

Uncle Noel Blair: *Ganan Ganan – Poor Fella Me*

Exhibition Review by Dominique Chen

6th of December, 2021.

It is both relatively rare and refreshing when an Aboriginal artist—with no formal art training, gallery representation, previous art sales, and with no mention in contemporary art discourse, can emerge with such assuredness and significance within the world of ‘fine art’. *Ganan Ganan - Poor Fella Me*, the first solo show by Jinibara Elder Uncle Noel Blair, curated by Ngugi Quandamooka woman Libby Harward, is an unpretentious body of work enlivened by culture, history, honesty, and the playful yet poignant processing of a lived experience beyond—and irrespective of, the gallery walls.

Ganan Ganan - Poor Fella Me is a series of six, large-scale poster works that depict brief, passing moments of conversation between embodied animal figures, speaking to the social and political circumstances of Uncle Noel’s life, as an Aboriginal man, living on Cherbourg mission and travelling and working across vast areas of Southeast Queensland. Beneath their unassuming, observational, and whimsical humour, the conversations are at times confronting and tensioned, highlighting the realities of displacement, colonial power and control, identity, and race relations in both a personal and broader sense. In his artist statement, Uncle Noel says the works:

“Have come from my reflections on things that have happened in my life...they portray some of the remarks we used to get. The things people used to say. They tell the stories from across my life and all the places I’ve travelled for work and all the things I’ve had to deal with. These are the thoughts I have at night while everyone’s asleep taking me back to the old days when I was knocking around everywhere... I have painted and carved and drawn since I was young and have carried this skill across the country in all the places I’ve worked. It has helped me survive and feel better when I had things on my mind”.

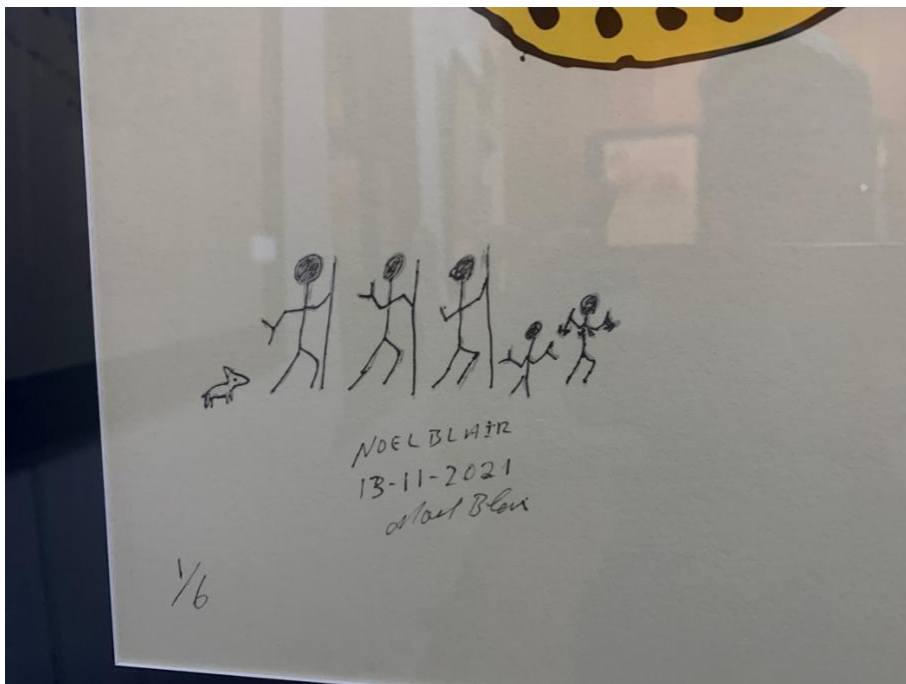


Uncle Noel Blair. *The GANAN GANAN Tour Poster*, 2021.

“This poster represents so many stories. It is the tour poster for my first poster series. It represents stories of my experiences across all the places I’ve lived and worked in my lifetime. Everyone of these places, I’m certain I have a story for” (Uncle Noel Blair).

‘Ganan ganan’, a multilayered, tongue-in-cheek phrase used on the Cherbourg mission to refer to someone who is not quite living up to their own ‘big noting’ or ‘showing off’, self-frames the work as an understated contribution, perhaps resonating with the understatement or derogation of Aboriginal people more generally within mainstreamed, settler colonial society. However, the title, like the works themselves, has a satirical undertone that invites a deeper critique, subtly instilling the works with an unrelenting power, strength, and resilience. As Uncle Noel explains, “‘ganan ganan’ people are considered very special people too, cos they can mix with anyone and everybody. They have a very loveable personality which never offends anyone in any way”. As such, *Ganan Ganan - Poor Fella Me* speaks to notions of survival, and the requirement to navigate the complexities and realities of a colonised existence. Like the ‘ganan ganan’ person, the works are approachable

and accessible—a friendly and welcoming space to share and feel into the harsh truths of their context. However, despite its overarching humility and non-confrontational approach, the sentiment of *Ganan Ganan - Poor Fella Me*—as conveyed by the animals and their to-the-point exchanges, is not one of defeat or deficit. Rather, within the context of their situations, the animals—as embodiments of Uncle Noel, and or Aboriginal people more generally, gently hold their ground.



