

13 Digital–physical–emotional immersion in country

Bearing witness to the Appin massacre

Tess Allas Interviewed by Lizzie Muller

In April 1816, Governor of New South Wales Lachlan Macquarie ordered a massacre of Aboriginal people that took place on Dharawal country at Appin. The soldiers attacked a camp at night, firing on men, women, and children and chasing them to the nearby cliffs of the Cataract Gorge where many jumped to their deaths. At least 14 bodies were counted, but it is likely that many more died (Pickering, 2010). Australian Aboriginal artist and curator Tess Allas and Canadian Métis artist and curator David Garneau curated *With Secrecy and Despatch* at Campbelltown Arts Centre, Australia in 2016 to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the massacre. The phrase “With Secrecy and Despatch” was taken from instructions written by Macquarie to his troops.

The exhibition marked a moment when awareness of the hidden histories of Australia’s frontier massacres was emerging forcefully into public consciousness.¹ Like many other violent deaths of Indigenous people, the killings at Appin were entangled with colonial “scientific” collecting and museology. The skulls of three of the dead – Gundangurra leader Kanabgyal, Dharawal leader Durrelle, and an unnamed woman – were removed and sent to the Anatomy Department at the University of Edinburgh, where they were held in the collection of the Edinburgh Phrenological Society (Organ, 2016). In 1991, the skulls were returned to the National Museum of Australia (NMA) in Canberra where they reside while discussions on their future care continue between the museum and community members (Pickering, 2010). Michael Pickering, Senior Repatriation Advisor at the NMA, has argued that these remains, and others like them, are “translated” through their curatorial treatment “from human to object” (2008:12), disconnected from the lives and deaths of their owners.

In this interview, Tess Allas describes a curatorial approach to this historic atrocity that connects emotionally with the lives and deaths of those involved, and the ongoing impact on their cultural descendants. *With Secrecy and Despatch* emphasised love, continuity, and physical connection alongside loss and trauma. Allas explains the curators’ immersive use of colour and sound to create a deeply atmospheric exhibition. In the visceral “liveliness” of this atmosphere, profound reactions to the massacre could

be experienced and processed bodily. Many of the works in the exhibition used interactivity to involve the audience physically in mourning and commemorating the killings. Allas describes the ambitious audio-visual technologies used by the artists and curators to bring the massacre site to life within the gallery – including large-scale projection, drones, and real-time chroma keying. This digital-physical-emotional immersion in country casts audiences as active witnesses who must share responsibility for remediating the continuing effects of violent dispossession. For Allas, bringing together Australian and Canadian First Nations artists internationalised the experience of Colonial brutality – shifting the narrative of survivor and perpetrator to one of global solidarity between Indigenous peoples.

LIZZIE MULLER: This is a conversation about life and death in your curated exhibition *With Secrecy and Despatch*. The show was full of life, and deeply atmospheric. But the purpose of all that liveliness was to conjure a vivid experience of the Appin Massacre and its ongoing trauma and effects. Can you describe the background of the exhibition?

TESS ALLAS It was produced and staged at Campbelltown Arts Centre (CAC),² which is close to the massacre site. The exhibition was really initiated by the community, particularly by Auntie Glenda Chalker – a Dharawal elder who is a descendent of a survivor – and plays an important public role in holding the memory of the massacre. Michael Dagostino, Director of CAC, approached me to begin the research a few years before the anniversary. We set up a curatorium of local key stakeholders who we reported to periodically and took advice from.³ Whenever I uncovered any new research, I presented it to them at scheduled curatorial meetings. Campbelltown Art Centre frequently work with “curatoria” as a model to engage community actively in exhibitions about issues that affect the local people.⁴ So, it was very embedded in the community but, from the start, it was also conceived as an international conversation with our Canadian brothers and sisters.

LM From the perspective of this volume, it’s interesting that the exhibition brought together Canada and Australia in this act of commemoration. How did that idea arise?

TA It was Michael Dagostino’s idea. He had an interest in Canadian First Nations artists and in placing the massacre into a larger international context, and the connection made sense to me. In the Indigenous world, there’s always been dialogue between the two countries – Canada’s colonial history and our colonial history are frighteningly similar. They’ve had their own massacres – hidden, covered. They’ve had their version of stolen children – hidden and covered. We share acts of brutality through the act of colonisation, and the continual brutality of the ongoing colonial projects in both our countries. So, to bring their history in with our history made sense. We included several existing Australian works and invited six Australian and four Canadian artists

to create new commissions specifically for the exhibition. David Garneau – a Canadian Métis man who works as a painter, curator, and writer – joined me as co-curator.

