted annihilation of the Aboriginal race that occurred in this part of the Central Queensland hinterland, as elsewhere across Australia. Gibson's account doesn't shy away from the spectre exposed, acknowledging that there are indeed places in Australia that breathe evil, as historic sites of violence. From my viewpoint, as an Aboriginal person, it is intriguing to watch regular reprisals of a more general national performance that would seek to overturn such a valid comprehension of place through the persistent denial that many still hold regarding the colonial massacres of Aboriginal people, and the pretence that Australia is a white nation.

In the 1980s and 1990s, conservatives of all shades in politics turned against what they perceived to be immoral and untrue academic and artistic texts pursuing themes of revisionism in our national history – a legacy of the 1960s generation of the left. Chief among these issues for debate was the role and place of Australia's Aboriginal population. Although conflict between Aboriginal and European colonists occurred right from the beginning of the colony, it was not recognised at the time and in subsequent official histories as a 'war' in the legal sense: that is, a war was never officially declared at any time over the last 200 years. Through this and other semantic tropes, some would press that the nation was not tainted by illegalities or major crimes in an historical or international sense. The left view of Australian history, implicating present-day Australians for the near annihilation of the Aboriginal people,

as the 'black armband' version, was severely criticised for the diminution of respect shown towards European settlers in the 'great' colonial era of exploration: a period of survival and expansion, discovering and taming the land and environment, during which the settlers fought and acquitted themselves in other people's colonial wars. These were the things to be proud of! In the mid 1980s, within this environment of denial, the idea for an Aboriginal Memorial was conceived. At this time, I was working as the coordinator of the arts and crafts co-operative in the community of Ramingining in Central Arnhem Land. What follows is my personal account of the development of the memorial from a series of projects, which would involve all sections of the local art community, to the genesis of an idea for a memorial, and the process of its realisation in the form it takes today. In the early 1980s fellow arts adviser Peter Cooke, who was based at the neighbouring Maningrida community, had a system of setting up research projects to develop audiences for Aboriginal art and to create a local museum collection, following a successful model set up as a resource for social, scientific and historical instruction at Milingimbi Methodist mission in the 1960s and 70s. The aim was to constitute a permanent physical art history within the community, supplementing strong oral traditions, so that future generations needn't travel to Washington, Amsterdam or London to see the artwork of their forebears. These enterprises were in addition to the daily grind of selling 'bread and butter' items to keep the cooperative afloat. At Ramingining, during the same period, I proposed a number of art collections and projects which involved diverse groups within the community to record a broad history of styles and forms, spreading the benefits across the population. Around the end of 1985 to early 1986 I was contacted by the planning committee engaged in the construction of 'new Parliament House' scheduled for completion in Canberra in 1988. They were looking for inspirational, nationally significant artwork to fit out the building, including Aboriginal art. For this I proposed eight 'concept' projects, among which was a forest of dupun (hollow log/bone coffins) and, specifically for 'new' Parliament House, an Aboriginal visual arts cultural landscape referencing the Australian bi-cameral parliamentary system. Unfortunately, they were looking for larger permanent public art pieces, almost architectural elements for the building, such as the Michael Nelson Tjakamarra Possum and Wallaby Dreaming mosaic now in place in the forecourt, and declined all of the projects I presented. In the course of setting up the art centre's exhibition program we came in contact with Fran Considine who had just started working at the new Centre Gallery of the Gold Coast City Council at Surfers Paradise. A survey

