



TOWARD A CURATORIAL ACTIVISM

DR MAURA REILLY

I INTRODUCTION: WESTERN ART – IT’S A WHITE MALE THING

In 2004, when the Museum of Modern Art in New York City re-opened its greatly expanded exhibition spaces, including a reinstallation of its permanent collection, of the 410 works in the fourth and fifth floor galleries, only a paltry 16 artworks were by women. That’s 4 per cent. And even less by artists of colour. A recent dash through the same galleries in 2009 revealed that little has changed, except that now there is a room dedicated to feminist art (with a total of six works), as well as one dedicated to Jacob Lawrence, who functions in the installation as the sole representative of African American art. It’s shameful. However, it’s not surprising: Western Art – it’s a White Male thing.

MoMA, however, is not alone in perpetuating discriminatory practices. A glance at the recent special exhibition schedules at major art institutions (like the George Pompidou, Tate Modern, Reina Sofía), especially the presentation of solo shows, reveals that the problem of gender and race disparity continues. Indeed, at one point in the late 1980s, so problematic were the statistics at the Whitney Museum of American Art that the activist art group The Guerrilla Girls nicknamed it the ‘Whitey Museum’ (Figure 1). A decade later, the same ‘girls’ took the Metropolitan Museum of Art to task for its glaringly obvious gender bias. For a more recent statistic, peruse the first installation of the Kaldor family collection of contemporary art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, and you’ll instantly note that the majority of the works are Euro-American, e.g. Robert Rauschenberg, Sol Lewitt, Jeff Koons, Donald Judd, and so on. On closer examination, you’ll notice that there is no contemporary Aboriginal art, and that there are only a few women artists and just two artists of colour on display.

After even a cursory glance at art world statistics such as these, which are (sadly) almost identical in every mainstream museum throughout the world, it is evident that sexism and racism have become so insidiously woven into the institutional fabric, language and logic of the mainstream art world that the inequities in representation often go undetected. Once ferreted out, however, there can be no denying their prevalence. The statistics speak for themselves. On investigating price differentials, and sex–race ratios in galleries, within thematic and national exhibitions, and in the press, the numbers demonstrate that the fight for equality is far from over. Indeed, the more closely one examines art world statistics, the more glaringly obvious it becomes that, despite the decades of postcolonial, feminist, anti-racist, and queer activism and theorising, the ‘majority’ continues to be defined as white, Euro-American, heterosexual, privileged and, above all, male. When perusing the majority of mainstream museums, for instance, one must search more diligently for the women artists, artists of colour, and artists of non-Euro-American descent. Without question, the art world is not yet concerned with full assimilation of work by minority, postcolonial or any other voices into the larger discourse, except, of course, as ‘special’ (read separatist) exhibitions, e.g. Aboriginal art, Latin American art, Women artists, etc.

