

PolesApart rea

3rd April 2009 – 2nd May 2009



BREENSPACE

PolesApart
Christine Nicholls

Christine Nicholls is a writer, curator and academic working in Australian Studies at Flinders University. From 1982 – 1992 she lived and worked at Lajamanu, a remote Aboriginal settlement in the Tanami Desert of the Northern Territory. Dr Nicholls has published many books and articles on Indigenous Australian art and languages, some of which have been translated into languages other than English. She also regularly writes about other areas of visual art, including Asian art, sculpture, jewellery and ceramics, and has curated art exhibitions in Australia, Europe and Asia. Christine is currently the Australian Editor of two high circulation, Hong Kong-based visual arts magazines – Asian Art News and World Sculpture News, and is working on a series of books for Thames and Hudson publishers.

re a, an artist of the Gamilaraay people of northern New South Wales, is a new media artist working in photography, digital media and moving images, who also explores creative environments through installation. Many of us would prefer to avert our eyes (and ears) from the themes and issues with which re a deals in her artworks.

In earlier work, re a has examined racial discourse within the specifically Australian context; the continuing repercussions felt by Indigenous Australians following colonization and a violent and often traumatic past; land loss and the accompanying loss of relationship of people with 'country' in the wake of dispossession; Indigenous Australian language loss and renewal; identity construction and how the self, especially the female self, has been historically and relationally shaped; Indigenous collective memory, as distinct from highly individualized concepts of memory and the 'official' memory promulgated by the nation state; the ways in which such collective representations of memory might be utilized in the creation of a new, re-formed, more integrated sense of 'self', at both individual and collective levels; the role of images of the past in the political legitimization of the dominant culture and of Indigenous cultures; and the part played in all of this by the *body*. Clearly, these recurring themes and concerns are inseparable, interweaving and overlapping. Their interconnectedness is also reflected in re a's *oeuvre*.

In *PolesApart*, re a's most recent multimedia work, now showing at BREENSPACE, the artist extends earlier ideas and enters new territory. In the silent video that she has created expressly for this exhibition, re a embodies, enacts and performs the part of a fleeing figure. The protagonist, an apparently ageless Aboriginal woman with closely cropped hair, is running through a bushfire-devastated forest. The fire-blackened trees through which the woman weaves are tall, stark and forbidding. There is little ground cover. The woman is wearing a long black dress that places her in an earlier era than the present. The woman who has taken flight successively runs, crouches in fear, stumbles, rests, pauses to take stock, picks herself up again, resumes her fugue. From whom or from what is she trying to escape? Why? Are her invisible pursuers real or imagined?

Viewers watch the lone woman's flight, as through a glass, darkly.¹ This poetic, lyrical work has the qualities and virtues of silent film. Each beautifully constructed, black-edged, sepia-tinted frame acts as a window through which we bear witness to the mysterious woman's unfolding drama. In identifying with her desperate although enigmatic attempt to escape pursuit by unseen forces, viewers too become implicated. We begin to identify with her subject position, her humanity.

At one point a blue sky emerges from this darkness, transiently, fleetingly – a moment of transcendence. All too brief, cut short, because soon the woman is relegated back to the shadows, evanescent into the blackness, darkness – the darkness of obliteration. She disappears, returning to her state of invisibility.

Again we are compelled to ask, who is this hunted, fleeing woman? This woman of shadows, who is conjured up and then disappears, fades into virtual nothingness, then reappears, becomes fully invisible, only for this relentless cycle to repeat itself?

To answer this question we need to turn to re a's family history. Ruby, re a's grandmother, and her grandmother's sister Sophie (re a's great aunt) were members of the stolen generation, removed from their family and taken to the Cootamundra Girls' Home² circa 1916 when Ruby was just five years old. Ruby was to remain under the strictures of the Aboriginal Protection Board until approximately 1934.

There, at the Cootamundra Girls' Home, the sisters were trained as maidservants, before being sent out as virtually unpaid labour for wealthy white people. As historian Peter Read has written, *"As the children approached the age of fourteen or fifteen the question arose of their employment. The girls at Cootamundra were better prepared for the work – described by one of them as 'slavery' – for their training in the home [had] coincided with exactly what needed to be done anyway. It consisted of the scrubbing, washing, ironing, and sewing that the Board did not want to pay anyone to do."*³

Following this forcible 'education' process, Ruby was farmed out to work as a maidservant for a General, who lived in Victoria, close to the border of New South Wales. One of the military man's great friends was the celebrated operatic diva Nellie Melba, who immediately took a shine to young Ruby. On one occasion Melba sought and was given permission to 'borrow' the child from the General, taking her on a tour around Australia. Ruby worked as Dame Nellie Melba's personal maidservant during that time. This has now become incorporated into re a's extended family history.

Ruby was destined never to find her family or to return home. On the other hand, Sophie

Endnotes:
1. Cf. *For now we see through a glass, darkly*. Bible, I Corinthians xiii, 12.
2. The Cootamundra Girls' Home was opened in 1911 and closed in 1957.
3. Peter Read, n.d., *The Stolen Generations, The removal of Aboriginal children in New South Wales, 1883-1969*, <www.daa.nsw.gov.au/publications/StolenGenerations.pdf>, p14, accessed 2/4/09.
4. All quotes from re a are personal communications to Christine Nicholls via email, March 2009.

made the courageous choice to run away from the white people for whom she was working, to flee her domestic servitude. Eventually, Sophie made it back home, where she was to remain for the rest of her life.

