

Who are these strangers and where are they going?

These strangers, where are they going?

Where are they trying to steer? ^[1]

These words are the opening lines of a Badtjala song, created in response to seeing the ship Endeavour sail past K'gari (Fraser Island) south to north in 1770. It is also the title chosen by Badtjala artist Fiona Foley for her major survey exhibition, at the Ballarat International Foto Biennial in 2019. A singing of this song by contemporary Badtjala people, is part of a new moving image work created by Foley for this show.

The International Foto Biennial is held in Ballarat – where supposedly the oldest camera store in the country opened its doors in 1872 on the gold fields.

Aboriginal people appeared in photographs for the first time in 1847 (in Victoria), and Badtjala people first appeared around 1900. One of these images, *Badtjala Woman*, from this period was the inspiration for Fiona Foley's *Badtjala Woman* series (1994). Ever since, Aboriginal people at large have appeared in front of the lens to be perpetually defined and stereotyped by the 'white' people behind the camera.

"In this book, you will learn about how the wallaby got its pouch, how the boomerang was invented, and how the little fire bird came to have that bright scarlet spot on its back. The stories tell why the curlew cries like a woman at night, and how the swam stretched its neck, and why the bat or flying fox hangs upside down. You will also learn some secrets of Aboriginal Magic which you can try for yourself." author Moonie Jarl (Wilf Reeves).

Fiona Foley was born in Maryborough in 1964, a time of great change culturally in Australia and for Badtjala Aboriginal people. This was year of first tours to Australia by the British bands the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. It was the year of the first publication by an Aboriginal poet; Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker 1920-1993) of Stradbroke Island, who reflected on Aboriginal cultural life and destructive effects of colonisation, as possibly 'gone and scattered'. In the same year, a Badtjala book, *The Legends of Moonie Jarl*, told by Fiona's

relatives Moonie Jarl (Wilf Reeves) and Wandj (Olga Miller), both now deceased, was published by Jacaranda Press, illustrating a still living cultural memory. This book has just been reprinted.

Foley's Badtjala people (meaning in one reading the 'sea folk') are the people of K'gari (Fraser Island), a 'sand island' born in the mouth and estuary of the Mary River, possibly the largest sand island in the world. It was a place with so many food and water resources that it was one of the most intensely populated sites in Aboriginal Australia. The island was born from the mouth of Mary River on the mainland opposite and basks in its estuary. Life as we know it on earth was created in such a wet, intertidal zone where the saltwater mixes with the fresh. The coming and going of tides breathes life. Some 70% of Australian east coast commercial fish catch are born in estuary zones such as these.

In that same year (1964), the Japanese film noir *Woman of the Dunes* was released, telling a story about two oppressed people on another 'sand island' in the Pacific Ocean to the north. K'gari consists of huge sand ridges and Foley tells me the sand blows and constantly moving dunes both cover, reveal, and expose memories.

In breaks from art school in Sydney, Foley spent considerable time wandering the island, following the long, open beaches, and then into the rainforest interior and across the living landforms of the large, ever shifting sand hills and into the rainforest interior. Searching for, finding, and re-engaging with the spirit of the place. At that time, the Badtjala had no legal title or ownership to the land they'd lived on for tens of thousands of years, let alone recognition of their spiritual and social relationship to their island. Living on the coast opposite, they could until recently, only gaze at across the water, occasionally visit but never conduct rituals to spiritually re-connect their souls to this site. A form of devotional deprivation relentlessly oppressed them as they fought to retain the memory of their origins and bring these truths into the light.

Like you I am endowed with memory

Like you I have struggled with all my might against forgetting

Like you I have forgotten (unfortunately)

Like you I longed for a memory beyond consolation, a memory of shadows and stone.

Each day I resisted with all my might against the horror of no longer understanding the reason for remembering.

