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A Year in Art: Australia, 1992 review – dreams and nightmares

The 200-year battle for indigenous land rights in Australia is the focus of a devastating – and richly rewarding – exhibition

Tracey Moffatt, No title, from her series of lithographs Up in the Sky, 1997.

By Laura Cumming
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Tate Modern, London

Australia was founded on a Saturday, according to Algernon Talmage's ludicrous painting of the scene. Assorted British officers raise their beer mugs to the union jack, hoisted above the gum trees: cheers! It could be any old cup final, except that this is Sydney Cove in 1788.

The other side of the story at Tate Modern appears, very aptly, on the opposite wall. Gordon Bennett's *Possession Island (Abstraction)* reprises this colonial triumphalism, complete with Captain Cook and flag, but in stippled dots reminiscent of both pointillism and Indigenous Australian painting. At the heart of the picture is a kind of suprematist abstraction – red, black and yellow (colours of the Indigenous

Australian flag) – obscuring the ghost of a black man holding up the drinks tray. Black footprints appear among the undergrowth. Bennett versus Talmage: what a pictorial standoff.

This excellent new show is emphatically political. Its focus is the agonising debate over Indigenous Australian land rights, before and after the high court's epochal 1992 Mabo decision. Eddie Koiki Mabo's family had lived on the Straits island of Mer for at least 17 generations when the government tried to seize the land. He spent the last decade of his life challenging the doctrine of *terra nullius* – land belonging to nobody – upon which the British had justified the original colonisation.

The Leap (2017), by Dale Harding.

Mabo's drawings of Mer were crucial evidence and here they are: all the plants, trees and neighbourly "portions" marked out, somewhere between landscape and map. Indigenous Australians do not recognise conventional land ownership, we're told, only that the Earth is the living basis for all human existence. And for its repose; Mabo died only months before his challenge succeeded. He is buried on that tiny island shaped like a dugong.

Land is so variously depicted at Tate Modern. In Dale Harding's *The Leap*, the red earth is literally blown on to the canvas. The title refers to the death of a 19th-century Indigenous Australian woman in Mackay, leaping from a cliff to avoid the Queensland police. Harding's image is both entirely abstract and yet also figurative, to some extent, conjuring an aerial view of the land. Which is true, too, of much Indigenous Australian art.

The whole show takes you deep into land, race and history with unforgettable immediacy

Possession Island (Abstraction) 1991, by Gordon Bennett.

There are paintings here by Emily Kame Kngwarreye, a renowned elder from the Utopia region of the Northern Territory, who only began using acrylic paint in her 70s. Desert dabs of red and ochre, alternating with a maizy gold and the blue-green of eucalyptus, take you immediately into the dazzling land. Here and there, pale skeins of cream and grey wind through the surface. For western eyes, accustomed to abstraction, it is hard to comprehend their physical significance to the indigenous people: yam roots elaborating beneath the soil; the dusty tracks of passing emu.