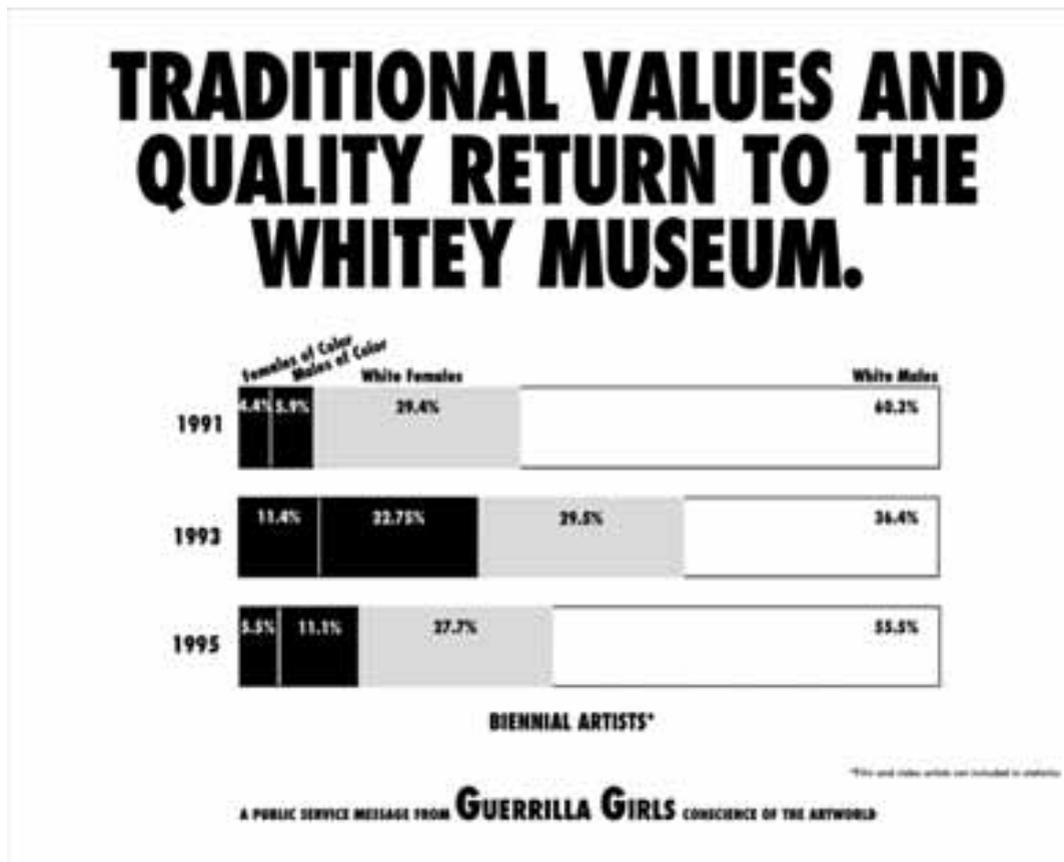


Figure 1: THE GUERRILLA GIRLS *Whitey Museum*. Copyright © by Guerrilla Girls. Photograph courtesy www.guerrillagirls.com.

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What's even more disturbing is that these mainstream master narratives of art, in which large constituencies of people are ghettoised and excluded from the big-white-boy narrative, are presented as natural, as common sense, and these discriminatory practices are rarely challenged. In short, the art system – its institutions, market, press and so forth – is a hegemony: a Marxist term that explains the way 'a particular social and political order culturally saturates a society so profoundly that its regime is lived by its populations simply as "common sense"'.¹ As a hegemonic discourse, the current art system privileges white male creativity to the exclusion of everyone else. As hegemonomies, museums perpetuate their 'story of art' ad infinitum via installations, exhibitions chosen, catalogues, wall labels, education material, publicity, acquisition policies and so forth, creating hermetically sealed narrative boxes into which few can penetrate. Not only are women and artists of colour excluded, but non-Euro-Americans are as well. For instance, MoMA owns just one work by an Australian modernist, Sidney Nolan (*After Glenrowan siege (Second Ned Kelly series)*), and yet it has exhibited it only once since it entered the collection in 1955. (Incidentally, there are no works by Ian Fairweather, Arthur Streeton or Margaret Preston, nor is there any Aboriginal art, for that matter.)

The fundamental problem with this biased representation on the part of MoMA is that since its founding, it has functioned, and continues to function as an international icon, as an institution that other modern art museums have looked to as a paradigm of excellence to be mimicked. (For example, Tate Modern's 'story' of art is almost identical.) It is also one on which the majority of art history textbooks in the west are based, and therefore western curricula, and its definition has become so naturalised that it goes without question that this is *the* history of modern art. Indeed, most textbooks follow MoMA's 'story' to the letter, with artists of colour and women entering the textbooks only at the point at which they were introduced into the museum's collection in the 1980s. For instance, it was not until 1986 that African American and women artists were included for the first time in HW Janson's *History of art* textbook. Native Americans were only introduced in 1995.

