

Four Women: (I do belong) Double

Djon Mundine OAM

Curator

10 Music just can't be about the art, but it has to be an expression of the good, bad, and ugly in life...

Nina Simone from *Nina Simone: Four Women*

This year (2017) is the fiftieth anniversary of the 1967 Australian Referendum where Australian citizens overwhelmingly voted for Aboriginal people to be counted in the Australian census as human beings. Many ideas were moved by Aboriginal people ourselves in that decade and the 1970s. The creation of the Aboriginal Medical Service (1971), the Aboriginal Legal Service (1970), and the Black Theatre (1972). In 1963 the people of the clans of Yirrkala 'mission' painted what is called the 'Bark Petition' for Australian Parliament to claim their prior ownership to land in east Arnhem Land and begin the process of the recognition of Aboriginal 'land rights'.

Some writers say that this was the time of 'second phase' feminism that was part of a wider liberal rights struggle with the Anti-Vietnam War and African-American Civil Rights movements, and the passing of the equal rights constitutional amendment in the USA, and Australian women being granted equal pay (on paper) in 1969.

In 1963 in Alabama in the southern USA, four young Black girls (Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, Denise McNair, and Addie Mae Collins) were killed when the 16th Street Baptist Church they were in was bombed by members of the Ku Klux Klan. An infuriated Nina Simone markedly moved her creative action to a more political one. She then wrote a number of songs in response, including: *Mississippi Goddam* (1964), *Young, Gifted, and Black* (1970), and *Four Women* (1966), for the four women they may have become.

It beggars belief now, but in the 1960s Australian women couldn't obtain a housing loan from a bank without a letter from a male indicating that they were of stable, respectable character. This is no longer practiced. Important, sometimes almost unnoticed social and legal shifts liberated women in Australia over the 1960s–70s decades. The most important was the availability of the oral contraception drug; The Pill, that was released to

the population in 1961. In 1970, Australian intellectual Germaine Greer published *The Female Eunuch*, one of the most important writings of the twentieth century.

A group of Aboriginal activists, feeling Aboriginal people weren't treated as Australian citizens, but practically as foreign people, set up a tent; the Aboriginal Embassy, on the front lawn of Parliament House in 1972. In Alessandro Cavadini's 1972 documentary film; *Ningla A-Na* (Hungry for our land), which captures the Aboriginal political movement of the times, (including the Tent Embassy), a group of Aboriginal women tell several 'white' feminist women how they don't believe in dividing the Aboriginal movement at that time on gender lines, and remind them of colonial 'white' women's complicity in the colonial process.

In 1959, the film adaption of Tennessee William's *Suddenly Last Summer* was released. In the dark *Southern Gothic*, the young Catherine character is confined to a private mental hospital to be lobotomised to prevent her from telling 'the truth' of her aunt, and her cousin's dark crimes. Historically it was a practice to control women by deeming uncontrollable women as insane and consigning them to institutions for the insane.

From early on my father talked to me like an adult. One of the early things he did was to teach me the Latin names of the parts of the body. He was very analytic. We had

no money, but intellectual curiosity was encouraged, and my parents constantly talked with each other. This develops the brain. I remember listening and thinking, listening to voices talking, talking, talking ... My father died of cancer but lived long enough to see me famous, though not long enough to read my book fully.

Camille Paglia, Playboy interview (May 1995)

At the 2016 Cementa Festival at Kandos I saw Wart perform an unscheduled but insightful, wistful, reading-performance concerning the relationship with her father and mother. Wart was born near Geelong in 1958, one of five children to surgeon Dr Bob Waterhouse and his wife Barb. The children were nick-named 'Wart' from an early age, a moniker that stayed with her since.

Wart came to study art and design at Deakin University before heading to the active art scene of inner city Sydney in 1979. Her career history was so active, rich and broad in that scene. It defies description but included painting, installation, using found art objects, cartoons, performance, initiating art co-operatives, studios and residencies and designing posters and t-shirts for pop bands of the time (including The Cockroaches, Mental As Anything and Midnight Oil). With the photographer Ken Duncan she co-won an Aria award for Midnight Oil's 1987 *Diesel and Dust* album cover. At the end of the 1980s she had to

12 slow down after being diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder and in 1988 was taken to Gladesville Hospital for psychiatric assessment. From 1995, she was admitted to Callan Park Hospital for the Insane.