show, *The Art of Ramingining*, in 1987 was accompanied by a mural project led by Ramingining artist David Malangi, Queensland artists Arone Raymond Meeks and Avril Quail, and Kombumirri woman Ysola Best. The mural, a representation of the Yathalamarra waterhole on Malangi's mother's land, had to be painted indoors due to seasonal rain. On a number of fibro panels, Meeks and Malangi laid down the central large reed-fringed black circle and composite sections outlining the various spirit and natural species creatures associated with the site. While we were there, we met members of the Kombumirri community who explained how they were waiting for the return of the human remains of about two hundred people from the Anthropology Museum of the University of Queensland where they had been cared for since being accidentally dug up in a Gold Coast property development project. A block of land had been granted to the community as a burial site. Malangi discussed the possibility of performing a type of Hollow Log Bone Coffin ceremony at the reburial. Upon our return to Ramingining we continued our conversations about how to complete the two hundred poles, one for each person represented in the collection of Kombumirri remains. Since 1788 (at least) hundreds of thousands of Aboriginal people have died at the hands of white invaders. In 1987, a sensational 'discovery' was made by a University of Sydney team, led by Australia's most celebrated pre-historian, Professor D. J. Mulvaney. They reported that the Australian population in 1788 was 750,000 (three times the previous estimate), concluding that more than 600,000 people had died as result of white settlement. Murdered in many incidents over these years, unsung and without any other ritual, their bodies were frequently burnt to hide the evidence or simply cast into dry creek beds or unmarked graves. It is for these unnamed, unrecognised, peaceful, normal, average Aboriginal victims – men women and children – and not just warriors, that this memorial was created. Whatever it has meant to 'white Australians' my inspiration was for the lost souls of Aboriginal people and the benefit of their present-day descendants. More recent research by Robert Orsted-Jensen has reinforced the fact that the deaths from colonial murder were more likely around 80,000 in Queensland alone. Some time ago, an elder artist in Ramingining (now deceased) brought me several videotapes belonging to his dead son. The son and the artist were very close to me. The tapes were battered and dust-ridden. I hesitated to run them through my machine but our relationship and my curiosity made me play them. His son was a very sophisticated person. He had been a member of the Northern Land Council Executive, and, in the course of his work contacts had been given some more 'political' videotapes as

background briefing for himself and the community. One of these was *The Secret Country* (1985) by award-winning journalist John Pilger. In the opening précis of the program he talked of the decimation of a tribal group who owned land on the Hawkesbury River, near Sydney in New South Wales, and who died 'to the last man, woman, and child defending their country'. He continued that, throughout the land in every country town, there was an obelisk to those who had fallen in this war or that, but nowhere was there a memorial to those first Australians, the Aboriginal people, who died defending their country. Other historians, such as Henry Reynolds a decade later, have made similar statements. Do we make room for the Aboriginal dead on our memorials, cenotaphs, boards of honour and even in the pantheon of national heroes? If they did not die for Australia, they fell defending their homelands, their sacred sites, their way of life. In the course of my work as art adviser, the major role was to make the 'outside' world more aware and appreciative of Aboriginal art and culture. Some works of art are visually accessible to 'white-eyes', but others are more difficult to place. The Hollow Log Bone Coffin was one of these. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, when Aboriginal art was really 'discovered', installations of so-called 'totem poles' were popular if controversial. The gradual growth in Aboriginal art appreciation from the 1970s was led by the Western Desert 'dot and circle' paintings. Sculpture, generally referring to bird and animal life pieces, was also sought after. But works as uncompromising as the Bone Coffins were still hard to place. The problem was to change people's perception of Aboriginal sculpture and art in general. During the day-to-day business of the art and crafts centres in Aboriginal communities, regular exhibitions are staged. Art is a communication medium that often transcends language barriers. The aim is that themes, concepts and ideas of Aboriginal culture are carried within each exhibition. During the Bicentennial year, Aboriginal organisations (and many white ones) were boycotting the celebrations. Many white Australian artists had withdrawn their works from Bicentennial shows. As a commercial enterprise set up to ensure returns to artists, any boycott decisions have strong economic consequences. The problem was to present Aboriginal culture without celebrating the Bicentennial. Historically, all Aboriginal art expression is personal and political in nature, as well as event oriented. The white Australian 1988 Bicentenary celebrations presented just such an opportunity. Before European settlement the forested area of the Australian continent was about 700 million hectares (around 10% of the total land) but forests are now less than 5%. Between 320 to 400 million hectares have been lost in just over 200 years of colonisation. The greatest loss in