LM You have previously told me that those Canadian First Nations artists acted as witnesses and friends.

TA That's right – they were there to bear witness to the event so that the Australian artists didn't have to carry that responsibility alone. The Canadians could come and say: "We stand with you. We see your suffering – not from a perspective of either victim or perpetrator – but as peers, as brothers and sisters." This shifted the perspective of the exhibition from "black v. white Australians" to a more global story of colonial violence and Indigenous solidarity. Through the Canadian artists' works, we were introduced to other massacre and trauma experiences, so the Appin commemoration became a springboard from which to open broader dialogues about the international history of colonial brutality and massacre.

It became a combined retelling in a very collaborative way. But also in a way that was individual, because each artist made very personal work. The curatorial approach wove them all together to make one big artwork.

LM That sense of the exhibition as one big artwork, as a whole encompassing experience, was very strong. How did you achieve that coherence?

TA When all the work started to arrive – from ten artists working separately across the globe – we noticed that the same colour red was being used, whether that was digitally by Canadian Musgamaḱw Dzawada'enuḱw artist Marianne Nicolson, or the act of putting pigment onto canvas as in Australian Yaegl painter and installation artist Frances Belle Parker's work. So, red became a theme. Red is for passion, red is for blood, red is for anger. It's also symbolic of how this history has been hidden – the flow of rivers of blood represents the way evidence of violence was deliberately hidden in the watercourses.

LM I heard an interview where Marianne Nicolson reflects on the fact that red was everywhere in the exhibition, saying red is the colour of the loss of life, but also the colour of life.⁵

TA ...and love.

LM ...and earth.

TA Yes, in Australia, definitely red earth.

LM So, that redness isn't just about death and violence.

TA No. It's about passion. It's love. It's connection. It's life.

LM The other very present colour was black. All the walls were black, the title signage was gloss black on a matte black background. To me, it read as a rejection of the traditional white walls of gallery spaces as "neutral". But also, as a viewer, you were immersed in a very provocative, disturbing atmosphere created by the darkness. Can you talk about your use of colour to generate atmosphere curatorially?

TA I always knew I was going to have black walls. Black is mourning in many cultures, including the Western dominant culture we live in today in both our countries. But the blackness also created rooms or even caves of memories, devoid of anything else but the work you were looking at and the intense feeling of walking into an almost pitch-black space. So, you would be left with your own emotions, you were allowed to experience your own feelings.

There was also a powerful soundscape across the whole show. Many of the works had their own sound, but I wanted the sound of Canadian Siksika (Blackfoot) artist Adrian Stimson's work – *As Above So Below* – to be heard throughout the whole exhibition. It was the sound of a running heartbeat and then a big loud musket shot – then silence. I made sure you could hear it everywhere. Every ten minutes you could hear a human heart beating and then a musket shot, which reminded you, no matter where you were, that this massacre really happened.

All the other sound works had parabolic speakers, so as you approached the work you heard a soft invitation of sound, and then as you moved closer you became surrounded by it. Everything else was removed from your aural world and you could only hear what's going on underneath that speaker. So, those works also received the respect and attention they deserved.

But as soon as you emerged again there was the sound of Adrian's work – endlessly repeating. There was no escaping the event. I can still hear it. The suggestion that the runner has died from the gunshot and then the silence. The silence was the most powerful sound in that show. Reminding you over again, at a physical level, why you're here.

LM Adrian's work engaged the visitors' bodies visually as well as aurally. The soundscape you're describing, which filled the exhibition, accompanied a huge split screen projection where he juxtaposed epic soaring aerial footage of the Appin massacre site with footage of the land where the Canadian Cypress Hills Massacre of 1873 took place. It collapsed the distance between these two parts of the world, bringing the landscapes together. But also pitching the viewer headlong into country.

TA That sense of immersion in country was hugely important. We projected the work from ceiling to floor, so you couldn't escape being part of the landscape. The viewer became a witness to these landscapes that hold so much history. In his artist statement accompanying the work, Adrian asks "How does the land speak to us? What does it say?" The land itself is very much a presence in Adrian's work. It is not only a site but a witness and a victim itself.