Uncle Noel Blair. *Get off my Property*, 2021.

In *Get off my Property* (2021), a white dog snaps at a colourful, moving crocodile to 'get off *his* land, or he'll call the police'. The higher position, and aggressive, immovable stance of the dog within the frame, creates a contrasting power dynamic to the lower placed crocodile and its sideways movement towards the edge of the image. The implication that the weight of the authorities are on the dog's side, also furthers the apparent marginalisation and disenfranchisement of the crocodile. Uncle Noel explains how the work references a time growing up on Cherbourg Mission, where local property owners would curse, and tell people going fishing and hunting to "get back to the mission". Even today, Uncle Noel tells of how his family "has to cross private property if we want access to our sacred sites or check on country". The crocodile's reply of '*c'mon man, I'm just passing through*', on the surface, feels as if the crocodile is submitting to the demands of the dog, placating its sense of authority and control. However, it is through the purposeful non-confrontation of the crocodile—a muted, inconspicuous, and ancient animal, not an equal match for a dog after all, holds to its autonomous, travelling purpose. Despite the systematic pressures, the detached, fluidity and transience of the crocodile, in synch with the unfenced, sovereign and always-moving nature of Country, asserts its place, power, connection and belonging.

While unique in their style and application, the works of *Ganan Ganan- Poor Fella Me* come from the rich stylistic traditions of the Cherbourg mission, where Uncle Noel's old people, such as Charlie Riley, Charlie Chambers and Uncle Angus Rabbit Snr taught him to draw. The works then, not only capture moments of Uncle Noel's working and traveling life and experiences, but also the bigger contexts of the region's history, for example, the diaspora of Jinibara people to reserves and missions away from Country, and the circumstances of Aboriginal 'protection' policies and government legislation. The works in the exhibition are displayed with old photographs, texts, and documents, including Uncle Noel's Exemption Certificate—a government issued document which allowed him the 'freedom' to leave the mission. These accompanying documents and objects bring into sharp focus the highly personal nature of the works, inseparable from Uncle Noel's connections to family, place and culture. Within the details, they also express the inescapable politicisation and control of everyday, Aboriginal lives.



Installation images of document and photograph display cabinets, included in the exhibition. Munnimbah-dja Gallery, 2021.

The poster works were selected from multiple volumes of hand-drawn, pen and pencil notebook sketches, spanning decades; and that have until now, been shown

and shared only within Uncle Noel's immediate friends and family. Significant to the *Ganan Ganan - Poor Fella Me* story, is that the exhibition is a strong and considered recentering of intergenerational, cultural ways of curating, and supporting Aboriginal art practice within a fine art context—one that is often dominated by non-Indigenous values, processes and market trends. Curator Libby Harward, who is family for Uncle Noel through her Jinibara partner, BJ Djinidjini Murphy, worked collaboratively to unpack the concepts of the work, and select and transform the sketches into digitally rendered and coloured prints. The vibrant colours used include an earthy, ochre-like pallet of red, yellow, beige, black and white, referencing both their cultural foundations, as well as their connection to contemporary Aboriginal cultural identity and politics through the colours of the Aboriginal flag. This intergenerational, and collaborative way of working is not understated within *Ganan Ganan: Poor Fella Me*. Rather, the digital presentation and bold reworking of the drawings, brings a meaningful and poignant connection between past, and present—a sensitive and generous continuum of Uncle Noel's stories, insights, and experiences into contemporary contexts. The presentation of the works as a poster—a well-established medium of political protest and expression, is part of this amplification, reframing, and opening up the works to new and broader interpretations, outside of their personal beginnings.



Uncle Noel Blair. *Your Well Bred*, 2021.

"I remember working in Murgon at the legal service and I was sitting outside the office and this old white fella who used to own the local shop asked me my name. Back in those days they used to refer to us as full bred or half bred or quarter bred" (Uncle Noel Blair).

Ganan Ganan: Poor Fella Me, is a collection of reflective moments and musings from the life of Uncle Noel Blair. It is also the capturing of time and place moments in Aboriginal social, political, and cultural histories, and a testimony to the increasingly self-determined landscape of Aboriginal art within fine art contexts. The ‘ganan ganan’ person as ‘big noter’ or ‘show off’, brings a unique and satirical critique to a fine art environment that is perhaps mostly for and by the social and cultural ‘elite’—a space often filled with pretention, and ‘big name’ people. Whether Uncle Noel was justifying himself within this space, or satirising it—or both, remains to be seen. However, it is undeniable that this very subtle, unassuming, and ‘two-way’ space that *Ganan Ganan: Poor Fella Me* inhabits, is what makes its contribution so valuable.

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