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Landscapes in blood

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Debra Jopson

The Aborigines of the Kimberley have turned to pictures to sway the debate about white massacres of their people. Debra Jopson reports.

‘HE RAN and ran. The white men were chasing him on horseback and he hid in the water. A white man shot at him from up on the horse. The old man thought quickly and cut himself so that his blood came out in the water. The white man looked at it and said: ‘All right. I hit him.’”

That is how Kimberley artist Phyllis Thomas described her uncle's story of outwitting a pursuer by pretending a bullet had struck him. Thomas cannot read or write, so to record this story permanently she created her dramatic painting *The Escape*.

It is one of 12 such paintings by 10 artists about frontier murder which form a new exhibition to be opened by the former governor-general, Sir William Deane, at Melbourne's Ian Potter Museum of Art today.

Called *Blood on the Spinifex*, the exhibition depicts three massacres at Mistake Creek, Bedford Downs and Chinaman's Garden and survival stories like those of Thomas's uncle over the half century after whites arrived in the north-eastern Kimberley region of Western Australia in the 1880s.

According to the exhibition's curator, Tony Oliver, these artworks are a direct rebuttal of the attempt by Keith Windschuttle, author of a new book, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, to downplay the ferocity and frequency of frontier killings of the 18th and 19th centuries. "The whole thing is about an oral history versus a written history and that's what this show is partly discussing," says Oliver. "When you can't read and write, your main history is through oral history, the passing down of stories." Oliver is an adviser to a group of feisty painters of the Gija people who had created the Jirrawun Aboriginal Art Corporation. He has heard the oral history of the north-eastern Kimberley killing fields by night around their campfires.

Oliver believes it took great courage to divulge the stories to him and then to other whites. Many had not been told before for fear that it would lead to a bullet through the head of the teller.

"Who can the oral historian trust to tell of murder against his people other than his own people? Retribution from the white man amongst indigenous Australians is not an abstraction it is part of our shared history," Oliver writes in the exhibition catalogue.

The weight to be given to oral history is at the heart of the debate which flared recently between Windschuttle and Deane over whether white people killed Aborigines at Mistake Creek in the Kimberley in 1915. Windschuttle said Deane had got it wrong when he apologised to Kimberley Aborigines over the massacre. Police records showed it was "a killing of Aborigines by Aborigines". Deane wrote in reply that "one simply cannot ignore the indigenous oral history" and that police throughout Australia were reluctant to file adverse reports against white settlers.

When news of the academic debate filtered to the Kimberley, the old people who had been handed down stories from three eyewitnesses about their forebears being killed at Mistake Creek by whites were frustrated over their inability to reply. They could not read or write.

But over the past few years, they have been finding new ways to tell their stories to city audiences. The exhibition is part of their answer. "How is somebody who has an oral history meant to be involved in this debate? It's basically a European-dominated paradigm that these people haven't been able to enter," says Oliver.

"So they entered this debate through their own culture, through painting." Linguist Frances Kofod has written down in English the stories she took from them in Gija and Kimberley Kriol.

They are painful. The late Timmy Timms painted a boab tree near Mistake Creek, where he said his mother's family had been murdered. It was at this site that Deane said "sorry". For that Windschuttle took him to task.

According to the catalogue, Timms's massacre account is very similar to the story found in 1915 police records. Timms spoke of a group of Aborigines camped in a gorge near Mistake Creek homestead. The group ate a cow after their dog had attacked it. As punishment, two white men, Bob Beattie and Mick Rhattighan, shot the Aborigines in the gorge. They were helped by an Aboriginal station hand from Darwin, Joe Winn.

A fleeing Aboriginal survivor told the Turkey Creek police, who couldn't find their horses straight away and took a while to move out.

Meanwhile, the remaining Aborigines in the gorge were chained up and moved to Mistake Creek. The police arrived just as the last shot was fired in their massacre. "White people call it Mistake Creek. We call it Gurtbelayin the place where many were killed at one time," said Timms.

In notes to his painting, Chinaman's Garden Massacre, Rusty Peters has said how his uncle, a survivor, "went down afterwards to look for them. 'Where are my people? Where are my people? Where?' The white men had killed them all, poor things."

Timmy Timms's bold black and brown painting Bedford Downs Massacre has a white dotted circle in one corner, which he once explained represented the place where a group of Aboriginal people were poisoned and burned by white men.

Timms's sister Peggy Patrick was instrumental in taking a corroboree about this massacre to the Melbourne stage recently in the production *Fire Fire Burning Bright*. Timms's son Freddie, chairman of the artists' co-operative, said of Windschuttle: "He don't know nothing about killing black people. It's what white people have done."

Authors like Windschuttle will have their rebuttals cut out for them in years to come.

Gija people giving cross-cultural training to Argyle Diamond Mine workers in their region gave them "chilling accounts" of 11 massacres there, the Aboriginal academic Professor Marcia Langton said in her catalogue notes for the exhibition. "We are finding more and more massacres now they are finding the confidence to speak," says Oliver.

Freddie Timms this week issued an open invitation to Windschuttle to visit the massacre sites with the Gija people and to hear their stories.

"He wants to come; he can come and look if he reckons no blackfellas got shot.

"Let him come and have a look. We'll show him around."