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Art in America

FROM THE ARCHIVES: IDENTITY AND LOCALE: FOUR AUSTRALIAN ARTISTS

By Eleanor Heartney

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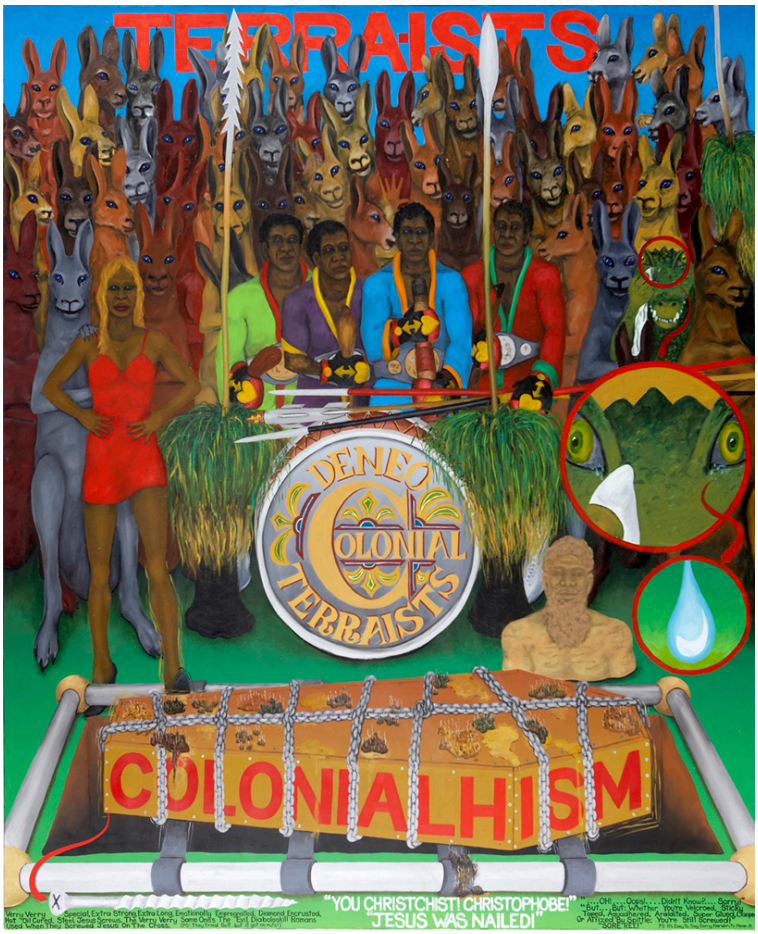

Gordon Hookey: *Terrarists Colonialhism*, 2008, oil on linen, 137 4/5 by 114 1/5 inches. Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

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Gordon Hookey: *Spears of Intervention*, 2009, oil on linen, 118 by 78 4/5 inches.
Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

In our October issue, contributing editor Eleanor Heartney ***wrote about*** *a recent trip to Brisbane, Australia, where she visited several exhibitions of contemporary* ***Aboriginal art****. Heartney was struck by the bracing militancy of the work on display, much of which directly engaged with the country's colonial history. "Australian reformers often speak of the silence that has muffled so much of the country's history," she writes. "Aboriginal artists are speaking up to break it."*

Nearly a decade ago, in May 2009, Heartney had contributed a more geographically (and ethnically) dispersed overview of contemporary Australian art to A.i.A*. Visiting gallery shows in four major cities—Perth, Brisbane, Sydney, and Melbourne—she reflected on the various ways in which local artists from disparate backgrounds dealt with their status as "outsiders," either in the context of the international art world, or with regard to Australian society itself. In this article, which we present in full below, Heartney considers the various aesthetic techniques used by* ***Gordon Bennett*** *and* ***Gordon Hookey****, who are ethnically Aboriginal;* ***Simryn Gill****, a member of the Indian diaspora; and* ***Rosalie Gascoigne****, of European descent. —Eds.*

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LOOKING DOWN FROM a plane above the Australian interior, one sees vast expanses of red earth barely scratched here and there by roads. It could be a Martian landscape, devoid or nearly devoid of water and vegetation, which might explain why the English and other European settlers opted to colonize the coasts. These days, however, things are not so comfortable along the coasts, either. During my recent three-week visit to four coastal Australian capitals, everyone seemed to be talking about current eco-disasters: floods north of Brisbane had plunged entire communities under water, while the so-called one- thousand-year drought in the Southeast was blamed for bushfires in Victoria that killed over two hundered people and at least a million animals.