The Appin massacre site is on private land – the owners won't grant any access. To film the site Adrian had to use a drone, which is probably the first time the actual site has been seen for many years. When we first took the footage to show to the members of the curatorium, it was a very emotional



Figure 13.1 Adrian Stimson, *As Above So Below*, 2016. Installation view, Campbelltown Arts Centre, 2 channel 16:9 HD (1920 x 1080), 10:24 mins. Image courtesy the artist. Photograph: Simon Hewson.



Figure 13.2 Cheryl L'Hirondelle. *Dharawal kiskisiwin [remembering Dharawal], n̩pawiw̩n Dharawal ohci, [standing up for the Dharawal]*, 2016. Installation view Campbelltown Arts Centre, Video loop, Processing code, Kinect camera, data projection, plinth, screen, light, audience participation. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy the artist. Photograph: Simon Hewson.

moment for many to actually see that land. By making the work fill the gallery wall, we were able to really bring those sites, those lands, to life.

LM Canadian Métis/Cree artist Cheryl L'Hirondelle also worked with this idea of witnessing and physically placing the viewer's body in the country of the massacre.

TA Cheryl's piece was technically complex. It used real-time chroma keying to superimpose video of audience members onto a video of the site of the massacre memorial. In the gallery, we put a reproduction of the memorial, a very humble monument, about five miles from the massacre's location, where people gather every year to commemorate the event. We recreated it through a digital photograph of the engraved plaque displayed on an iPad encased in a black box. The viewers were drawn towards it to read the text. As they were reading, their image was captured and, when they looked up, they would see a video of the memorial site at Cataract Dam, with themselves appearing there, as if by magic. The work became a kind of portal to the physical site and involved the audience in the process of commemoration.

LM Both Adrian and Cheryl worked with this idea of collapsing space – physically transporting the viewer, but also connecting the land of the massacre to their own Indigenous knowledge and country. Cheryl did this partly through song. Can you describe her approach?

TA In the installation, you could hear a recording of her singing a song that combined quotes from historical texts about the Appin massacre, and a chorus in her language, where she is singing to the Dharawal lands and people. She sung the song as she walked down the road near the massacre site towards a point where you can see the cliffs where people were forced to jump. She's singing for the people who died, remembering them. It was beautiful.

LM Both Adrian and Cheryl used sophisticated technologies to make the physicality of the massacre site and the experience of the victims come to life in the gallery. Their works created a particularly tangible sense of presence. But there were many other works and objects in the show that engaged the visitor's body interactively.

TA Many of the commissioned artists created works for audiences to physically participate in. The ten commissioned artists were all taken to the massacre site, all were introduced to the local elders, including Aunty Glenda, and all were given a package of the research I had gathered in the previous years. Each artist was free to respond to these meetings, tours, and archival material in any way they felt was appropriate to their practice. That many of the works created an immersive bodily experience did not surprise me, given the theme of the show – that being the physically violent removal of a people from the landscape. Australian Giramay, Kuku Yalanji Artist Tony Albert made a school desk in which he had etched lists of massacre sites around our country and the phrase “women and children first” – referring to the idea that if

you kill the women and children first, your attempts at killing a culture are expedited. Tony placed black paper and white crayon on the desk, so visitors could do a rubbing of the etched lists and phrases, and slowly the sites and the phrases were revealed – written in an almost ghostly way onto a document that the visitor could take away and keep.

Australian Worimi artist Genevieve Grieves spoke of commemoration in a way that is recognised internationally – inviting audiences to pick up and place a flower as part of the installation. She chose the little Fringe Lily, a tiny purple flower that opens with sunlight and which is part of a Dharawal dreaming story about the importance of mourning and remembering loved ones. A time-lapse photographic capture of the lily opening at dawn was projected onto an end wall in the gallery space. Thin lilac-coloured lines were painted – weaving over the gallery walls, and hundreds of tiny holes were drilled into these lines. The lines represented the creeks and streams that ran into the river which is found at the base of the cliffs of the massacre site. Visitors were invited to take a small fabric lily from a nearby basket (woven by master local weaver, Phyllis Stewart) and place it into one of the prepared holes. The act is familiar to all each Anzac and Remembrance Day as an act of commemorating the dead from past battles.

LM What's interesting to me in terms of thinking about lively objects is that in those examples the audience is required to do some of the work of uncovering the story. You had to become active, you couldn't be a passive viewer.