terms of area has occurred in Queensland, where practically half of the Australia-wide loss occurred. In northeastern Arnhem Land present-day Aboriginal people carry on many age-old ceremonies and rituals. One of these is the Hollow Log or Bone Coffin ceremony. When a person dies, the body is washed, painted with relevant totemic designs, sung over and mourned. Some time later the bones of the deceased are recovered and distributed to relatives in a special ceremony. After a period, which may be years, the relatives hand over the bones to ceremonial leaders for them to hold a Hollow Log ceremony. A log hollowed out naturally by termites is found, cleaned and painted with relevant clan designs (like a body) amidst singing and dancing in a special camp for those completing the ritual. The bones are cleaned, painted with red ochre, and placed in the log with special dances. When a set series of songs and dances has been completed, the log is carried and danced into the main public camp and stood upright. It is then left. Full-size versions without the bones are made and sold today as sculptures. These are art objects in their own right. Originally living trees, the installation is like a forest – an Aboriginal artistic vision of the forest and landscape. In the original ceremony each pole would contain the bones of deceased people, embodying the soul. Each tree in this new forest would (symbolically) contain the spirit of a deceased person. The forest as the environment is us, we are the environment. Each Hollow Log is ceremonially a Bone Coffin so the forest represents a large cemetery of dead Aboriginal people – a war cemetery and a war memorial to all those Aboriginals who died defending their country. Two hundred poles were commissioned to represent the two hundred years of white contact and black agony. Within a year of the arrival of the first convict fleet, Aboriginal deaths from smallpox in great numbers occurred around the harbour. Death came so swiftly that there was no one to bury the dead. In fact, it has recently been speculated, that the plague may have been deliberately created by the British colonial authorities. It has now been proved that the colonists had brought with them bottled pus and scabs of smallpox and that members of the military guard for the convicts had previously served in America against the revolutionary war of 1776. During these campaigns the British had in several places used bacteriological warfare against Native Americans and others by distributing infected blankets as a tactical weapon to exterminate their opposition. In southeast Australia there were many well-documented massacres of Aboriginal people that have occurred since 1788. Many of these were covered up and forgotten. These incidents are of course the subject of the David Irving-style, white cult of denial still raging today. In northern Australia, a present-day

distortion of history continues. It is widely touted that Aboriginals there are treated differently and did not suffer as other Aboriginals did from white contact: that these 'real', 'more authentic' Aboriginals have no reason to feel betrayed, deprived and angry as those southern blacks and Queensland Aboriginals are perceived to be. Although many benevolent acts were carried out by missionaries, massacres were occurring, as ethnic cleansing, in Arnhem Land at least from around the end of the 1800s, the time of similar incidents in other parts of Australia. This is still 'secret history' for most of Australia. Passing through Sydney in the middle of 1987, it was suggested to me by the curator Bernice Murphy that I contact Nick Waterlow who, I was told, had just been appointed as the Director of the Bicentenary Biennale of Sydney. We met for lunch. As I explained the form of the project as an installation and the philosophy of the memorial as a forest, Waterlow gazed into the middle distance and in a very poignant moment asked if I had ever been to the First World War battlefields in Flanders? He went on to explain his remembrance of endless rows of crosses, covering rolling hills of the landscape as far as you could see. A landscape covered by the dead. The memorial was accepted into the Biennale. At this time, Aboriginal political activist Gary Foley and Charles 'Chicka' Dixon, who had recently been appointed as Director and Chair respectively of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council, arranged for me to address the board. There was unqualified support for the project and I had little trouble convincing them to contribute monies towards the transportation from the remote tropical north to the southern metropolis of Sydney. At the beginning of 1988 there were plenty of poles but little financial investment when printmaker Chips Mackinolty, then working as a journalist with the Northern Land Council, proposed that I should approach the Director of the National Gallery of Australia, James Mollison, to support the project. Mollison was extremely excited by the proposed art installation. The NGA was looking for inspirational Australian art to match in iconic status works like Blue Poles by Jackson Pollock and Brancusi's Bird in Space. He agreed to fund the project by in effect commissioning the artwork. When the time came in the middle of April 1988 to wrap and ship the poles, the floors of our small tin shed serving as an art centre threatened to collapse under the weight. NGA curators Wally Caruana and Gary Lee came north to check our progress and assist with the packing. After a mammoth effort over several days, with the help of local artists Roy Burrynyla, Charlie Djota, Lawrence Leslie and Barry Djarryang, the bulk were wrapped. Later they were loaded onto the town tip truck to be driven to the coast where a barge took them to Darwin. From there, the Biennale had