There was plenty of time to contemplate such matters in the thirty hours it took to get from New York to Perth, my first destination, and in the five hours' travel between Perth and Brisbane, on the opposite coast. The enormous distances involved in getting to and through the country help explain the Australian art world's persistent sense of isolation. Recurring international events like the Sydney biennial and Brisbane's Asia-Pacific Triennial not-withstanding, **Australian contemporary art** remains shaped by an **outsider identity**. Artists turn inward, reworking broader esthetic developments to uniquely Australian ends.

Of course, geographical distance does not ensure immunity from global economic contagions, or from the kind of cultural conflicts that plague other multiethnic, postcolonial nations. On the financial front, Australia has been made vulnerable by its dependence on China. Politically, art worlders are heralding a change comparable to that which recently swept the United States. The 2007 replacement of the conservative prime minister John Howard by the opposition Liberal Party's Kevin Rudd promises a new approach to many of the country's intransigent conflicts. This was most dramatically indicated by Rudd's now famous "Sorry" speech a year ago. Breaking from his predecessor, who opposed such an action, Rudd apologized for Australia's history of mistreating its native peoples.

While I was in Australia on a combo lecture tour/art exploration trip, I saw many fascinating shows that raised issues of outsiderness, **aboriginality** and the complexity of **Australian identity** along with themes having to do with the continent's landscape. I'll focus here on four solo shows, all of which touch on these subjects in one way or another.

PERTH: GORDON BENNETT

The capital of Western Australia, Perth is a midsize city that inhabitants often refer to as the most isolated capital city in the world. The long-running Perth International Arts Festival offers some relief each February. It features performing artists on tour as well as a number of first-rate exhibitions of Australian and international visual art. Among these was “Gordon Bennett,” a traveling retrospective surveying one of the country’s senior artists, organized by curator **Kelly Gellatly** at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, and on view in Perth at the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

Bennett, an ethnic aboriginal raised as a Euro-Australian, exemplifies the many degrees of outsiderness in the Australian psyche. Raised in the suburbs, where **anti-aboriginal sentiment** was common, Bennett had a late start—he entered Brisbane’s Queensland College of Art at age thirty—but quickly became known in the late 1980s for paintings that deal with issues of aboriginal identity, his own and others’. Bennett used the techniques commonly available in the art world of the time: appropriation of historical and cultural imagery and manipulation of reproductive processes, along with references to postcolonial theory. In works like *Painting for a new republic (The inland sea)* and *The aboriginalist (Identity of negation: Flotsam)*, both 1994, Bennett promiscuously mined imagery from multiple sources, including illustrations from Euro-aggrandizing history textbooks. These he combined with self-portraits and Pollock-like skeins of lines and geometric forms, set against the intricate patterns of aboriginal sand painting. He often created a screen of painted benday dots, referring simultaneously to Western mass media, Pop art and the patterns of aboriginal dot paintings.

These works, with their intermingling of European, American and aboriginal imagery, convey Bennett’s struggle to make a cultural, historical and esthetic place for himself. By the mid-1990s, however, he was growing restless with the “urban aboriginal” label (a term used to describe “nontraditional” aboriginal artists). To distance himself from his own carefully constructed identity, he created a new persona, **John Citizen**, and has exhibited under that name since 1995. Unlike Bennett, Citizen has no discernible ethnic identity and creates work that riffs more specifically on Western modernist art. Citizen courts a deliberately banal style, but like Bennett, he layers cultural and art-historical references. For instance, in the “Home décor” series, *(Preston + de Stijl = Citizen) Post painterly realism of a peasant woman in two dimensions or Red Square* (1997) superimposes flatly painted snippets of works by Mondrian and Reinhardt, a trellislike grid meant to evoke the iconic white picket fence, and aboriginal vignettes and figures.

Such imagery also references the adoption of aboriginal patterns into decor by mid-twentieth-century Australian designers. Something similar is going on in Citizen's more recent "Interior" series, in which paintings of clean, '50s-era rooms, presented with a Roy Lichtenstein-like affectlessness, are furnished with objects of Australian modernist art and design.