Continuing her art practice, she rationalised her life as an artist (having established herself as a 'name' artist), and her need for self-care in dealing as an independent adult with her now recognised illness. She has exhibited widely and often since, including a residency at the Bundanon Trust in 2004 and in Venice in 2007. Artbank curator Daniel Mudie Cunningham described the self-portraits of *Secret Phases of Fear* (2005); "depicting an escalating manifestation of mania during paranoid states – moving from raw figuration to smeared abstraction".¹ Or as curator Anne Loxley describes the series "a slow revelation of naked agony".²

Throughout history slaves, lower classes and outsiders ('the other') have been branded or marked in some way with subtlety, but more often brutally and blatantly. The Iranian passport of photographer and installation artist, Nasim Nasr, contains forty pages, and her portraits show her journey on leaving Iran and attempting to find permanent residency in another country — travelling from place to place, being bureaucratically defined and marked forty times until she is practically unrecognisable and may never escape the internal scars of this marking.

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia was the only country in the

world to bar women from driving until this year (2017). Women will from next year be not merely compliant passengers but 'be in the driver's seat'.

In the 1980s, when I lived in Ramingining-Arnhem Land, the male 'white' Australian Adult Educator gave lessons to the local Aboriginal women working in the town Council office to obtain their driving licence. This gave them control over the highly valued, Council vehicle fleet.

In the 1960s at the time of the Referendum there were few women (and fewer Aboriginal) curators or film directors. In the late 1980s when artist Fiona Foley and her fellow Boomalli co-operative founders started, they were shunned by State institutional and commercial galleries, and so they 'curated' their own exhibitions. This power position of 'curator' or film director is now recognised as the key creative, enabling position. It was something the feminist movement realised from these times, and, that if all oppressed people were to be given a voice, they needed to allow 'all' to be 'there'. It was a principle Carolyn Strachan and Alessandro Cavadini passionately believed in, and which I think is strongly evident in their direction of the 1981 *Two Laws* film, where the Aboriginal players aren't merely subjects but centrally retain the 'active voice'.

Almost forty years on in 2017, activist curator Therese Ritchie has collaborated with academic Seán Kerins and Aboriginal artist Jacky Green in curating the *Open Cut*

exhibition. On invitation, they worked to allow the Garawa traditional land-owning people of the Borrooloola region of the south-western Gulf of Carpentaria a voice in their fight against the colonial weight from the government and a Swiss-owned company, who were open-cut-mining and poisoning their land on the McArthur River.

Haptic specificity is the concept term, that you only allow certain other individuals into your personal space to touch your body. In Aboriginal society only certain other members of your society paint your body design on your body — they are in a specific spiritual and personal relationship to you. The painting also creates a relationship between you and the site in the land the paint comes from. The men and women in Therese Ritchie's subject directed photo portraits were painted with those words by those correctly tied individuals in their society, as with what is ritually practiced. If the earth is female; 'my mother the earth', it also has special spiritual spaces that can only be touched by people in this spiritual relationship to it. Who do you allow to mark that 'earth body'?

In a truly civil society it is a common right for every member of that society to be able to move freely about in their daily work and social lives without being assaulted, robbed or raped, or even to be in fear of such attacks. In 1992 David Lynch's psychological-horror film *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* was released. The film's story line follows the last week in the life of murdered fictional teenager Laura

Palmer and how the investigation into her death uncovers a society of drugs, corruption, hypocrisy and immorality, the truth of the history of a small country town.

Karla Dickens' hero images for the exhibition; her *Sleeping Beauty* quartet, honour the memory of a series of young women murdered in the Northern Rivers region, in some cases famous and current, others a little distant, but people we often know and strongly feel for, in what is a beautiful physical and potentially socially creative region.

Teena McCarthy's Ophelia self-image *Whatevahappentu Wiipitja Noongu (Barkindji woman)* was directly inspired in its form by a small publicity article 'Whatever Happened to Laura Palmer', but broadened the hidden murder in her work to comment on the unrecognised massacres of her Barkindji people in the colonisation of the upper Darling River.