The realisation that Western art historical canons are a problematic concept is not new. As early as 1971, in her landmark essay, *Why have there been no great women artists?*, Linda Nochlin cautioned women about getting into a no-win situation trying to name female Michelangelos or Picassos. 'There are no women equivalents for Rembrandt, Delacroix or Cézanne, Picasso or Matisse,' she argued, "any more than there are black American equivalents of the same."² The problem, she argued, lies not in our hormones, as women, nor by extension is it in the colour of our skin (if one happens to be non-white) — but in *our institutions and our education*. Thus the question of equality, she argues, devolves around the very nature of institutional structures themselves, and the white masculine prerogative they assume as 'natural'. It is precisely this ideological stronghold over women and non-white

people that has kept them from succeeding historically. Moreover, if 'greatness', as Nochlin argues, 'has been defined since antiquity as white, Western, privileged, and, above all, male', then how are we to redefine it to include non-whites, non-Westerners, the underprivileged and women?³ In other words, if the problem lies in our institutions, at a *systemic level*, then what can we do? How can we change our institutions? Or, to paraphrase Audre Lorde, 'Can the master's tools ever dismantle the master's house'?⁴ If so, how? Which tools will work most effectively?

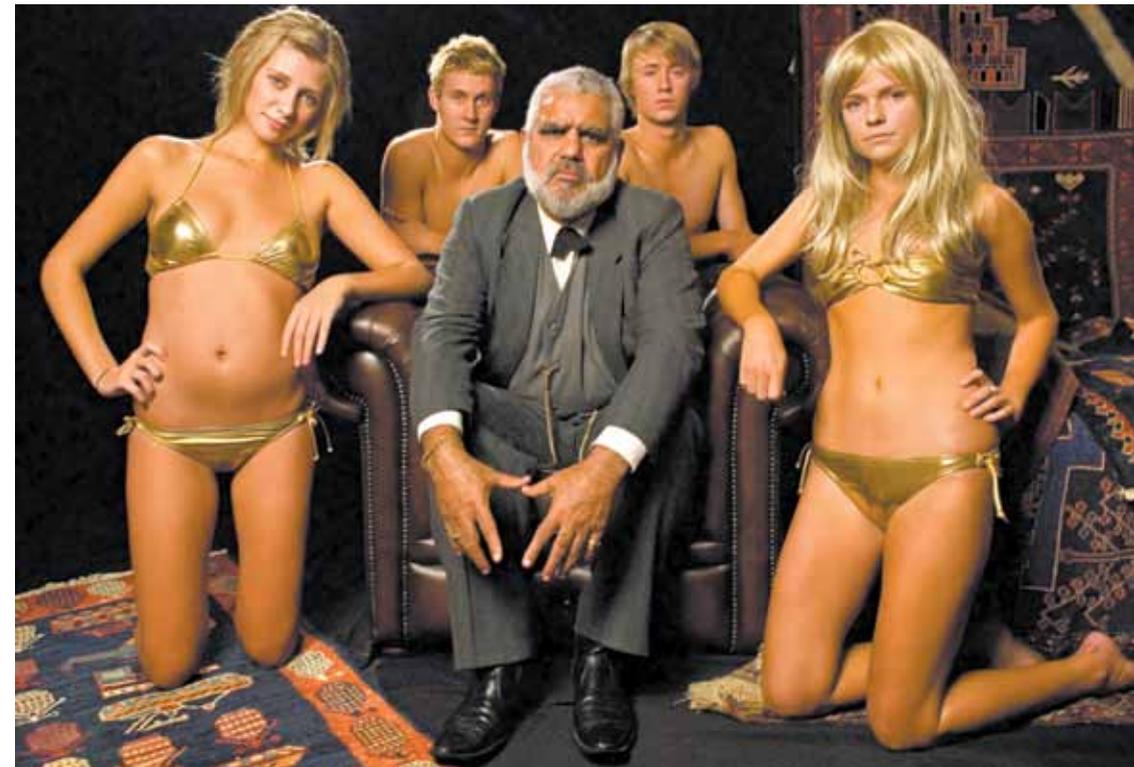


Figure 2:
RICHARD BELL *Scratch an Aussie*, 2008. Production still. Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

II. STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE

If the canon of art history is a hegemony – which I think we can all agree that it is – then, in the words of Griselda Pollock, how can we 'difference it'? More importantly, how can we each do our parts, as curators, artists, teachers, scholars, museum directors, patrons, collectors and so on? And don't we have an ethical responsibility to ensure that, if not the past, then our present and future are more inclusive than exclusive? But what are our options?

