

WHITE LIES: As we know it Texta Queen, Yarnin' Project, Abyss and Roberta Rich

Curated by Roberta Rich

white lie; noun. A harmless or trivial lie, especially one told to avoid hurting someone's feelings.

WHITE LIES: As we know it presents the work of artists, activists and educators from diverse backgrounds that explore a 're-writing' of colonial history. Together, these works contribute to a larger project of telling stories and narratives from various identities that are often subjugated or negated from mainstream and dominant colonial histories. *WHITE LIES: As we know it* is a reclaiming of history, focusing particularly on Victorian Aboriginal activism as well as the lived experiences of the artists in this exhibition.

A "white lie" may simply translate directly as deceit, falsehood and fabrication— a certain negation of something, to avoid hurting someone's feelings. However *WHITE LIES: As we know it* though a statement, asks its viewer to re-consider history as "we/they/or I" may know it – perhaps the "white lies" that surround our media, social and education forums, preserve feelings of a 'white Australian' community disengaging with its colonial past. It is much easier to swallow "white lies" than the frequency of massacres and racial violence that has been prevalent since the British arrived in Australia and globally across colonised nations.

"...the breaking down of colonial structures are the result of two causes: either of a violent struggle of the people in their own right, or of action on the part of surrounding colonised peoples which acts as a brake on the colonised regime in question."¹

A video documenting a demonstration, held on Invasion Day, 26 January 2003 depicts activists including Robbie Thorpe and Gary Foley, re-imagining British settlement of Aboriginal land, taking place on the shores of St Kilda beach. Here, Captain Arthur Phillip and British colonists are given the proposal to 'abide by our [Aboriginal] law, go through our customs and pay the rent, well you're welcome to stay'. Those who refused Aboriginal Sovereignty and pay rent, were sent on their way, and convicts who acknowledged Aboriginal Sovereignty and agreed to pay rent were allowed to stay. This demonstration of appropriating Australian colonial history is an act of empowerment and self-determination. It brings to the surface history, as we *should* know it

Texta Queen's *Creature from the Black Platoon (starring Gary Foley)*, 2011 is from her series 'We Don't Need Another Hero,' a collection of fictional movie posters depicting Australian Indigenous and people of colour posing as the outlaws of their post-apocalypses. In this particular work, the films 'Creature from the Black Lagoon' (1954) and 'Platoon' (1986) are combined, subverting 'Platoon's' original leading white film cast, creating a mash-up of Foley as a powerful Black militia.

Texta's work mirrors Foley's involvement in the Black Power movement in Australia, using significant images and references such as the Aboriginal Tent Embassy (1972). The work also reminds the viewer of how Aboriginal people in Australia were classed as flora and fauna in the National Census until 1967 (which is also referred to in the *Invasion Day 2003* video). Texta's work eloquently and sophisticatedly creates a platform where Indigenous Australians and people of colour experiences of colonisation and racism can be acknowledged and recognised. The viewer enters into this dialogue via its subversive satire within its movie poster framework, allowing for consideration of the roles of power while potentially educating its viewer about Australia's own Black Power movement.

Foley continues to maintain an online educational resource and historical archive named The Koori History Website (accessible at www.kooriweb.org). Online forums such as these become vital and important resources for people to learn about histories that are not commonly discussed or considered, let alone taught within state high school education curriculums, when thinking of a Black Power movement within Australia.

Employing short film, a mobile media training program and an online archive is the Yarnin' Project. The Yarnin' Project was conceived by respected elder of the Yorta Yorta, Dja Dja Wurrung clans Robert 'Bobby' Nicholls, activist, playwright and broadcaster John Harding of the Kuuku-ya'u / Meriam Mir peoples and film and television director and producer Rebecca McLean, creating Yarnin' Pictures. Working in conjunction with Open Channel, Yarnin' is a mobile media training and recording program that documents Aboriginal Elders stories in Victoria. The program utilises Open Channel's film, tv, digital media and production mobile training unit, allowing the program to travel across Victoria, educating Aboriginal youth on film making, as well as indigenous histories of various communities shared by working with Victorian Aboriginal Elders.

