

THE BOX: DEATH TRANSFORMATION REBIRTH

Belinda Golder Kngwarreye

Chelsea Coon

Dean Cross

Elizabeth Gower

Kellie Wells

Mandy Marshall Nakamarra

Mark Shorter

Phillip Denham

Curators: Jessica Clark and Dr David Sequeira
HOST INSTRUCTION

1. Receive "The Box" and notify curators by email/phone.
2. Read artwork installation instructions outlined on the following page.
3. Each artwork has been labelled with respective artist's name on/or attached to artwork packaging.
4. Carefully open and unwrap contents using gloves provided.
5. Select a room in your house to install the works and curate the exhibition.
6. There is no specific installation requirement; however, please keep in mind the following: handle the works of art with care and diligence, do not install artworks in kitchen or bathroom areas, display objects throughout the same room.
7. Throughout the week spend some time with the works. You may wish to read the exhibition text while you are with the works.
8. Please document the works of art in your home and supply curators with at least 10 quality images to be shared via the exhibition Instagram page @theboxexhibition.
9. At the end of the week, you will receive instructions for pickup and delivery to the next venue. When ready, take another pair of gloves and carefully wrap the works as you found them. Place them in the box, affix address label and post/contact curator for re-delivery.
10. Debrief experience with curators over the phone or by email.

ARTWORK INSTALLATION

Chelsea Coon, *THE FURTHEST POINT IN SPACE IS ALSO INSIDE OUR BODY*, 2020, digital archival prints, edition of 20. Audio recording: 3 minutes.

1. In the black calico bag, you will find a USB, listen to this first
2. Return USB to the bag and choose one envelope to open
3. Keep one print and display, gift the other

Dean Cross, *One day even the sun must die*, 2020, yellow-coloured light bulb.

1. Unwrap and choose one of two yellow light bulbs
2. Replace an existing lightbulb in your home with this one. If you don't have a fixture that fits, an alternative lamp is provided
3. Turn the light on and off at different times throughout the week

Philip Denham, *Bagu*, 2020, Milky Pine, Jiman, ochre, hand-made natural string, 17 x 7 x 1 cm.

1. Carefully unwrap object
2. Display the object on a flat surface

Elizabeth Gower, *Cycles*, 2015, paper on cheese lids, 11 x 11 x 1 cm each.

1. Carefully remove wrapped objects
2. Display works

Belinda Golder Kngwarreye, *Bush Yam Story*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 cm.

1. Unwrap canvas
2. Display work

Mandy Marshall Nakamarra, *Tali*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 cm.

1. Unwrap canvas
2. Display work

Mark Shorter, *Mérode Altarpiece 1428–2020*, 2020, pewter candlestick from 3D digital print, beeswax taper candle.

1. Remove candlestick from cylinder
2. Choose a candle and place in the candlestick (scrape out wax build-up if necessary), display
3. Light the candle at different times throughout the day/duration

Note: Before re-packing candlestick, remove candle – keep or dispose.

Kellie Wells, *The Letter*, 2020, handmade kangaroo skin wallet, 5 x 7 cm, double-sided photographic print, handwritten letter on paper in sepia ink, and peacock feather.

1. Remove object from cardboard envelope, carefully unwrap
2. Open the work, look, touch, explore, try and decipher the text
3. Display work

INTRODUCTION

THE BOX: DEATH TRANSFORMATION REBIRTH has been devised within the context of a Stage 4 COVID-19 Lockdown in Naarm (Melbourne), Australia – a time when museums and art galleries are closed and offering virtual art experiences. The artworld is a resilient one, and despite being one of the hardest-hit sectors, there has been a continual stream of online art-based content, virtual exhibition viewings, live feed artist talks, online art fairs, panel discussions, and workshop webinars on offer.

This travelling exhibition has come about through a question we have been asking ourselves: how do we generate experiences of intimacy with art during a pandemic? We are interested in exploring the role of the curator. What is an exhibition, and what can it be? What happens when the home is the exhibition space, and art occupies the same space as the TV?