Research by postcolonial, critical race and feminist theorists over the past three decades has posited that the most successful tactics for addressing inequality, while sometimes self-defeating, are always worthwhile. Historically forgotten artists can be reclaimed, excavated for close analysis; revisionist strategies can be employed in which mainstream artists can be read 'against the grain'; 'area studies' can be further explored as well, although such 'specialised' studies can also be ghettoising at times; and finally comparative studies, which celebrate the polylogue (versus the monologue), have also been suggested as a possibility. The downside of the latter technique, however, is that it can result in assimilation, which comes at the cost of cultural heritage, and can obscure the real socio-historical differences in relation to the privileged classes.

So, again, what can we do? Instead of being disheartened by the sad reality, it is perhaps more productive to be proactively antithetical: to misbehave, to talk back, while dedicating ourselves to disrupting the hegemonic discourse *from within* by showing the gaps in representation, 'the blind spots, or the space-off, of its representations'.⁵ There are many curators worldwide committed to these 'blind spots': Jean Hubert Martin, Okwui Enwezor, Rosa Martinez, Jonathan Katz, Olu Oguibe, Michiko Kasahara, Rasheed Araeen, Connie Butler, Jean Fisher, to name just a few. Likewise, here in Australia, there are curators working tirelessly to ensure that the voices of Indigenous Australian artists are heard, among them Djon Mundine, Hettie Perkins, Brenda Croft, Diane Moon, and of course, the Director of this year's CIAF, Avril Quail. I have coined the term 'curatorial activists' to describe those individuals who have committed themselves to 'counter-hegemonic initiatives' that give voice to those who have been historically silenced or omitted from the 'master narrative'. In other words, curatorial activists focus exclusively on work produced by women, artists of colour, non-Europeans or queer artists. Unlike most curators, who content themselves with organising exhibitions on white European males (or exhibitions within which they are the majority), curatorial activists are unable, ethically, to do so. And I would ask, don't all curators have an ethical responsibility to ensure that all artists are presented, not just the chosen, elite few? Is there really a need for another exhibition on Monet or Picasso or Michelangelo, in which the same ideas and images are regurgitated over and over again? There are surely far more interesting contributions to the scholarship to be made.