I don't want nothing black but a Cadillac, said one³

African-American Black Power writer Eldridge Cleaver's important autobiographical-self confessional text *Soul on Ice* (1968) tells his story of the meeting line of black-white races in the USA from a black man's point of view. He initially defends his raping of white women as a political action in a colonial race war but shifts ground to see the pointless, immoral violence of this practice. Early in the

14 book he reviews another face of this crossing of race when he asks his fellow black prisoner colleagues their race preferences of women as sexual and/or life partner. Some preferred white women, some, Japanese, some Chinese, but to his surprise, though his fellow prisoners were all black, none preferred black women.

In an Australian office where I worked, when the mainly male co-workers had their end of work Friday night drinking sessions, a comment made when the topic of Aboriginals came up was — ‘We shot all the men, and we’re fucking the women out of existence’.

Carine says. I used to wear high heels everywhere! Even if I were making a simple grocery store run, I’d be in stilettos!⁴

Fiona Foley’s photo portraits point to the low esteem level of Aboriginal women in Australian society along similar lines. Aboriginal women were called ‘Black Velvet’ in colonial times up to the present. Her *Venus #4* (stilettos), from the *Sea of Love* series, in a form of ‘oppositional gaze’ is a symbol of a confident, sexually alluring Aboriginal woman. She is sexy and knows and revels in it. Privately, Foley related that she felt Aboriginal women can be educated, sophisticated, well-travelled, and yet, still now, unaccepted socially. As in colonial times; the Black Velvet, which you use but don’t marry.

Fourth phase feminism is I think a return the second phase of striving for equal acceptance within the society.

As a young female colleague privately related to me; “we don’t hate men, we do not imitate men, we have a common ambition to reach an equal, free and safe society for all.”

This includes a recognition of the true colonial history of the last two hundred years and the disempowerment, displacement, and murder of the Aboriginal societies that lived here at the arrival of the first shipment of British convict prisoners in 1788, to create an open-air prison for them. A current social debate is taking place internationally on the colonial historical (mainly male) figures the State sees fit to memorialise. I was told by a non-Aboriginal academic that traditionally Aboriginal people didn’t have memorials (nor I guess, anthropologists defining how we are supposed to live). There are, of course, far fewer statues of women (or Aboriginals) anywhere. Romaine Moreton’s *Ragtag* 2014 talks of the use of Aboriginal people, particularly women, as tourist fodder, not people we need to talk to or who have feelings we should care for, but a tool, an obscene object, merely to make money.

I am tired, tired of standing up, being counted, tired of ‘having a voice,’ or worse, ‘being a role model,’ Tired, true, of being a featured member of my racial group and/or my gender niche.⁵

Kara Walker, artist statement, 2017

Can art really provide answers, except as a form of their own personal, private relief? Kara Walker’s statement is one of frustration at expectations of providing solutions when we artists (representing ‘the other’) struggle every day with our own realities. But we have to strive to survive if we cannot flourish...

Out of the huts of history’s

Shame

I rise

Up from a past that’s rooted in pain

I rise

I’m a black ocean, leaping and wide

Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise

Into a daybreak that’s wonderously clear

I rise

I rise

Bring the gifts that my ancestors gave

I am the dream and the home of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise.

Maya Angelou

Notes

¹ Daniel Mudie Cunningham, ‘Mental Olympics: in between breaths with Wart’, in *un Magazine* 11.1, un Projects, Melbourne, 2017

² Anne Loxley, ‘The Charisma of Schizophrenia’, in Dysart and Fenner (eds.), *For Matthew and Other: Journeys with Schizophrenia*, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 2006, p. 42

³ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, Complete and unabridged, Granada Publishing Limited, London, 1968, p.21

⁴ Kara McGrath, ‘What 9 Real Women Wear When They Want To Feel Sexy’; <https://www.bustle.com/p/what-9-real-women-wear-when-they-want-to-feel-sexy-67494>

⁵ Kara Walker, ‘Tired of Standing Up, Promises Art, Not Answers’; <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/16/arts/design/kara-walker-race-art-charlottesville.html>