- Hiroshima mon Amour (1959)

I was told by a pregnant mother that if she ran a torch over her stomach at 22 weeks, the child in her womb could discern light and shadow through their mother's skin, even though the unborn child's eyelids are still fused shut. All photography is about light and shadow. All Aboriginal history has been portrayed as light and shadow – visible and invisible. The highest spiritual being appears in the form of a reflection or refraction of light into the 'rainbow' spectrum, appearing in the skin of reptiles, the scales of fish, the wings of insects and the surface of shellfish and oysters.

The photographic artwork of Fiona Foley can be read both epistemologically and ontologically as the written archive of history, and as the personal experiences of a lived, active, conscious, life. The works come from actual personal places in her life as well as a broad social-political historical brush.

Although originally trained at art school in print-making and sculpture originally, in which she was successful, Fiona has used photo-graphic images as an art form virtually from the start of her training. A photograph is an art object, and in art terms Fiona has combined sculpture, and installation with sets of photographic images referencing historic images, people, places and events and adding personal commentary on racism, racial stereotyping, and, interpersonal interactions in her life as a contemporary Badtjala woman. She places photographic portraits in central focal positions that draw your eye to them as the central point of meaning in her arrangement of objects and message. The overall point is that of memory, mnemonics, justice, balance, and shadow history.

Seven sets of photographic images are included in this special viewing at the Ballarat International Foto Biennial, interspersed with appropriate objects both natural and man-made: *Badtjala Woman* (1994); *Wild Times Call* (2002); *HHH* (2004); *Bliss* (2008); *Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom* (2010); *The Oyster Fishermen* (2012); and *Horror Has a Face* (2017). There is also an audio piece *Make Tracks Home* (5.49min).

The oyster pathway talks of the presence of the 'rainbow' spirit, and of the life of Fiona's uncle Fred Wondunna, who dived and worked deep sea oyster beds for 14 years near Lismore, NSW in the 1950s.

It also of course references the *Oyster Fishermen* series with its story of the convict oyster fishermen who worked out of the Brisbane River down to Moreton Bay and its off-shore islands when the first convict settlement was set up on the site of present-day Brisbane. Local Aboriginals took offence with their treatment of Aboriginal women and their general invasion of these food resources. The story is also a personal one for Foley, who appears in a stark blue dress in otherwise black and white images.

In both photography and painting the 'focal point', and the 'vanishing point' are meaningful terms. Wikipedia defines 'focus' as: the point on the axis of a lens or mirror to which parallel rays of light converge or from which they appear to diverge after refraction or reflection. Centre, focal point, central point, centre of attention, hub, pivot, nucleus, heart, cornerstone, linchpin, kingpin, bedrock, basis, anchor, backbone, cynosure. The 'vanishing point' is; the point in the distance where parallel lines seem to meet.

Most people in the Australian art world would know Gauguin's late nineteenth century painting; *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? (1897-8)*, but few would know the song words of the Badtjala people from 1770, a hundred years earlier, after observing Cook and his ship the Endeavour sail past.

The Aboriginal concept of time is cyclical and not the European linear straight 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 our dignity in the criminal colonial action; and, where do we, as a nation and society, want to go (morally, legally, and philosophically, and not just economically)? Aboriginal people seemingly periodically drift into the focal point of this question, before being moved off into the vanishing point in the historic distance. We are the centre point of this question and must remain in focus.

The exhibition and events related to the weaving of threads of Fiona Foley's life and her Badtjala extended family fall into two converging art-forms and concepts concerning memory, truth, and consciousness. The exhibition contains photographic images, oyster shells, and, a two-hundred-year old song, sung in the Badtjala language. Its first showing will be in August 2019 in Ballarat in the International Year of Indigenous Languages. The following year, 2020, it will be exhibited at the National Art School in Sydney, as part of the Festival of Sydney. The Badtjala song was created in 1770 and describes the Badtjala people's observation of Lieutenant Cook's ship, the Endeavour, as it passed K'gari (Fraser Island) from south to north.