Meanwhile, Bennett continues to exhibit new paintings under his own name. One series appropriates and reworks imagery from the paintings of Jean-Michel Basquiat, an artist with whom Bennett feels a profound affinity deriving from Basquiat's similarly, hybrid identity. "Notes to Basquiat" reaches its culmination in several compositions created in the wake of Sept. 11, 2001, in which Basquiat-style planes are aimed at attenuated towers. The exhibition closed with Bennett's less than compelling recent canvases, abstractions reminiscent of Frank Stella's early efforts.

BRISBANE: GORDON HOOKEY

Brisbane, capital of the northwestern state of Queensland and the third most populous city in the country, boasts lush greenery, a subtropical climate, a sparkling new arts and entertainment center (which includes the new home of Queensland Art Gallery) and a lively contemporary art scene. An exhibition of work by Gordon Hookey at Milani Gallery provided an interesting counter-point to the work of Gordon Bennett.

An aboriginal artist with no ambivalence about his identity, Hookey was born in 1961 in the outback town of Cloncurry in northern Queensland, and belongs to the Waanyi people. His large oils, crowded with agit-prop-style words and images, comment wittily on the situation of Australia's native people. Hookey borrows from a wide range of populist sources, including colonial-era political cartoons, circus and boxing posters, and trade union banners. In these often garish paintings, kangaroos stand in for aboriginals in confrontations with the bloated sons of white colonists, while boxers, boxing rings and punching bags refer to the history of "black fellas" in a sport that in Australia, as in the United States, provided a way out of poverty.

Hookey has noted in interviews that he feels free to play fast and loose with English because his own native language was stolen from him by the colonizers. Puns abound. One of the works in the show is titled *Terrarists Colonialhism* (2008), and here the conflation of terrorist, terra and territory sums up the basic conflict in a society where the original inhabitants have had to battle for their land rights. In this painting, a pugilistic gathering of boxers, kangaroos and an aboriginal

sex goddess pose as if for a class picture (or pose for an alternate-world Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band) over a coffin labeled "Colonialhism."

Two new works from 2009 reference an egregious landmark in white/aboriginal relations: the Palm Island Rebellion of 2004. Enraged by the death in police custody of a member of the Palm Island aboriginal community, an angry mob burned down the police station and barracks, as well as the local courthouse. The police, their numbers augmented by reinforcements from nearby communities, subdued the rioters with tasers. For much of the twentieth century, Palm Island was the site of a penal colony for "problem" aboriginals, and today it is a reserve with nearly eighty percent unemployment. The place has become a loaded symbol of both abuse and resistance.

In *Blood on the wattle, blood on the palm*, a phalanx of kangaroos armed with rifles topped with tribal spearheads is surrounded by a ring of goons bearing tasers. *Spears of Intervention* stars a lone kangaroo insurgent, armed with a rifle/spear and wearing a jaunty red Che-inspired beret, who presides over a field of fallen policemen, their eyes popping out of their sockets like springs. Despite the incendiary subject matter, bright colors and cartoonish characters give these paintings a playful air, as Hookey satirizes all the participants. Their closest kin are the similarly pop culture-inflected protest works of artists like Cheri Samba, Peter Saul and Manuel Ocampo.

SYDNEY: SIMRYN GILL

During my visit to Sydney, the capital of New South Wales and the most populous and multicultural city in Australia, an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art underscored Australia's growing ties with Asia, as well as the fact that a sense of inbetweenness is not exclusive to the nation's aboriginal residents. The subject of "Simryn Gill: Gathering" exemplifies the modern diaspora. Of Indian parentage, Gill was raised in Singapore and Malaysia, and now lives in both Australia and Malaysia. Curated by Russell Storer, the exhibition focused on Gill's impulse to collect and archive objects and images in works that explore the indeterminacy of contemporary identity.

A sly humor underlies many of these works, as Gill's careful cataloguing of objects and approximations of museological display veer away from knowledge toward uncertainty. *Garland* (2006), for instance, is a collection of flotsam and jetsam salvaged from the beach in Port Dickson, Malaysia, where Gill sometimes lives. Bits of plastic, wood, shell, metal and ceramic, from mainly unidentifiable sources, are arrayed on the floor as if swept onto a beach.