arranged that they be back-loaded in the luggage compartments and trailers of tourist buses to get them to Sydney. After installing the work at the Bond Stores venue of the Biennale of Sydney, with the assistance of young artists including Fiona Foley and Gavin Duncan, artists David Malangi, his son Johnny Dhurrikayu, Paddy Lilipiyana and Paddy Waynbarrnga sang to consecrate the space on the opening night. Director Nick Waterlow described the work in his catalogue essay as 'The single most important piece in the exhibition'. The work was seen as important to Aboriginal people too. The National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) named the contributing Ramingining artists as Aboriginal Artists of the Year. After the Biennale, the memorial was erected for permanent display at the National Gallery of Australia. David Malangi traveled again to receive the Award in Brisbane with fellow contributors Ganalbingu artists George Milpururru and Roy Burrnyila. They then went on to Canberra where he sang a second time for the public opening. National Gallery Director, James Mollison said in his opening speech that it was 'Probably one of the greatest works of art ever to have been made in this country.' Since its first appearance in the 1988 Biennale of Sydney a debate has taken place about the final resting place of The Aboriginal Memorial. Some argued that the poles should be placed outdoors in a relevant public place and allowed to decompose from natural weathering as happens in the actual ritual. I argued against this as it would be too convenient for 'white Australia' to forget its existence (and the crimes it refers to). It was also argued that because of its message, the correct place for such a work of art was the Australian War Memorial, not the National Gallery of Australia. I discounted this argument because of the lack of vision and knowledge of the real history of Australia, including at that time any mention of Aboriginal people, in the AWM. The governing board did move post 1988 to having a small wall exhibition of images of Aboriginal servicemen and women. This was a result of the debate about The Aboriginal Memorial and from the action by a private non-Aboriginal ex-serviceman citizen. In a city of mountains of 'red tape', without waiting for permission or for bureaucratic permission, he unofficially mounted a small metal plaque to a rock on the slopes of Mount Majura behind the AWM. The plaque reads: 'Remembering the Aboriginal People Who Served in the Australian Services'. The site remains (to me) as a much-visited, simple moving shrine and a strong statement by a private citizen of good conscience. Both moves seriously fall short in that they fail to make the conceptual leap beyond the idea of 'terra nullius' and recognition of the thousands killed in the 'black wars' of Australia's colonisation. A speech given by the then Prime Minister of Australia, Paul

Keating, at Redfern Park in Sydney on 10 December 1992 for the Australian Launch of the International Year for the World's Indigenous People, did much to acknowledge this need for recognition: 'It begins, I think, with the act of recognition. Recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the disasters. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us. With some noble exceptions, we failed to make the most basic human response and enter into their hearts and minds. We failed to ask – how would I feel if this were done to me? As a consequence, we failed to see that what we were doing degraded all of us.' During the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s various Australian historians had heeded the words of Australian anthropologist Bill Stanner about 'the Great Australian Silence' concerning the exclusion of an Aboriginal presence that prevailed in the telling of official Australian history. The most publicly prominent of these, Henry Reynolds, presented his research on Aboriginal massacres through a series of books. Reynold's publications have probably had the biggest impact on public opinion and raised the ire of conservative racists within Australia. A campaign, largely led by amateur historian Keith Windshuttle and funded by various right wing 'think tanks', used the schoolboy debating tactic of focusing on the minor details and then working these up to question the complete argument. The 'history' or 'culture' wars continue unabated for those who insist, like former Prime Minister Howard, on holding on to this 'positive view of the past' in relations between Aboriginal and other Australians. In 2000, to mark the end of the official Reconciliation process, the Howard Government initiated a competition to create a public artwork for what was called Reconciliation Place. The Howard Government's record in Aboriginal Affairs included sabotaging the Native Title process, refusing to apologise for the 'stolen generation', encouraging an atmosphere of racism within the electorate, and generally dismantling the mandate for Reconciliation. The art project was tragically symptomatic of this racist attitude. Here, the only images of Aboriginal people are those in Australian Army uniform (and children playing cricket) on one of the shards with the very un-Aboriginal neo-fascist slogans: Strength, Service, Sacrifice. In 2001 an official government television campaign for the Celebration of the Centenary of Federation made the claim that the formation of the nation of Australia had been peaceful 'without war or revolution', completely ignoring the black wars against the original inhabitants throughout the