TA Yes, and therefore you're implicated in the story and the responsibility of remembering it. If you put the lily in the wall, then you are commemorating a death. You are commemorating an act of brutality. You are implicated forever to stand up for, and speak, on behalf of those people and that time and that event.

In Tony Albert's work, you're implicated in uncovering this history, but also because of the school desks, you're implicated in a system of occlusion through an educational system that does not teach this history.

LM I've seen Tony Albert quoted in the education resource that accompanies the show saying that the aim of his work is to counter the Australian attitude that "ignorance is bliss" in relation to these hidden histories (Albert, in Shaw 2016: 7). It's not a reasonable defence anymore for non-Indigenous Australians to claim "I didn't know".

TA There is no excuse anymore for not knowing these histories. We have the internet now. If you live somewhere and you care about that place, you can choose to find out more about it. Or you *choose not to know*. You can't claim not knowing as an excuse – you are actively choosing

LM The show was, I think, a kind of a reprimand to the idea of innocence. One of the reasons you and I have been talking about the exhibition

so deeply over the last three years was because of the reaction of my own daughter, Albie, who was four at the time. When she experienced it, she told me it made her feel “unconscious”. I don’t think she could have defined the term – but she must have associated the feeling of the exhibition, and the feelings it gave her, with the emotional tenor of the word. At the time you and I were both struck by how apt the word was. It suggests a kind of sleepwalking – an insensibility to the world around you. Quite different from a state of innocence.

TA Yes, Albie became my favourite art critic with that comment. The exhibition made her feel “unconscious”, like she needed to wake up. Even as a four-year-old, she felt the demand made by the exhibition to wake up, to take responsibility, to see the history and its effects.

LM When we discussed where this interview may go in this book, you suggested the section on Energetic Objects, and that does seem to fit with this idea of the powerful atmosphere created by the works and the overall show. So powerful that it could be felt on a deep level, even by a four-year-old who couldn’t really grasp the magnitude of the events themselves.

TA The idea of energies is relevant because the whole exhibition was choreographed to create very intense and quite different moods as you walked through. From the domestic scale of Tony Albert’s school desks to the soaring, almost overwhelming intensity of Adrian Stimson’s landscapes. About half-way through the exhibition, you walked out from the encompassing darkness into the light of Genevieve Grieves’ Fringe Lily installation. A bright room filled with flowers. And you could feel hope. And then you walked around into a violent and confronting space I called the “Splatter Room”. This room included three of Vernon Ah Kee’s paintings that represented the perpetrators of massacres in a kind of “splatter” style onto the canvas. Directly opposite these was Dale Harding’s work – a physical representation of a huge boulder found in the Carnarvon Gorge in Queensland. The Gorge and its surroundings are Dale’s traditional lands. In the cliffs of the gorge are many rock art sites, some known to all and some to only Dale’s people. This area is also, sadly, a massacre site. Dale represented the armoury of the colonising forces through a traditional ochre painting method. From his own mouth, he sprayed an ochre mix onto stencilled shapes of muskets and shackles. The implements used to kill and control his people. With that stencilling method the objects themselves are absent, but their trace – their impact – is very intense. The room was lit with a very low light, and the mood was suspense and fear.

LM So, “energetic objects” works because you were curating emotions or atmospheres through objects, or in Dale’s case the traces of objects. You told me that you didn’t think this discussion would fit in the section of the book on resistant objects – which is where I initially wanted to put it⁶. My idea was that it was resistant in the sense of resisting forgetting.