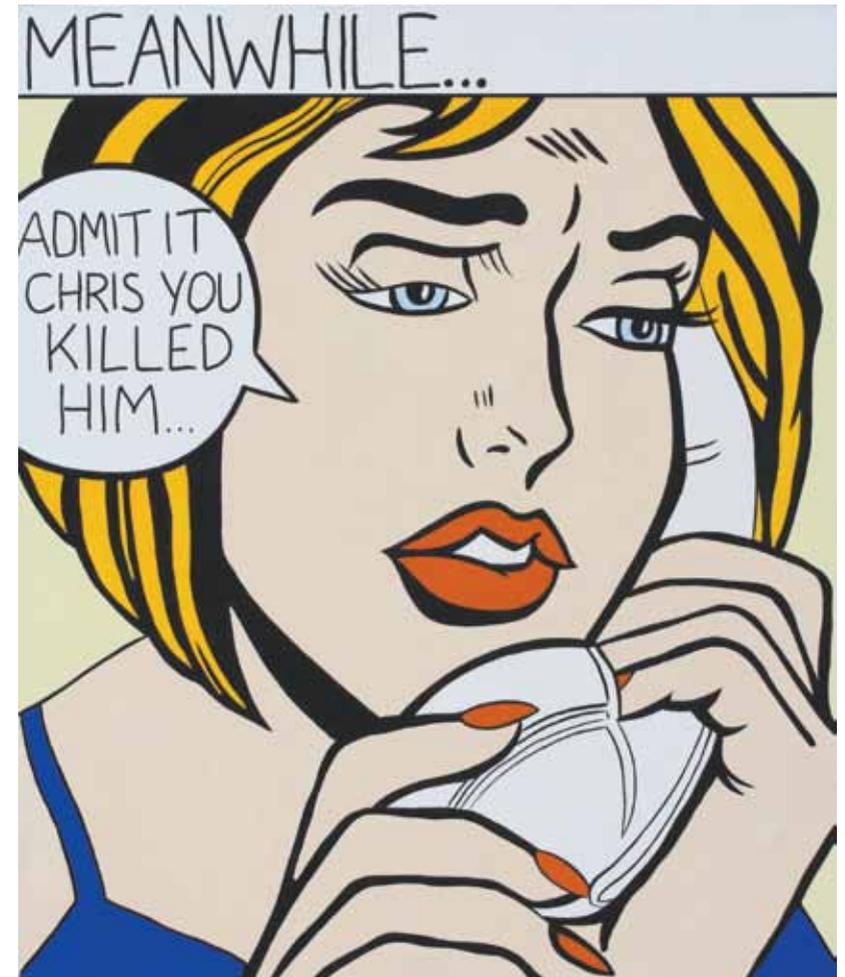


Figure 3:
RICHARD BELL *Admit it Chris you killed him*, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 60cm x 51cm. Private Collection, Brisbane.
Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

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III. RICHIE

In 2009, under the auspices of my then-current position as Senior Curator at Location One in New York, I invited Indigenous Australian artist Richard Bell for a one-year international fellowship, which commenced with a survey exhibition that included over 40 works dating from 1992 to 2010.⁶ The exhibition was a huge success, with reviews appearing in prestigious online journals, as well as features in *Art in America*, and *Art Asia Pacific*. I had chosen to invite Bell after seeing his video, *Scratch an Aussie*, at the 2008 Sydney Biennale. It was one of the most potent artworks about racial discrimination that I had ever seen. In it, Bell overturns political and social norms by masquerading as a black Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysing racist white Australians who recline on a sofa in gold lamé bikinis like exoticised others. The *whitefellas* complain about the loss of personal property (iPods, house keys, and other everyday objects) and their feelings of victimisation. Out of concern for his white patients, who 'seem to have the weight of the world on their shoulders,' Bell seeks out therapy for himself and is analysed by Black Power leader Gary Foley. These different sessions are interwoven throughout the video, juxtaposed with racist jokes about Aborigines and word associations that reveal the unconscious racism within Australian culture: if you scratch an (white) Aussie, racism is always just beneath the surface (Figure 2).

While my feminist friends did not understand my nomination of Bell for the fellowship – since Richard, after all, describes himself as 'a recovering sexist', and was, therefore, a far cry from my previous postcolonial feminist projects – to me it was a clear extension of my curatorial activism. Having successfully 'infiltrated' the masculinist art world system via a series of highly acclaimed feminist art exhibitions (e.g. *Global feminisms*, *The dinner party*, and *Burning down the house*: all at the Brooklyn Museum), by 2008 I began concentrating almost exclusively on the problem of racism in the arts, with the first of many exhibitions being one dedicated to Egyptian artist Ghada Amer, followed thereafter by a mid-career retrospective for African American artist Nayland Blake, whose work deals directly with issues of slavery, 'passing', and the stereotyping of blacks in the United States.

An exhibition that could show the universality of racist power structures, as one focusing on Bell most certainly would, seemed like the perfect follow-up. Besides, Bell's protest work has tremendous cross-cultural relevance. It speaks directly to racist stereotypes, colonial mythologies, land rights, commodification of indigeneity by the art market, violence against Aborigines, and to Austracism, in particular. Like Australia, the US was colonised by *whitefellas* from Europe, who massacred the Indigenous peoples, stole their land, forced them on to reservations, and deprived them of human rights. (Like Australia, Indigenous Americans make up less than 3 per cent of the population.) The racism continued in early America, and permeated all sectors of society, as is perhaps best



Figure 4:
GORDON HOOKEY *Blood on the Wattle, Blood on the Palm*, 2009. Oil on linen, 285cm x 500cm.
The James C Souris, AM, Collection, Brisbane. Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

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exemplified by the US's shameful history of slavery, which is an incomprehensible atrocity. Because the histories of racism in the two countries are quite similar, I felt that Bell's protest art could apply to all so-called minorities in the US as well. For instance, the declarative statements emblazoned across his famous *Theorems* series – *We were here first* (2007), *I am not a noble savage* (2009), *Pay the rent* (2010) – correlate with the oppression of colonised peoples in North America (the Native Americans and the First Nations peoples of Canada in particular). These works, and others like them by Bell, e.g. *Guilty (There is no black problem)* and *Pecking Order (Thank Christ I'm not Aboriginal)*, also have great relevance to Indigenous peoples, African Americans, immigrant communities and other oppressed peoples in the US.