colonisation process since 1788. The new Australian constitution of 1901 did not give Aboriginal people the special status they deserved and in fact only mentioned them twice, clearly stating that they were not to be included in the nation's population figures, that they would be denied the right to vote in federal elections or claim the same right to ownership of land and property as other citizens. Jimmy Governor who went on a rampage against his racist treatment at the hands of white people in eastern New South Wales was caught by authorities at the end of 1900 and hung in January 1901, the month of the national proclamation of independence. Later that year, the two elder 'squattocracy' patriarchs of the Durack family were both shot in the head as they slept by Aboriginal people with whom they had argued earlier in the day. In fact, the 'black war' is the longest continuous running war in Australia's history and many Aboriginal people believe it continues in various forms today. In 2005 Aboriginal filmmaker and artist Richard Franklin wrote to Prime Minister Howard urging him to move the council of the Australian War Memorial to include reference to those Aboriginal victims and heroes of the 'black wars' in its structure and programs as an important step towards real reconciliation between 'black' and 'white' Australia. 'The conflict between the British and Aborigines must be recognised and given the same attention that other wars involving Australian soldiers were given', Franklin wrote. This was positively supported by an editorial in The Age newspaper on Monday 21 June. On 24 June, The Age reported the Australian War Memorial response. Acknowledging that the issue had been brought up intermittently by the public, AWM Director Steve Gower said that successive war memorial councils had decided the memorial should honour 'men and women who died defending Australia's national interest in external conflicts'. Further, 'this closely reflected the concepts of the memorial's founder, Dr. C. E. W. Bean, Australia's official historian in WWI. The National Museum would be a more appropriate place for recognition of those killed in the "first wars"'. I conceived and assembled The Aboriginal Memorial in 1988, the bicentenary of the setting up of a penal colony by the British Crown that became Australia the nation. In 2015, Australia marks the centenary of the Gallipoli campaign that is so revered as defining the nation we are told. Unspoken is the memory of the centenary of the Armenian Holocaust that began almost to the day of 25 April 1915, where around one to two million Armenians were robbed, raped and murdered on the Turkish side. The Australian side of course already had its untold holocaust story – the near extermination of the Aboriginal race. Throughout my own life as an Aboriginal person, it appears to me that around every generation Australians approach a

'real', 'adult' confession and absolution in regard to the nation's crimes against Aboriginal people. Yet, on each occasion, as they approach the historic and moral moment, inexplicably, they fall back and recoil almost in terror at the implication that they could be held responsible. An Australian term is the 'never never'. And so the denial continues and Australians wonder why, in many parts of the world, they are considered racist, unintelligent, uncaring and inhuman brutes. A simple but powerful step is to make the conceptual leap, so clearly outlined in the speech of Paul Keating in 1992, to be honest about the past. Djon Mundine OAM is an independent Bandjalung curator, writer, and Phd candidate at UNSW Art & Design. He is co-editor with Daniel Browning of Artlink INDIGENOUS Global to be published in June 2015.

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Inaugural Winner of the Indigenous Art Writing Award of the Power Institute of Contemporary Art University of Sydney, 2017.