

rea

GINS_LEAP/DUBB_SPEAK

d/Tour/2006



r e a-framing landscape, memory and identity: an introduction to rea's gins_leap/dubb_speak

Dr Christine Nicholls

Born in 1962, new media artist r e a¹ has stated a preference for making technology based visual art because, significantly, she actually conceives her projects in digital form² and also because of the challenges presented by working with new media.

The origin of r e a's contemporary visual art practice can be traced back to her childhood in the small, predominantly Indigenous northern NSW town of Coonabarabran, where she was born into the Gamilaraay³ nation:

...My Mother first taught me and my siblings about our history by showing us her collection of black and white and sepia photographs that she kept in a biscuit tin covered with red roses.

I carried these images...in my memories until I went to art school; I then asked my mother if I could have the photos to work with. I began to create coloured photos from my black and white memories so that they would become more real to me.

This is where computers came in!

Once I realised how much I could do and that the ideas were limitless it became the main focus of creating and exploring new ideas.⁴

From that auspicious starting point r e a went on to create her celebrated photographic series *Look Who's Calling The Kettle Black* (1992) and *Don't Shoot Till You See The Whites Of Their Eyes...* (2000). The Art Gallery of South Australia recently acquired the latter work.

Since returning from the U.S.A, where she was undertook a residency and post graduate studies, r e a has created an innovative DVD installation, *gins_leap/dubb_speak*, which evokes

...a well known land mark outside Coonabarabran [where r e a was raised as a young child before going to live in Sydney] on the road between Gunnedah and Narrabri...

While r e a is perhaps most renowned for her innovative approach in incorporating digital media into her artwork she has also created a number of other significant works using diverse media.

Best known among these are *Look Who's Calling The Kettle Black* (1992), comprising ten small prints that were created to call attention to the situation of Indigenous girls who were forcibly removed from their families and made to work as domestic servants for the colonizers, as well as the installation *Don't Shoot Till You See The Whites Of Their Eyes...* (2000), an in-your-face r e a-take of Australian history that comprises photographs, glass sculptures and a soundscape, recently acquired by The Art Gallery of South Australia. The latter work will be exhibited at a major exhibition marking 2006 as the Australia-Japan Year of Exchange that opens at the Bridgestone Museum of Art in Tokyo later in the year.

The centrepiece of d/Lux/MediaArts' current touring exhibition is r e a's ambitious digital installation work entitled *gins_leap/dubb_speak*. Indigenous oral history has it that many years ago Gin's Leap was the site of a tragic death leap by a young Indigenous woman.

The development of 'gins_leap/dubb_leap' began with an early visit by the artist to Coonabarabran as part of the first TourdLux programs in 2001. A series of conversations recorded during this visit have been developed into a multi-channel interactive work over a period of 4 years.

The title of her work is in itself provocative because of the present-day connotations of the word 'gin', a demeaning term for Aboriginal women. The genealogy of this word has been traced back to an originally quite neutral word for 'woman' or 'girl' from the Tasmanian Indigenous language, but which took, when linguistically appropriated by the colonizers, a decidedly racist, sexist turn. The idea of "gin" or 'gins' operates at two levels in *gins_leap/dubb_speak*. At one level, it makes reference to the stories about the young woman's allegedly tragic fall from a rocky outcrop near this location, at some indefinable time in the past. The stories associated with this event persist to this day and have become incorporated into local Indigenous oral history and into collective memory.

On another level, the work refers to the four contemporary 'gins' who took part in the making this work, under r e a's guidance and direction: r e a herself, Maria, Sharmaine and Susan. These four women grew up in Coonabarabran and the image cycles in *gins_leap/dubb_speak* relate to the fugitive memories of their shared past, and to their present lives. Maria, Sharmaine, Susan and r e a, all of whom started school on the same day, remain friends today. Unlike r e a, the other three women have stayed in Coonabarabran. The women's collective memories form the basis of this work.

The work is a sound installation and an interactive digital video that has been designed to surround and envelop its audience. Activated by entry into darkened space, the viewer is greeted by a soundscape comprising a low susurraton of unearthly, eerie wind-like resonance. Venturing further into this seemingly empty, black space, one's movement sets in motion the image cycles that relate to the past and present lives of Maria, Sharmaine, Susan and r e a.

The poetic visual imagery of the landscape and the beguiling soundscape (it is a lot more than simply a 'soundtrack') are equally important. These images and sounds in *gins_leap/dubb_speak* inhabit the space so that the viewer is never quite certain when or where the next cycle might appear – perhaps from behind, in front of, or immediately beside us. The repetitive cycle of the visual imagery, accompanied by the lyrical haunting soundscape of half-remembered fragments of conversation, birdcall and flowing water, gives this magisterial work a deeply meditative quality. The landscape itself, we realize, represents culture as much as nature.