There is a sense in which *PolesApart* is a tribute to those women, from whose lineage re a is a proud descendant. Through her embodied performance as an Aboriginal woman fleeing all forms of servitude, re a is not only re-animating this familial, collective memory, but transmitting and preserving it. At the same time she is rejecting an identity that has been imposed and enforced by others, to the point that it becomes worn like a straitjacket.

Furthermore, in filmic terms, *PolesApart* has been conceptualized episodically, reflecting the circuits of memory itself. The jumps, the saccades, the barely glimpsed dreamlike, sometimes nightmarish images, as well as the contradictions and sudden failures of memory are all present in this artwork. Disjuncture and lack of access to certain memories that people struggle to retain are also represented in this film. From time to time *PolesApart* plunges into complete darkness, nothingness: the void.

Such re-animation of the past itself constitutes a kind of memory. While for re a, the performative nature of *PolesApart* means that at one level it is a work of the imagination, at the same time it resonates deeply with the lived experiences of her female forebears and kin, especially her great aunt Sophie and grandmother Ruby. As part of the collective memory these experiences are now inscribed on re a's own body. Equally, such body-knowledge informs re a's symbolic flight through the charred Victorian forest. Memory also lies at the centre of identity, and this is certainly the case for re a.

There is another dimension to this work. *PolesApart* is infused with a contemporary political consciousness and identity politics. It is doubtful that re a's grandmother and great aunt, given the times in which they lived, and the limitations imposed upon their life choices, would or could have possessed such insights into their predicament.

re a made a conscious political choice to film the work near Daylesford in Victoria, not far from where the artists of the renowned Heidelberg School lived and worked. *"My underlying research has been into the Heidelberg painters, in particular into McCubbin's artworks 'The Pioneer' and 'The Wallaby Track', she writes, "and the Heidelberg artists simply did not 'see' the Indigenous presence in that country – Indigenous people were invisible to them.*

...PolesApart is about memory, past history and how both memory and history continuously replay the constructed invisibility and visibility of the Indigenous (female) body. It's layered with the history of the Heidelberg painters and their inability to 'see' what was there, right in front of them, even when they were 'looking'.

In addition, re a is able to conceptualize such colonial blindness in an international perspective: *...In this work I also make historical references to American pop art and to Jackson Pollack's Blue Poles – signifying the 'brand' of Empire – the colours red, white and blue. The title 'PolesApart' is in fact a reference to Pollack's painting.*

...The colours that appear in the video also reference the colonisation of Australia by the British and our current colonisation by America. These colours link the British flag, the OZ flag and the US flag and are also a point of connection for the current alliance of these three nation states – all of which have been party to the blotting out, the rendering invisible, of Indigenous cultures.

Ultimately, the work is about the continuing lack of visibility of Indigenous identity, and of the diversity of Indigenous identities in the Australian landscape. I represent this through the movement of my own body through the physical and conceptual landscape – I am the subject in both the photographic and video work.

At the end of the video work I become invisible through the spraying of these colours all over me.

*It seems that the harder I work to be visible the more I'm blotted out – like I'm continuously running, hoping to find the freedom to create my own identity – re a!*⁴

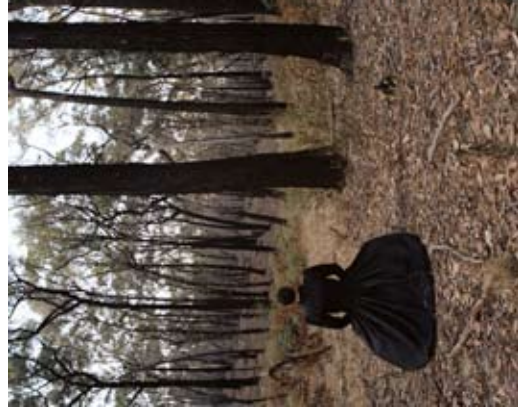
Finally, *PolesApart* also comprises four large triptych photographs, printed as C-type prints. These too record the central character's flight from powerful, undetectable external forces, and her gradual, successive disappearance into the landscape, as she metamorphoses into a tinier and tinier fuzzy black ball, no longer recognizable as a sentient, living, breathing human being.

The conclusion of *PolesApart*, where this brave, fugitive Aboriginal woman is splattered with viscous red, white and blue paint to the point of obliteration, shows that collective memory has its own evil twin – collective annihilation.

PolesApert 1 2009
c-type photographs
tritych, 100 x 92 cm, 100 x 110 cm, 100 x 92 cm
edition of 10



PolesApert 2 2009
c-type photographs
tritych, 100 x 92 cm, 100 x 110 cm, 100 x 92 cm
edition of 10



Poles/Apart 3 2009
c-type photographs
tritych, 100 x 92 cm, 100 x 110 cm, 100 x 92 cm
edition of 10



Poles/Apart 4 2009
c-type photographs
tritych, 100 x 92 cm, 100 x 110 cm, 100 x 92 cm
edition of 10





Front and Back cover:

PolesApart 2009

HD video, 16:9

6:55 minutes

edition of 10

BREENSPACE

www.breenspace.com

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11am to 6pm

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