

Deacon-structuring Destiny

I keep having these dreams but they're not the good memories that I want,
they're the bad memories and they won't go away.

Edith Piaf, La Vie en Rose, 2007

We live in 'interesting times' - insane, dangerous, contradictory times. Can art make a difference and affect change, but can artists be expected to carry such a responsibility? Is it really better for the artist to 'heal thyself'; is that the first step - a cathartic one?

We are all victims of our times yet the best of us respond to and triumph over the personal and social that attempt to restrict and contain us. Artistic life itself is to challenge and never merely accept, as here in

'writing' stories from the 'tin box' of A.T.S.I. family photos of objects, events, places of periods of living experiences.

Early on, Destiny Deacon's work was a shadowy foreboding tale and herself the almost too shy 'little' Blak girl. Soft, unfocused, shadowy - I do what do because I like it [Destiny] - kitsch and camp - using things in a way to ward off the tension of the encounter - that of being forced into uncomfortable positions, to play out roles or characters in a sense of irony. You can hide your shyness by being a drunken Blak [as many people of all races do] or a dumb little girl [or boy]. Destiny was actually no doubt, smart enough to know that in Australia intelligence or ideas really don't pay nor in fact are they greatly respected [more likely resented]. However, in the art world how can you hide yourself for any period of time - to be

among intelligentsia and not be intimidated in exposing yourself. Both Destiny and Virginia have hinted at unpleasant frightening childhoods and could be seen to have recognized that in each other. At least in making art they can affect some control over their destiny [sic], to make one feel better to be myself despite everything. Special visions of the world, a world filled with prejudice. The relationship [and attendant issues] is to some degree, ones beyond questions of Indigeneity alone.

The history, the life Destiny had written then as ugly and grotesque had in fact a ritual beauty of a different kind. In moving about with her mother both physically and emotionally [she had several stepfathers] can be a draining experience for a child on one hand but enriching on the other. Her fathers worked on the wharves and as merchant seaman; were connected to the union movement leading to a very cosmopolitan, political and sophisticated life. Ships brought international contacts, foods, friends, ideas and influences [comics and the latest black music]. And of course, every 'shanty' town or 'shanty' place has a number of levels of existence. There are many levels of experience; reading and living Blak. They ambiguously exist of almost separate two paths of familiarity and understanding. At a conference concerning the pinning down of the elusive idea of 'urban Aboriginality' Richard Bell's story of disrupted family nostalgia and bitter memories were to some degree refuted by a set of participants whose lives were a more comfortable middle class reverse of his complex series of successive violent actions by the state against him and his brother.

Hear the pennies dropping,

Listen how they fall

Every one for Jesus

He shall have them all

Dropping, dropping, dropping, dropping

Hear the pennies fall

Every one for Jesus

He shall have them all

From 'Schoolroom', 2007.

The Scottish psychiatrist R. D. Laing said in the 1960s something along the lines that mental illness was an action or reaction by the individual in dealing with the stress of what is essentially an insane world. The photographs here come from Destiny's last two solo shows at Roslyn Oxley Gallery in Sydney; 'Totemistical' [2006], and 'Whacked' [2007]. The rug, cushion covers and two videos; 'Hoodies', and 'Whacked Off' [of someone stealing one of the videos from the installation at Penrith] were first shown at Roslyn Oxley's in 2007. Socially around Destiny in Melbourne is a form of 'Blak Bloomsbury set' - relatives, artists, theatre performers, political activists and intelligentsia - the literati, gather, socialize and in her case often to be used as subjects and contributors to her current work in progress. Masking brings out personalities - masking brings out possibilities. And so, we find artist Richard Bell, her brother playwright and poet Johnny Harding, her curator Natalie King's son Woody under the hoods of 'Whacked'; Bell and political activist Garry Foley posing in another series [Portrait - Gary Foley, Cosmic Avenger, 1995/2004]]. The hoods conjure the Ku Klux Klan in one guise, or people 'renditioned' and condemned to interrogation or execution in another. These are most probably common base working-class Ku Klux Klan with stocking-headed and flour sack hoods, not the institutionalized regal Grand Wizard costumes of Fiona Foley's H.H.H. series

[No Shades of White, 2005]. The fascistic use of a cavalcade of Australian flags is taken from the social overlay of turbulent racist, right wing, jingoistic events and movements; the Cronulla riots and others, passing before our eyes. Destiny thought up the hoods and Virginia introduced the flags into the photos and they collaborated similarly throughout. Things supposedly so rooted in reality and observation seldom are and are more surreal yet rarely what you call really visionary. Virginia Fraser related to me; 'Among the recent events that were going through my mind while 'Whacked' was being made was the Federal Government's intervention in the NT, the material in the ABC archives we used 'Schoolroom' installation, the previous Federal Government's citizenship test, and the increasing use of the Australian flag for all sorts of quasi and pseudo patriotic purposes.'

Don't you wish that you can be?

A, little Aborigine

The boomerang he learns to throw

And that is all he needs to know.

From 'Schoolroom', 2007.

Most Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people now live in urban environments and don't actively practice the rituals connected to their spiritual beliefs. A deficit the result of the history of 'Schoolroom [s]' across the continent and history; regimented 're-education' camps. A bell to time-mark your day - a bell to scar your life. Yet your personal physic history comes from that ATSI identity referenced to that Indigenous history - 'I am real am I not '- I have a creative history in this process. For some they desperately want something authentic to believe in and to some extent the quality of belief may be more important than the degree of

authenticity. It's really the capacity to maintain difference in order to maintain the capacity to survive. Many artworks purport to be political in intent. Totem, an Objibwe Native American word refers to an object, animal, plant, or other natural phenomenon revered because of your spiritual connection to it. It is something especially treated with the kind of respect normally reserved for religious icons. 'White Australia' holds many [too many] curious icons of Australiana in 'Totemistical'. Within the kitsch and ridiculous are actual people and an ambiguous and humorous Ghanaian Shark coffin referencing Destiny's own TSI totem; Beizam the shark [a metaphor for police]. Here we see a new anthropology - a new totemism - moving the idea of 'icon' into the idea of totem to reclaim it,

I wanted to write something that was critical but yet comfortable. Quite a lot's been written already concerning Destiny's choice of dolls and other objects to represent people and events. Babies and dolls embody unself-conscious, spontaneous playfulness and vulnerability. Babies are the next generation. How to affect - how to raise children; the next generation with a non-racist attitude without losing the development of a form of 'race' identity. I wanted an open discussion of sorts; white people never examine what it means to be white. For an Aboriginal you can never escape that - it's always there. How do we know what is real and how do we know what is human - this thing we call reality might just be a collective hallucination. Be brave to make your own observations, make your own notes, to see adventure in the ordinary, to imagine what might be going on in stranger's lives and minds. How to combine the ordinary and the extraordinary to make a new reality.

The wonderful work of Destiny Deacon and Virginia Fraser is open, challenging, and brave in its questions and the baring of particular poignant aspects of their lives - look, listen and enjoy.

He sings the wild corroboree,

You wish that you were he?

Don't you wish that you can be?

A, little Aborigine.

From 'Schoolroom', 2007.

Djon Mundine OAM

Indigenous Curator - Contemporary Art

Campbelltown Arts Centre

for Clandestine [exhibition] - Destiny Deacon and Virginia Fraser

Tandanya, 2008 Adelaide Arts Festival