Bell's continual sampling from the master narratives of art history is one of his most powerful propagandistic weapons. Roy Lichtenstein, Imant Tillers, Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns – no one is untouchable. In his hands, these 'masters' become slaves to his politics. Lichtenstein's *Interiors* are reproduced but with a difference: in Bell's domestic settings, the walls are decorated with miniature Bell paintings. Pollockian drips are employed in other works to emphasise that the modernist drip itself is actually an appropriated gesture from Indigenous sand painting. In Bell's capable hands, John's famous target signifies the way in which he, and all Aboriginal men, felt they were being viewed suspiciously after the release of the *Little children are sacred* report in 2007, which examined sexual abuse in Indigenous communities. Likewise, his frequent appropriation of the famous Emily Kam Ngwarreye (repainted in a Pop Art style) only serves to remind us how Aboriginal art is continuously commodified, even by Aborigines themselves.

It is his painting, *Bell's Theorem* (2002) that is perhaps the most cross-culturally relevant. Prominently written in the centre of the canvas is the phrase 'Aboriginal Art – It's a White Thing,' a statement by Bell intended to emphasise how Indigenous art is not only a phenomenon created by white anthropologists and art advisors, but one that reduces Aboriginal art to dots and bark paintings. As he explains, 'White people buy it, white people say what's good, what's bad. They sit in judgment.' The slogan makes the point that Aboriginal art is a kind of projection made by white Australians, including Imant Tillers, whose formal style Bell has appropriated for the painting. In the US, the words 'Aboriginal art' can be substituted with 'Black art', 'Latino art', 'Middle Eastern art' to much the same effect, calling attention to the fact these particularised groupings are projections made by whites. To invert that power structure, Bell reappropriates the master appropriator, and returns ethical concerns to Aboriginal art.

[A year later I organised a mid-career retrospective exhibition of Bell's work, titled *Uz vs. Them*, which is currently travelling to four venues in the US throughout 2013, accompanied by a comprehensive exhibition catalogue, with essays by Richard Bell, Djon Mundine, Eleanor Heartney and myself.⁷]



Figure 5:
VERNON AH KEE *tall man*, 2010. Production still. Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

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IV. BLOOD ON THE PALM

It was while researching the Bell exhibition, and his *Psalm Singing* series of paintings [dated 2007–2009] in particular, that I came to learn about the history of Palm Island and the death of Cameron Doomadgee in 2004 while in police custody in north-east Queensland (Figure 3). Why had I not heard about this horrific incident while living in the United States, I wondered initially? Had it made international news? I began to research it, only to learn that there was no international coverage of the Doomadgee death, and that few white Aussies had even heard of the incident. Yet when I asked these same Aussies if they'd heard of the 1991 incident in Los Angeles where African-American Rodney King was nearly beaten to death by police, every one of them had. Why was this? Why were they knowledgeable about racially-motivated violence in a country on the other side of the world, yet unaware of what was happening in their own backyard?

To address this embarrassingly obvious 'knowledge gap', I began organising an exhibition titled *Blood on the Palm*, which looks at the history of violence on Palm Island, as a metaphor for race relations in Australia. Established as an Aboriginal reserve in 1918, and quickly dubbed 'Punishment Island' by its residents, there have been innumerable episodes in which the Indigenous population has been treated inhumanely and unjustly, most spectacularly during the 1920s to 1960s when it was police patrolled like an apartheid state, where all *blackfellas* were ordered to salute white folks or face imprisonment or flogging, as was the charge against the Superintendent of Police Robert Curry in 1930. According to the islanders, very little has changed today: as descendants of relatives who had been forcibly removed to the island in the early 1920s, they are an impoverished, under-educated community left to suffer under all the side effects of chronic unemployment, including alcoholism. In Vernon Ah Kee's 2010 video, *tall man*, one islander explains that the police officers 'patrol' them 'like caged animals'. This is the historical context for the 2004 death and the subsequent riots, led by Lex Wotton, that occurred when the island residents, angered by the coroner's report that stated Doomadgee had died from an 'accidental fall', razed the police station and Sergeant Chris Hurley's home.