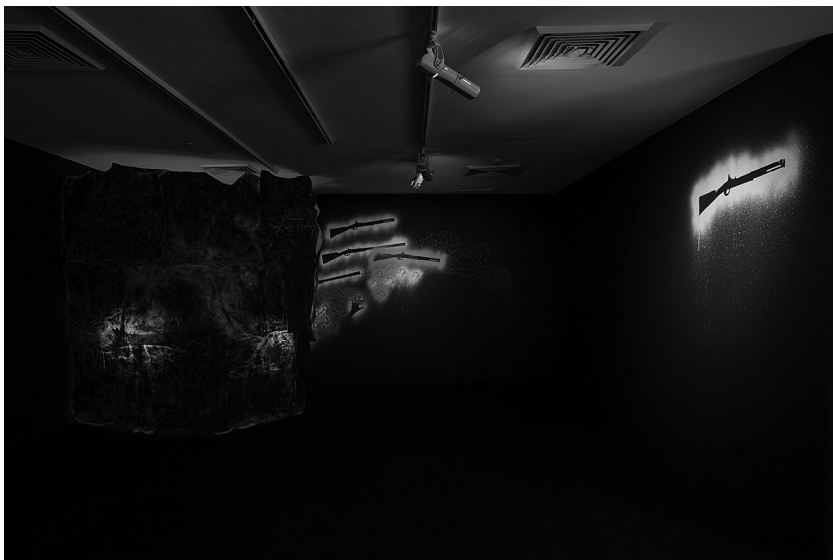


Figure 13.3 Dale Harding, *Mardgin dhoolbala milgangoondhi [rifles hidden in the cliffs]*, 2016, Installation view Campbelltown Arts Centre, rawhide ochre, cast iron shackles, steel shackles. Image courtesy the artist. Photograph: Simon Hewson.

TA Well, that's from a non-Aboriginal perspective, because no one in the community, none of the descendants of the survivors, and none of those people involved in the exhibition had forgotten. Resistance doesn't make sense, for example, from Aunty Glenda's perspective. Nor from any of the artists' perspectives. It's not at risk of being forgotten, but it is at risk of being ignored in the broader cultural narrative of Australia. All the artists in that show walk with it every day. They live with their own traumas and their own communities' colonial brutalities every single day. Every waking moment it's embodied within them. The question is just whether the broader community, the non-Indigenous community in all its forms, chooses to acknowledge it. So, the idea of "energetic" objects makes much more sense. These artworks, this exhibition channelled and harnessed energy. They connect with emotions, with life – yes, they speak to a history – but they connect that to the present moment.

LM The exhibition was called a commemoration, but it's not actually about remembering, it's more about considering how we live with this event in the present.

TA Yes. Or the manifestation of "this is what I live with". It's not a commemoration of the past. It's a deeper understanding of the present.

LM Which is why the show needs to be so immersive and visceral, because you can't understand someone else's experience if you're constantly looking at it as an object from outside.

- TA That's why there were no vitrines in that show. There were no barriers between any of the works and the viewer. I wanted visitors to feel a part of the history they were witnessing. For so long – centuries now – we have, as a nation, been told of “a” single history and, in more recent times, we have been told of an “Aboriginal” history as if there are two separate worlds that have never collided. I wanted to break down any intellectual barriers of our past teachings by allowing the work to be as accessible to the viewer as possible – to be able to almost “touch” the past.
- LM It had to be entirely immersive in order to do justice to a trauma that is still thoroughly part of contemporary lived experience.
- TA Yes – it's really nothing to do with memory. It's to do with bearing witness and saying, “Now you can't not know.”

Notes

- 1 One year later, The Centre for 21st Century Humanities at Newcastle University published an interactive map of Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia from 1788–1930 that presented consolidated evidence for the extent of colonial killing (2017). This received widespread press attention, which was then built on by *The Guardian's* interactive *The Killing Times* (2019).
- 2 The commissioned artists were Vernon Ah Kee, Tony Albert, Frances Belle Parker, Dale Harding, Julie Gough, and Genevieve Grieves from Australia, and Jordan Bennett, Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Marianne Nicolson, and Adrian Stimson from Canada. Existing works were shown by Gordon Bennett, Milton Budge, Robert Campbell Jr, Fiona Foley, Jennifer Herd, Dianne Jones, Queenie McKenzie, Laurel Nannup, Rover Thomas, Freddie Timms, and Judy Watson.
- 3 Members of the Curatorium were Tess Allas, Daniel Browning, Aunty Glenda Chalker, Michael Dagostino, Leah Flanagan, David Garneau, Sister Deb McCall, Kerry McDermot, Uncle Charlie Mundine, and Uncle Ivan Wellington.
- 4 Campbelltown Art Centre works regularly with community curatoria on exhibitions that connect to community issues and interests. The model is also used by other Western Sydney contemporary arts organisations including Casula Powerhouse and Penrith Regional Gallery. For more discussion of this curatorial approach, see Lorenzo et al. (2018).
- 5 Marianne Nicolson interviewed by Daniel Browning (2016). Her exact words are: “That red was so consistent across the exhibition [...] and I think it's because we are dealing with very similar issues, and it brings us to address things in a way that looks at the loss of life through blood, but also the extension of life through blood, through genealogy and our relationships to each other.”
- 6 Partly in response to this conversation the Resistant Objects section of this volume was changed to Troublesome Objects.

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