

Self-Searching

Contemporary Indigenous Photography at RMIT

Australia's cultural landscape has endured a long and controversial history as a consequence of our 'colonial' past. A tainted and fragmented history has ensured public debate surrounding the misrepresentation, misunderstanding and misconception of Indigenous culture in our country. With a history written by the West, Indigenous Australian's continue the pursuit for their identity in an attempt to make sense of their place in a society that publicises only part of the story. The disputes raised in the 1990's by the History Wars branded the traditional account of our country's history as biased, and acknowledged the importance of an Indigenous perspective, that is still missing today. Occident eyes roll and ignorance prevails as the History Wars continue to circulate and challenge Australia's history books and public perception. Was Australia colonised or invaded?

The ongoing public critique of 'colonisation' and its cultural consequences has highlighted a general lack of knowledge of Indigenous culture in contemporary Australia. With The Daily Telegraph's recent rehash of the University of New South Wales' 1996 decision to acknowledge Australia's Invasion¹, and the public responding as if it's a new thing there is no doubt a need for greater education on Indigenous history in our society. The debate continues, as does the proliferation of Indigenous Australians as 'other' in a country that is their own, to ensure misunderstandings of history are maintained. The notion of 'other', that is imposed on the traditional owners of our land, and the political debate of the History Wars, have created a culturally charged landscape that challenges our understanding of history and hinders Indigenous Australian's in their search of self.

Contemporary Photographers Hayley Millar and Moorina Bonini embrace their Indigenous culture, identity, and its challenges through carefully constructed visual narratives. Art is used as a tool to express who they are, their place in society, and what it means to be Indigenous in Australia's ever-changing cultural landscape. The medium of photography

provides the perfect platform for self-expression and a 'safe-place' behind the camera for these artists to openly examine personal experience and their search. Millar and Bonini's works provide the viewer insightful and relatable interpretations of Aboriginal identity and its multi-faceted nature in a contemporary Australia.



Hayley Millar, *Untitled 3 (Flora and Fauna)*, 2016
Digital collage of medium format 1m, 29.7 x 21cm
(Image courtesy of the artist).

Hayley Millar's photographic collages share glimpses of the past and what it was like for her, growing up Indigenous. The use of humour and nostalgia within her practice subtly confronts the general misconceptions of Aboriginal history, engaging in a dialogue with the past. Millar gifts a new life to her late grandfathers forgotten negatives through the process of digital collage, creating visually stunning and culturally provocative interpretations of Indigenous identity – fusing the past and the present to comment on the pressures and stereotypes Indigenous people are still being subjected to.

At first glance *Untitled 3 (Flora and Fauna)* (2016) appears to depict a typical Australian snapshot of an Indigenous family's road trip – the family stands together on the side of the road, posing for a happy snap at the Victorian Border road sign. The Australian bush landscape fills the background of the photograph,

¹ C. Bye, The Daily Telegraph, March 2016.

contextualising the iconic light blue Valiant pulled over on the side of the road to emit a distinct sense of 'Australiana' surrounding the family. Millar's application of digital collage techniques to her inherited negatives, masks the identity of the family with clusters of Sturt's Desert Pea (a native Australian flower), collaged to cover their faces. This intentional reduction or dehumanisation of identity² transforms the original 'happy snap' into artefact, positioning the Indigenous family as object and 'other', subjected to the Western gaze.

Millar's recontextualisation of family history challenges contemporary Australia to re-evaluate their preconceptions of Aboriginal people – not as flora or fauna, but as human citizens³. The reality of Indigenous experience is highlighted as 'other' through Millar's metaphoric use of a national flower as mask, creating both a subjective exploration of self and a relatable visual narrative for Indigenous Australian's to consider.



Moorina Bonini, *Collective Personality*, 2015
Digital photograph, 51 x 33.8cm
(Image courtesy of the artist).

This theme of personal experience is again analysed in the photographic work of Moorina Bonini who focuses her practice on the malleable nature of the human body⁴. Bonini uses a process of digital manipulation to render highly saturated photographs that depict intimate fragments of self. With our society entrenched with the multiple, a definitive understanding of identity seems to be out of reach, suggesting that no singular identity will ever be possible. Bonini investigates this contemporary reality, emphasising the binary social tensions that penetrate our internal and external worlds

in a culturally charged and overtly globalised environment.

Collective Personality (2015) exposes the hidden realities of Bonini's experience growing up Indigenous through a visually captivating study of the human form. The highly saturated photograph depicts a young Indigenous boy split in two, his body replicated, and manipulated to reflect both physical and mental states of self – existence and understanding. The central figure of the boy stands in profile with his head down, whilst the distorted 'other self' has been superimposed over his body, this time standing confidently with his gaze fixed solely on the viewer. Bonini's compositional choices in body language, digital technique and the symbolic palette choice of black and white all work together to emphasise the impact social, cultural and political influences hold, in determining our worlds⁵. Bonini manipulates the boy's physical self through the careful manipulation of light and exposure, creating a subjective and revealing illustration of her identity and experience. The intimate interpretation of self in *Collective Personality* recognises identity as both transparent and multiple, and alludes to Bonini's personal encounters with the categorisations of "skin colour and stereotypes"⁶ forced on Indigenous Australian's by the general public, media and the uneducated.

The concept of self-searching is a prevalent issue for Indigenous Australia, as the missing pieces to our history and culture are slowly being recognised, though tainted and even at times ignored by our country's 'colonial' past. The continual misrepresentation of Aboriginal history in our contemporary society will continue without the proper recognition, and addition of Indigenous perspectives in our history books. In order to reach an informed public understanding of Indigenous culture and experience, education needs to be a priority and will only be realised in an open dialogue with Indigenous people. The public debate surrounding Indigeneity stems from the sociological realities and politics of the History Wars, providing artist's Hayley Millar and Moorina Bonini a relatable and accessible visual forum for this dialogue to take place – sharing Indigenous perspectives that are now, more important than ever to Our Story, Our Country.

² H. Millar, Personal Communication, August 2016

³ H. Millar, Personal Communication, August 2016

⁴ M. Bonini, Personal Communication, August 2016

⁵ M. Bonini, Personal Communication, August 2016

⁶ M. Bonini, Personal Communication, August 2016