

# I PREFER IMAGINING

Clothilde Bullen



Karla Dickens, *Bottom Feeders IV*, 2018, acrylic and collage on board, 60 x 48 cm. Queensland University of Technology Art Collection, purchased 2018

**I prefer imagining.** So, indulge me, if you will, in a spot of it. Imagine if there was a disease so virulent, so prevalent across the entire planet that it affected every single human being. Imagine it taking different forms across the sweep of the earth's curve, mutating shape dependent on people and place. Some forms are violent and cause great suffering and death; others are little more than an annoyance. Imagine it manifesting differently in the young and old, and disproportionately affecting people of colour.

You might imagine I am talking about the current global pandemic of coronavirus, but this disease is far more entrenched, far more insidious and one for which it is unlikely there will ever be a cure. I speak of the disease of racism and prejudice.

The grief we are feeling for our disrupted lives is the very same grief that people of colour and many other ethnic minorities feel each and every day, particularly when lived under the weight of ongoing systemic prejudice and institutionalised racism. Grief mixed with rage, with fear and despair, with coping masked as complacency, with constructive efforts to create change. Research has shown stark inequalities in the health and health care of racial groups, with racism the most disturbing of explanations for these disparities. It is during times like these, when the very fabric of society is on a knife edge and all we know is under threat, that issues of structural racism and prejudice stand out in sharp relief.

Art is a vaccine for the times – a domain where the hard issues of grief and racism and suppression and sexism can be unpacked, tilted, challenged and metamorphosed into alternative forms. It is an unfortunate but continuing necessity that cultural institutions curate and construct programming and exhibitions that respond to these ongoing themes, and it is in this vein that the offering of complex works in *Just Not Australian* takes place. I prefer to call it an offering, or perhaps a call to arms; one that ultimately asks more questions than it answers. The artists examine the broad overtones of nationalism and right-wing populism generally associated with anti-environmentalism, protectionism, anti-globalisation and an opposition to immigration.

Australia's descent into an ever-increasing fundamentalist nationalism is underpinned by a pervasive postcolonial history of negative race relations and a suspicion of all things non-western and non-heteronormative. One of the central foci of the exhibition is Soda Jerk's *TERRA NULLIUS*, which examines ideas of visibility and inclusion in a kind of meta-analysis of popular Australian culture through film. It can be read as an anti-nationalist

text and acts as a thread, drawing the other works towards it like a spider in the middle of a web.

Hoda Afshar's characters in Middle Eastern dress engage in the ritual of new nationhood in order to gain safety by assimilation; while Abdul Abdullah's singular work confronts viewers with a direct statement that exemplifies this same idea and is seen on a great many rear car windows in suburban middle Australia. Cigdem Aydemir's video offering relates to the work of Afshar and that of Fiona Foley by focusing on clothing and adornment – in this case the hijab – and inverting its loaded imagery by proposing a defiant narrative centred around Muslim women creating their own characterisations of a meaningful self.

Playing on the themes first raised in her 2004 series *HHH* (Hedonistic Honky Haters), Foley's new work *Hunted II* – a series of black hoods assembled in a tic-tac-toe installation on the wall – subverts the symbolism of the white supremacist movement of the Ku Klux Klan. The title references the hunting of Aboriginal people and their subsequent massacres across the continent, as well as ideas around racial profiling. Each hood is made using precise measurements under the guise of the pseudoscience of anthropometry, which asserted the average measurements of a white person's eye spacing, nose width, forehead and skull as ideal and the basis from which any departure from normal should be measured, correlating these with negative or positive racial traits.

While Indigenous Australians were historically tarred with these negative measures, they were also, in contrast, exoticised and sexualised as an 'other' (and often still are) with a different set of negative expectations and inferences. Tony Albert's *exotic OTHER*, 2009, is an assemblage of separate collected pieces of rummage and found kitsch components that form the words of the title. Albert references an Australian aesthetic tradition that dehumanised Indigenous Australians by representing them on common household items to be seen as targets of ridicule and caricature.

Similarly, Eric Bridgeman utilises a singular kitsch object en masse, which acts almost as a memorialisation of those who have been othered and objectified. Bridgeman uses the golliwog figure – with its complex social history – as a stand-in or mouthpiece for actions related to political activism, heteronormativity, racism and the feelings of being an outsider. Part of the cultural heritage the artist has inherited is Papua New Guinean, and Bridgeman steps into the role of the golliwog, referencing the Papua New Guinean war carriers called Fuzzy-Wuzzy Angels by British and Australian soldiers.

Karla Dickens' video work *The Queens Road*, 2017, is grounded in the history of Lismore, in regional New South Wales where she resides. Queen Elizabeth II made her way around the country on a national tour in 1954, stopping in this small town along the way. Dickens places a contemporary young Aboriginal woman back into that space and time as the central protagonist who runs away from the Queen, symbolically escaping the yoke of imperialism.

Ryan Presley's large-scale banknotes author the next chapter of race relations by offering representations of Indigenous people of important cultural and historical standing writ large on faux Australian currency. The exploitation of Indigenous people in this country that has contributed so significantly to the colonial project is addressed by utilising the most significant semiotic systems of capitalism: money and unequal exchange. By imposing portraits of Indigenous leaders, however, Presley subverts the prevailing power dynamic.

Jon Campbell and Richard Lewer both offer arms-length laments and weaponised musings on contemporary Australian national identity. It is interesting that text is so dominant in *Just Not Australian*, given it is so often the weapon of the oppressor, but text-based works such as Campbell's and Lewer's act as a kind of anti-virus, an unseen and stealthy force that has the power to permeate our subconscious in potentially drastic and profoundly positive ways. In Raquel Ormella's work *Imperative*, 2012, text becomes object – an Australian flag with all its loaded symbolism folding in on itself and conflating the work with strategies of political activism.

Based on drawings of the Leverian Museum, Joan Ross has created an animated video that takes viewers through the spaces of the 'drowned' museum, highlighting particular curiosities in lurid, fluorescent colours. The dreamlike route encompasses a collection of oddities both historical and current and ends at Captain Cook, an infamous figure in the colonial project, generating the disintegration of the landscape around him. Ross's work deftly asserts the idea that in western society we are ultimately responsible for our own demise. Her critique of the colonial obsession with collecting and what it reflects about the collector's own sense of moral and racial superiority is integral to the narrative.

Vincent Namatjira dares to imagine a world in which Indigenous leaders and those with deep and longstanding cultural knowledge are revered in Australian culture. His work, *The Richest*, 2017, is part of a broader series of caricature portraits that

highlight wealth and power disparities. These works distort and satirise the notion that leadership can only be understood in capitalistic terms. Through an Indigenous artist's lens a devastating critique emerges that shifts the dynamic of power back to one of wisdom and genuine human connection.

The impact of structural racism and individual prejudice sheltering under the umbrella of rigid perceptions of nationalism is real. Artists that make work that speaks to my and other people's experiences in this way gives individuals and communities a sense that they are being seen and heard. It gives those whose privilege permits them to have *not* had these experiences an opportunity to develop empathy and to be challenged in their humanity. Right now, more than ever before, our global communities are being asked to identify deeply with other human beings and to draw out our compassion. I prefer imagining this new kind of world we are being asked to create.

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*This essay is excerpted from the Just Not Australian exhibition catalogue. Just Not Australian was curated by Artspace and developed in partnership with Sydney Festival and Museums & Galleries of NSW. The exhibition is touring nationally with Museums & Galleries of NSW.*