Blood on the Palm examines this contemporary event in close detail, including archival material that is meant to present a more comprehensive picture of life on the island, e.g. documentary films (historical and current), early 'tourist' photos, sound recordings of islander music from the 1950s, and historical interviews with islanders. It also presents works by contemporary Indigenous artists who have directly addressed the subject of Palm Island, either as a site of violence, including Gordon Hookey, Richard Bell, Vernon Ah Kee, and Fiona Foley, or as descendants of islanders hoping to reconnect with lost relatives, like Judy Watson and Tony Albert (Figures 4–6).

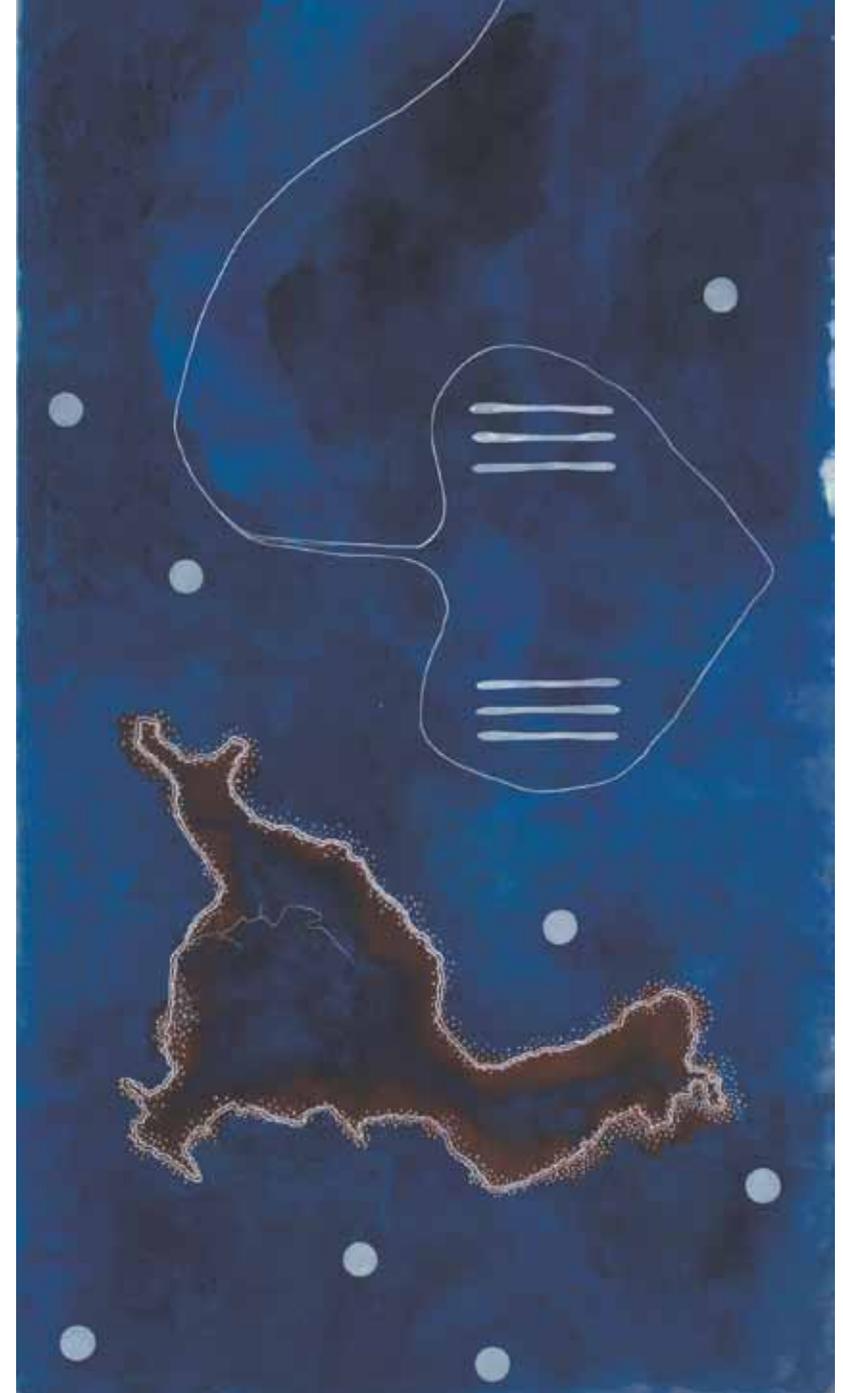


Figure 6:
JUDY WATSON *palm cluster* (detail), 2007. Pigment, pastel, acrylic and carbon ink on canvas
196cm x 106cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Australia. Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

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In the end, the exhibition hopes to ask: How can this overt racism and violence happen without massive press coverage and protests in a country that proclaims that every citizen gets a 'fair go'? And what of the countless Aboriginal deaths that continue to happen in police custody, and at an alarming frequency? I'm thinking here of the more recent incident in 2009 when Aboriginal elder Mr Ward was burnt alive in the back of a prison van in Western Australia. And how is it that Chris Hurley, and the police officers working on that fateful day, were given bravery awards by the government, and most importantly, how is it that while Wotton was imprisoned for his role, Sergeant Hurley was not only acquitted, but also promoted to the most desired destination in the Queensland Police Force, the Gold Coast?

V. CONCLUSION

To return to my earlier question: What can each of us do, as curators, artists, educators, gallerists and museum directors, to *difference* the art historical canon, and to offer a more just and fair representation of global artistic production? Should we all be working towards a global art history, an art without borders? Should we be aiming to abolish the canons altogether, arguing that all cultural artefacts have significance – in other words, should our goal be a totalising critique of canonicity itself? Or should we accept the omnipotence of the art historical canon, within and against which we all work, and vow to always supplement and query it, ad infinitum? I don't know the answer. What I do know is that, as we venture forward into this new century, it is imperative that art institutions examine not only their putative subjects, but their ideological biases as well. This will involve rethinking methodologies and iconographies for what they say, and do not say, about the constructions of race, gender, class and nation. In such cases, critical theory is not enough; we must re-examine cultural objects and social practices to understand the patterns of everyday life that shape the past and inevitably imprint the future.