With our home and work lives seemingly collapsed, the distinction between private and public space has become blurred. What is important for us as curators is the experience of art, the moment of encounter between viewer and objects, and the dialogue that emerges. As such, *DEATH TRANSFORMATION REBIRTH* embraces the notion of intimacy with art objects across time and space. It offers each host the opportunity to experience and connect with art objects in the safety of their own home – unwrapping the individual works, selecting and displaying them in their home, and just being with the works.

In a gallery context, our role as curators would normally involve the selection and display of works of art. Whilst we have selected the works of art for this project, we are handing over the specific decisions around display to the exhibition hosts. The project has been developed with the awareness that each venue will generate its own unique exhibition experience. We invite our hosts not only to engage with the selected works, but also to engage with the curatorial process of organising the art objects in their homes. The following Curatorial Notes are deliberately “loose” in their relationship with the exhibition’s themes.

Our intention is to provide our thoughts in the form of our text, our curatorial contributions (see next page), our chosen exhibition format and our selection of art objects such that the hosts make connections between the works of art, their lives and notions of death, transformation and rebirth.

CURATORIAL NOTES

Question: What does it mean to think about death, transformation and rebirth amidst a global pandemic?

Whilst the themes of death, transformation and rebirth are fundamental to human experience at any time, they have particular resonance in 2020. At the time of developing this project approximately 1,000,000 deaths around the world have been attributed to COVID-19.

The pandemic seems to have brought everything and everyone to a halt. It's as if time has slowed down and simultaneously quickened in lockdown. We have suddenly adapted to a different way of living life in response to the pandemic. Uncertainty has infiltrated all aspects of daily life. Our movement is restricted, our workplaces are closed, and our social interactions and connections are limited or nil. In this new physically distancing reality, the collective call to go back to normal resounds ... But can we really dial back to 2019? Is that really what we want?

The bushfires and floods of 2019–20 destroyed ecosystems and livelihoods. We have mourned the destruction of the ancient and sacred caves in the Juukan Gorge during Reconciliation Week, and although we have been forced to stop, the logging of our life-giving state forests continues. A community housing crisis has exposed severe systemic inequalities within our social fabric. The deaths in aged care facilities keep mounting, the Army has been brought in, testing centres abound ... we are on edge.

The global Black Lives Matter movement has shone a light on the realities of our First Nations people who are amongst the most incarcerated by percentage of population in the world. Mass protest against government policy and the interrogation of national and state monuments has brought issues of race to the foreground. Streaming services have moved quickly to remove culturally inappropriate content, its public recourse revealing a widespread complicity ... but also a growing awareness. A shift in the collective conscious is seeding.

We await daily updates ... numbers ... breaches ... The global pandemic unfolds on our screens. What if this is our wake-up call? A global reckoning; an opportunity to interrogate, to reimagine, to reform? As Arundhati Roy proclaims in her recent article, "nothing could be worse than a return to normality."¹ The pandemic is a portal, a gateway, the rupture – our time to rethink, reflect, and redirect.

¹ Arundhati Roy, "The Pandemic Is a Portal," *Financial Times*, April 4, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>.

CURATOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Although they are not actually works of art, two additional objects accompany the exhibition. These objects have been contributed by the curators of the project. The objects are not intended to be shown with the other objects. We see these objects (a fragment of pottery and a vial of essential oil) as sitting alongside our text for this project in generating a context for experiencing the exhibition.