Each student is involved in all aspects of the documentary process, which is then uploaded to the Yarnin' website. Histories and experiences from Elders within Victorian Aboriginal communities with regards to culture, land, history and Land Rights are recorded and archived by Yarnin' Pictures and Open Channel. A selection of short films produced in this program are presented within this exhibition including Aunty Lorna Walker (Shepparton), Uncle Lenny Clarke (Warrnambool), Aunty Rae and Uncle Albert Mullett (Morwell) and Aunty Ruth Murray (Swan Hill) serving not only as a record of important oral histories to indigenous and non-indigenous peoples but also a program of exchange in both art making and education. The Yarnin' Project is accessible at <http://www.yarnin.net/>

This process of exchange, of story, language and dialogue within cultural and diaspora communities, is also presented by emerging artist Abyss via her Amharic markings within Melbourne's inner west. In doing so, Abyss attempts to initiate a dialogue within her Ethiopian diaspora community about political and cultural concerns specifically shared by those in Melbourne's western suburbs. Her markings in Amharic translate as cautionary, comfort and strength; አይረክህ (translating phonetically and pronounced as *Ay-Zosh*) which has a likening to the familiar colloquial phrase of 'don't worry, its okay', and ደፋር (translating phonetically and pronounced as *De-Far*) meaning 'brave'. Warnings are also marked in the form of ቁ (translating phonetically and pronounced as *Wa*) and ተወ (translating phonetically and pronounced as *Tew*) meaning 'stop/avoid/leave'. Further, Abyss asks within her community ለምን (translating phonetically and pronounced *Le-min*), 'why?' which could be read as an internal rhetoric dialogue of the artist, a cry of exasperation, or the initiation of conversation with her diaspora Ethiopian peers- a dialogue not privy to anyone or everyone. These videos present attempts to communicate, which are potentially silent or notably pronounced dependent on its viewer that passes by. This strategy also combats the dominance of the English language within written and visual language, creating a space for a voice of her own and potentially of her communities as well.

The re-construction (work initially constructed in 2011) of the 1968 Mexico City Olympic podium, attempts to recreate the 'plinth' from which African American athletes Tommy Smith, John Carlos and Australian athlete Peter Norman stood upon that would be remembered as one of the most pivotal moments in sporting and protest history.

The infamous black power salute that occurred on this podium saw Tommy Smith and John Carlos with their fists closed and raised high, wearing one black glove each to represent strength and unity, beads hanging from Carlos' neck to represent the history of lynching, and black socks with no shoes to represent poverty that remains rife within black communities in America.² Norman, who came second, requested to wear an Olympic Project for Human Rights

badge, in solidarity of their protest. The backlash these athletes experienced almost instantly began from boo's and screaming of the American national anthem with racial slurs, to all athletes being banned from the games completely, as well as death threats towards Smith and Carlos and their families.

Only in their later years did Smith and Carlos receive some acknowledgment, however Norman still goes unknown to the 'average' Australian regardless of being one of Australia's best track and field athletes in a country that glorifies sporting achievement. As I write this, I am learning the news of the deaths of Philando Castile and Aston Sterling. Once again, more cases of black lives in America gunned down by police with no hesitation, continuing to ignite the Black Lives Matter movement and highlight the systemic racism against black people.

Australia's disapproval of Norman's solidarity to this movement from then in '68 reflects its own distancing of the Black Power movement happening in Australia at the time amongst Aboriginal communities gathering in Redfern and activism such as the 1972 Aboriginal Tent Embassy. This distancing continues today when thinking of Aboriginal deaths in custody, the recent cases of Maureen Mandijarra (2012) and Ms Dhu (2014) demonstrate the systemic racism within the Australian police force, in instances where death in prison holding cells need not occur, and at large inquiry into these deaths are not reported on in depth, with many families denied of what happened in these circumstances. Even more recently rallies took place across the nation on July 30th 2016 to protest the government and police forces continued abuse of Indigenous youth in custody that saw thousands of people attending rallies and sit ins to support and acknowledge the disgusting mistreatment.

Further, the re-election of Pauline Hanson, well known for her racial discrimination against brown and black peoples, gaining power within Australian parliament is frightening like the possibility of Donald Trump becoming the next President of the United States of America. Thus this exhibition aims to provide a space that breaks away from the dominant forms of news, media and education that negates the colonised subject and *act as a brake* in the colonial regime.

¹ Frantz Fanon, 'Concerning Violence.' In *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington. Great Britain: McGibbon & Kee, 1965. pp. 54-55

² John Carlos, 'The Medal Stand' in *The John Carlos Story*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011. pp. 103-127.

WHITE LIES

As we know it

an exhibition exploring and re-writing histories as we know it.
5 August - 2 October 2016 / Atrium, Incinerator Gallery

Abyss
Roberta Rich
Texta Queen
Yarnin' Project