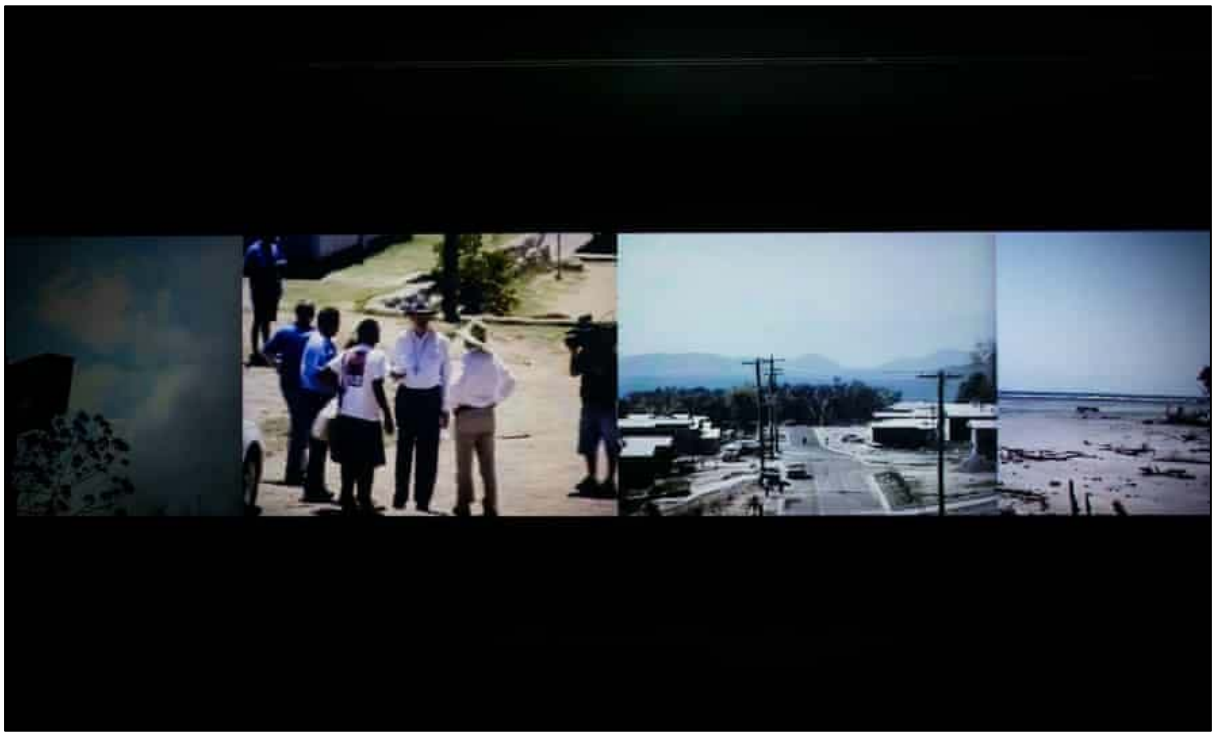
Land beneath your feet, wide sky above... they are evoked in video, painting and print. The dark and knotted photographs of Tracey Moffatt, Australia's representative at the 2017 Venice Biennale, are even called *Up in the Sky*. Visions of a post-industrial outback, with tin shacks, concrete sidings and burnt-out cars, these shots are like the stills from an overwhelming Pasolini film whose narrative is oblique or withheld.

A group of white nuns holds an Indigenous Australian baby aloft in the blazing sky. An indigenous child wanders among entirely white townsfolk. In one scene, three generations of villagers stand sentinel in a dusty street, staring in fearful opposition at the camera. All the dark-skinned girls are dressed in long white frocks – a fierce pastiche of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

Or so it seems, until you come upon a devastating film by Peter Kennedy and John Hughes. *On Sacred Land, 1983-1984* is a montage of archive footage that shows, inter alia, indigenous children being drilled to march like British soldiers, round and round in pointless circles; missionaries teaching them to skip; Indigenous Australians shackled in heavy neck rings. And there, within these vicious circles, is a film of dark-skinned girls being forced to dress in long white frocks. This is a portrait of the Stolen Generation: the indigenous children taken from their parents by government agencies and "assimilated" among white families, with the aim of cleaning up the blood stock.

"40,000 years of dreaming," runs the old Indigenous Australian slogan, "200 years of nightmares."

Anyone visiting this show will be stopped in their tracks by Judy Watson's collection of etchings: *a preponderance of aboriginal blood* (2005). Each print presents a very subtly chosen documentary fragment steeped in bloody ink. And each print tells a different horror: the determination of a person's "breed" from the blood in their veins – half-caste, quarter-cast, octoroon – as the bureaucracy decides who is white enough to vote. Indigenous Australians did not get the right to vote in Queensland until 1965.



Tall Man (2010), by Vernon Ah Kee

Occasionally, the art draws too close to fact. Helen Johnson's wall-size paintings repeat what is already known: that the British introduced smallpox and pestilential rabbits to Australia. And there are not many loans; almost everything was acquired by Tate Modern with a 2015 grant from Qantas. However, that thrift converts into free

entry until next spring. And the whole show takes you deep into land, race and history with unforgettable immediacy. The last work is a four-screen video installation by Vernon Ah Kee, which doesn't just tell the tale of the death in custody of a black man at the hands of white police on Palm Island, it actually orchestrates footage of riots, protests, the burning of the police house, government statements, even the arrival of back-up forces by helicopter from the mainland.

The fate of Mulrunji Doomadgee was to die within minutes of his arrest for swearing at a policeman in 2004. The case is still live. And the astonishing feat of all this splicing, timing, syncopation and sound is to give you the full crisis of civil and racial injustice on a portion of Australian land in the 21st century. Sporadically, through the smoke, you glimpse the blue sea that circles this little paradise.