Maura Reilly is Professor and Chair of Art Theory at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University. As founding curator of the Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, Reilly conceived and launched the first exhibition and education space in a US museum devoted exclusively to feminist art, during which time she organised numerous exhibitions, including the critically acclaimed *Global Feminisms (2007)* (co-curated with Linda Nochlin), and the permanent *reinstallation of The Dinner Party by Judy Chicago (2007)*. She has taught art history at Tufts University and Pratt Institute, has been a regular contributor to *Art in America*, and has worked in the Education Department at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Reilly has held senior curatorial positions at the American Federation of Arts and at Location One, both in New York City, where she organized major exhibitions related to feminist and postcolonial theory, including most recently *Richard Bell: Uz vs. Them (2011)*, which is currently touring the US. Reilly is the author of numerous articles and books, and is currently working on a book titled *Curatorial Activism and Ethical Responsibility*, to be published in 2012. Dr. Reilly received her MA and PhD from the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University.

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- ¹ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the canon: feminist desire and the writing of art histories* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 10.
- ² Linda Nochlin, "Why have there been no great women artists?" *Women, Art, Power and other essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 150.
- ³ *Ibid*, p. 176.
- ⁴ Audre Lorde, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house", *Sister Outsider* (The Crossing Press Feminist Series, 1984).
- ⁵ Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of gender: essays on theory, film, and fiction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 25.
- ⁶ *Richard Bell: I Am Not Sorry* was presented at Location One in New York City from October–December 2009.
- ⁷ From 2011 to 2013, *Uz vs. Them* will travel to Aidekman Arts Center, Tufts University Gallery, University of Kentucky Art Museum, Victoria H Myhren Gallery at the University of Denver, and Indiana University Art Museum. The catalogue is published by D Giles Limited in London. It is sponsored by the American Federation of Arts, The Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council, as well as the Queensland Indigenous Arts Marketing and Export Agency (QIAMEA).