It is a response to the so-called heroic colonisation; the other, Aboriginal side of history. Balance in the telling of this story is needed. For the 2020 Tamworth Textile Triennial; Tension(s) 2020, curator Vic McEwan insightfully talks about a 'balanced' view – that of 20-20 vision – perfect vision in both eyes twenty-feet from an eye chart. We can use this as a metaphor of history and a different kind of eye test where other attributes such as events on the periphery, ability to see things in depth, eye co-ordination, ability to move quickly with events, and colour vision-awareness also need to be considered to read history fully. These attributes must be utilised to completely see history correctly and bring to light the often, invisible Aboriginal side of history.

The sets of Foley's images and installations engage the viewer directly and forcefully but never casually. We should remember that Gauguin's question on colonialism fell on deaf ears and minds in supposedly post-revolutionary-intellectual France. Gauguin wrote a detailed description of the work concluding with the messianic remark to the art world: "*Seeing they see not, hearing they hear not*". At almost the same year as this painting, the Queensland government passed the *Restriction of the Sale of Opium and Aborigines Act 1897* leading to a formalisation of the sale of opium and adjustment to control over the lives of Aboriginal people in Queensland.

A series of stories, untold or unheard, are told and retold, chanted, by Fiona Foley. A binary history of the bible or the gun. A history of Aboriginal encounters with 'white colonials', those

of assimilative Christian missionaries, or the violent murder, dispossession, and enslavement of people as cheap labour. The title of Fiona's PhD photographs, *Horror Has a Face*, speaks of the 'Protector' of Aborigines in Queensland, Archibald Meston (1851-1924), who based himself on Fraser Island for a time in the late 1800s; and of the use of opium (and alcohol) in the enslavement of an Aboriginal labour force. These title words are quoted from another story of senseless murder, attempted genocide and madness, the American armed forces in the Vietnam War of the 1960s portrayed in the film *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Colonel Walter E. Kurtz says "... Horror. Horror has a face...", after Conrad in *The Heart of Darkness* (1899), "... the horror, the horror,"... a comment on the pointless, emptiness, and inhumanity of colonialism.

'I speak to cover the mouth of silence'

Fiona Foley, *Art Monthly Australia*, issue 250, June 2012, p 57.

Artists like Fiona Foley struggle successively but successfully, to keep Aboriginal people in a rightful 'focal point' position in this national existential discourse. Foley, through her life, as with many artists of her generation, spoke in her work to refute negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people and Aboriginal art. Many artists now pontificate and attempt to make 'profound political statements but remain 'legends in their own lunch-time'. Foley works with the burden of attempting to be an artist, writer, academic, Badtjala Aboriginal, and Australian citizen and yet remain a human being, with a positive view of life and the future of the society we all live in. Her art creates a space for debate, and the artwork is symbolic of Aboriginal people's inhuman horror of perpetual alienation in the land of their birth and spiritual origins. Her art strenuously challenges the official histories of Australia and the excluding writings and ideas of the western art cannon – a life on an edge. How she; and any of us Aboriginal people remain human is a wonder.

... I watched a snail crawl along the edge of a straight razor. That's my dream. That's my nightmare: crawling, slithering, along the edge of a straight razor and surviving...'

- Colonel Walter E. Kurtz, *Apocalypse Now*, 1979.

[1] *These strangers, where are they going?*

Where are they trying to steer?

they must be in that place Thoorvour, it is true.

See the smoke coming from the sea.

These men must be burying themselves like sand crabs.

They disappeared like the smoke.

Notes by Mr. Armitage. - Thoorvour . . . is a dangerous shoal near Indian Head, where the Changsha and Marloo were wrecked.

This short song clearly refers to Captain Cook, who passed the high, rocky bluff so close that he saw there, and mentioned in his log, "a number of Indians." The blacks saw him and his men on the deck and noted the man at the wheel and that the ship worked this way and that as he worked it. They supposed him to be the chief or master of the strangers. They thought that he was going to hit the Thoorvoor [sic] shoal. His disappearance over the horizon they compared to the sand crabs and the smoke and clouds. They had no conception of other lands or countries than their own . . . What Cook did not know was that these blacks had followed him from the south end of the Island in their excitement at the first ship they had ever seen.

- Cook (Wharton) 1893, 256

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