Through this installation we collectively experience the powerful psychic claim that Gin's Leap, as a place imbued with powerful, partly-understood memories, exerts on the human beings whose Ancestors had lived there since time immemorial. We, as viewers, are privileged to enter the women's space and their homeland and to share the experience of these women who, oh-so-gently and -lightly, feel, touch, imagine, yearn for, remember, and move across their country.

Significantly, this is also a work about contemporary Indigenous identities. It involves the reclamation of positive, self-defined identities, expressed via the women's continuing relationship with their ancestral homeland. As such, *gins_leap/dubb_speak* acts as a much-needed antidote to those earlier Other-defined constructions of Indigenous identity, whereby neutral words like 'gin', uttered through the mouths of the colonizers, turned racist and ugly. The word 'gin', in this context, is redressed, and returned to its earlier, innocent usage.

To be immersed in the deceptively gentle wash of memory of the sounds and images comprising *gins_leap/dubb_speak* is an extraordinary experience that enables people to feel as well as see and hear. One can envisage it becoming a 'must-see' event on dLux media's Australian touring circuit for some years to come.

[Dr Christine Nicholls is a writer, curator and academic who works in Australian Studies at Flinders University in Adelaide.](#)

1. Please note that the lower case spelling of 'r e a' has been a conscious decision on the part of this artist.

2. Email interview with r e a, 13th November 2002

3. Please note that because Indigenous Australian languages were originally orally transmitted, and only relatively recently written, they have been subject to a number of different orthographies. Linguists and Indigenous people themselves have contributed various different spellings. 'Gamilaraay' (the current preferred spelling of the people themselves) has in the past also been spelled in various texts as Gamilaroi, Kamilaroi or Gomilroi.

4 Excerpt from the same email interview, 13/11/02.



about the work

‘gins_leap/dubb_speak’ is a four screen, five cycle interactive digital video & sound installation which traces and tracks the memories, connections and on-going relationships to country/place/identity of four Gamilaraay women. The cycles entitled: ‘sharmaine’, ‘maria’, ‘susan’, ‘rea’ and ‘hands’ all place the women at the centre of the frame. The work is then located within a wall of text; there are five large language wall texts, which use repetitive Gamilaraay words to describe the relationship that Indigenous women have to their land and culture. ‘The visual and sound cycles gently segue into one another with the images referencing childhood memories, laughter and games (marbles, tin trucks), the centrality of ‘country’, natural phenomena such as trees and plants, earth, water, fire, Indigenous space, and intermittent reflections on various subjects, including Indigenous language loss and retrieval.’

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title

gins_leap/dubb_speak

medium

multi-channel DVD moving image & sound installation

date

2003/06

creative team

r e a, Creative Director
Stephen Jones, Technical designer, programmer
Abi Kelly, Dramaturge
Lea Collins, Sound Design
Peter Oldham, Co-editor

artist cv

r e a is a visual artist, from the Gamilaraay/Wailwan people; she was born in 1962 in Coonabarabran NSW and lives in Sydney. r e a has a MSc, in Digital Imaging and Design from the Centre for Advanced Digital Applications (CADA), New York University (2004), MA(Visual Arts) Australian National University, Canberra (2000), and a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Visual Arts) at the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales (1993).

r e a’s work has been exhibited nationally and internationally since 1992; she has been involved in a number of international and national residency programs and is currently creating a new body of work, which explores the construction of Indigenous Identity through archival photography and video.

r e a has lectured in Indigenous History since 2003, through the Nura Gili Indigenous Centre at the University of New South Wales; she has held Assistant Curatorial and Curatorial positions at Boomalli Aboriginal Artist Co-operative and at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and was guest curator, Primavera,1997 at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

She has received development and new work grants from the Australia Council for the Arts and was awarded the Anne and Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarship, 1998; was awarded the Biennial Indigenous Arts Fellowship Award, 2000 by New South Wales Ministry for the Arts and Sydney City Council; in 2004 r e a was award an American/Australian Fulbright Scholarship for research and development in creative technologies.

r e a is currently a recipient of a New Media Arts Fellowship from the Australia Council for the Arts, 2006.

about d/Lux/MediaArts

Based in Sydney, NSW, d/Lux/MediaArts is one of Australia’s key screen and media arts organisations and is committed to supporting the development, engagement and experience of Australian screen and digital media culture. Since its formation in the early 1980’s as the Sydney Super 8 Group and then as the Sydney Intermedia Network d/Lux/MediaArts has evolved and responded to technological, aesthetic and cultural shifts in experimental screen and interactive digital media arts.

about d/Tour

Established in 2001, d/Tour is an annual touring program of exhibitions of screen-based and new media arts (and associated artist presentations and workshops) undertaken by dLux media arts in collaboration with galleries and arts organisations in regional NSW.

d/Tour is one of the most successful ongoing projects undertaken by d/Lux/MediaArts.

supporters



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IMAGE CAPTION
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