Detached from their various origins, they are as orphaned as immigrants wrenched from their homes. A number of works comprise pointedly inconclusive archives of photographs. *May 2006* involves rows of unremarkable images of the streets, houses and sidewalks of Gill's Sydney suburb, all shot with rolls of film nearing their expiration date (as alluded to by the date in the title). *Looking for Marcel* (2005)—the title alludes to Marcel Broodthaers, another collector of odd, seemingly insignificant objects—consists of four large color views of Port Dickson that bring out the peculiar traces of British rule in this Asian city. In one, the residue of a typically English-looking breakfast is seen on a table in an outdoor setting with palm trees.

Books are another recurring element, though Gill cuts up, dismantles and otherwise refashions them so as to completely cancel out their informational content. An untitled work of 2006 consists of 123 old and perhaps out-of-print books, some placed on a shelf where their titles form a concrete poem touching on colonialism, once-new technologies and other themes of obsolescence. Others are left open, revealing gaps where selected words have been cut from their pages. These excised bits have been classified by word, bagged and placed in boxes. The quasi-scientific care with which these operations have been carried out adds to their absurdity. Another work, *32 Volumes* (2006), eliminates words altogether. Gill has whited-out the texts of the entire multivolume World Life Library series of the mid-1960s, so that only the photographic illustrations of exotic sites and people remain. Books are most thoroughly transformed in "Pearls," begun in 1999, an ongoing project for which individuals donate a favorite book. These are returned in the form of paper-bead necklaces created from the pages of each. No longer readable, the books have become another kind of precious object for their owners, their original residing only in memory.

With piles of found objects, stacks of photographs, shelves of book works and a reading room stocked with pamphlets and books whose connections to the art were not entirely clear, the show flouted the standard conditions of exhibition display. Instead, the eclecticism suggested a working laboratory, with various ideas laid out for consideration.

MELBOURNE: ROSALIE GASCOIGNE

In Melbourne, Australia's second most populous city, the standout solo show was "Rosalie Gascoigne," like "Gordon Bennett" curated by Kelly Gellatly for the National Gallery of Victoria. Similar to Simryn Gill, Gascoigne (1917-1999) was a hunter-gatherer of sorts, but to different ends. While Gill's collecting serves her conceptual concerns, Gascoigne was inspired by the

objects themselves, and her works fall in the modernist tradition of transforming quotidian materials into high art.

Of the four artists spotlighted here, only Gascoigne is of European descent. She is also the only one without formal art training. Born in New Zealand, where she studied English and Classics, she moved to Australia in 1943 to astronomer employed in the mountains outside Canberra. Harboring ambitions to be an artist while living a conventional domestic life, she studied Japanese flower arranging and developed friendships with Australian painters. She burst onto the scene in 1974 at age fifty-seven with a gallery show of assemblages that incorporated discarded farm machinery, stones, and dried flowers. These works quickly evolved into more elaborate arrangements, often in weathered wooden beehive boxes, of jars, dolls' heads, enamel kitchen-ware, reproductions of Renaissance portraits and cutouts of parrots from the ads of a local biscuit company.

The exhibition traced her development from series to series, as she seems to have been determined to navigate the entire history of modern art. Though Gascoigne claimed to be unfamiliar with many of their works, her assemblages variously recall Joseph Cornell, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Marcel Duchamp, Frank Stella, and Georgia O'Keeffe, as well as a number of Australian landscape painters. There is a wonderful audacity to many of her transformations. *Suddenly the Lake* (1995) is a composition with a simplified mountain view in the style of restrained landscape paintings by the better-known Australian Colin McCahon (1919-1987), though Gascoigne's work is created from cut up and spliced together segments of painted foam board and plywood. *Piece to Walk Around* (1981), which consists of patches of dried saffron thistle stems laid in squares on the floor, suggests a naturalized Carl Andre. *All That Jazz* (1989) combines Johns's crosshatching with the jumpy rhythm of Mondrian's late paintings in a gridded wall work composed of strips of wood cut from colorful soft-drink crates. The crates appear again in *Sweet Sorrow* (1990), where the yellow grounds and black lettering have been arranged as suggestive poems that bring to mind the text paintings of Christopher Wool. Among the latest works in the exhibition is *White Garden* (1995), consisting of corrugated iron rectangles painted in shades of off-white. The austere lyricism of Agnes Martin comes to mind.

Gascoigne's idiosyncratic work amounts to a compendium of Western art as seen from a distance and recreated with the humble materials at hand. For her, and for the other artists in my admittedly arbitrary roundup, Australia's isolation can be more a goad and a virtue than an affliction.