Curator Jessica Clark, Object 1: *Potskerf Fragment* from handmade unglazed clay pots made by Hendrick Witbooi and Christo Jacobs for the signing of a Bio Cultural Community Protocol Document (2003).²

Our departure was delayed ... Uncle Jeremy had been flying to meet us, carrying with him a collection of cultural artefacts including two clay pots. When the plane landed, he found that one was missing and the other was in pieces. Our journey had just begun, and I think we all felt a deep loss for those pots ... We arrived in Richmond to begin the First Nations Colloquium (2019) having been brought together from across the lands and the oceans, with the aim of fostering cross-cultural and international collaborations between First Nations peoples and First Nations creative work. That week unfolded through love, hugs, tears, and laughter. We connected through our lived experiences, our passion for First Nations art and culture, and our ancestors who ground us. We shared space, meals and music ... A strong and precious bond formed between us.

Mid-week we gathered in a circle for a morning session with Uncle Jeremy. The room quietened and he started with a pause ... before reflecting on the missing and broken pots ... He went on to explain that he had just that morning had a realisation that, for him, seemed to make sense of the loss of the pots. He would gift each of us a potskerf to take home, to treasure as a symbol of our continuing connection ... The potskerf transformed. A new life given. From heartbreak to hope. Each piece now a powerful and tangible reminder of our interconnectedness, regardless of the physical distance between us.

Curator David Sequeira, Object 2: *Tiger Lily Essential Oil*

Please use the essential oil sparingly on the inner side of your wrist. The tiger lily is said to symbolise confidence, pride, mercy, and compassion.

² The original pots served as objects for community ritual and celebration for the Outeniquia ("people living in harmony with honey bees"). You are welcome to view a short video of Uncle Jeremy greeting us and speaking about Indigenous healing plants and the significance of the pots on the USB that accompanies the potskerf. Video by Richart Culbert Van Wyk.

WORKS OF ART

Kellie Wells

The Letter (2020) includes a handwritten letter coded in the artist's own private language, folded and held within a kangaroo leather wallet. The text is accompanied by a double-sided photograph of the artist – one side showing the artist at eight years old, the other a more recent photograph – and a peacock feather, a deeply personal symbol for the artist in relation to self-reflection, change, and personal growth.

Mandy Marshall Nakamarra

Tali (2020) depicts an aerial perspective of the sandhill (tali) terrain that surround the artist's homelands in Yuendumu. Taking form as a result of weathering and erosion over time, the dunes both hide and hold secret sacred knowledges of life, land, and survival. The artist's layered linear and dotted patterns stretch across the canvas, just as the sands stretch across the land – stacked and repeated they evoke the elemental forces at work, a transitional state in time.

Mark Shorter

Mérode Altarpiece 1428–2020 (2020) is a pewter candlestick – its design a reproduction from a Northern Renaissance painting of the same title that depicts the Annunciation.³ Each host is invited to burn a candle in the candlestick over the course of the exhibition. The lit candle connects the 15th century and the 21st century. In the spirit of vanitas, the work suggests the transience of life and the certainty of death. As the melted wax builds up, and the candlestick is passed from host to host, Shorter invites contemplation on the passing of time.

Philip Denham

Bagu (2020) is a hand-carved and painted sculptural figure made to invoke the spirits of the artist's ancestors. In this sense, *Bagu* links the ancient with the present.⁴ The bagu (body) of the work takes the shape of a man, enveloped by the artist's decorative ochre flames that hold two black dots at its centre. These dots are connection points for the accompanying jiman (firesticks) that are bundled together – when these two elements connect, they spark fire – a place for warmth, gathering, cooking, and ceremony.

³ The *Mérode Altarpiece* (1425–28) by Robert Campin is indicative of the Northern Renaissance style that engages spiritual ideas and revelations. It is a small portable triptych that was intended for personal devotions. The original painting, in which the candlestick sits at the centre on a table, captures the moment the light of the candle is snuffed out – signifying the presence of the otherworldly, in this case, the moment of the Immaculate Conception.

⁴ Bagu are traditional fire making implements of the Giringun rainforest Aboriginal people. Their form is representative of a mystical and malevolent fire spirit, the Chikka-bunnah – a bogeyman type figure who would throw Jiman across the sky, and a trail of fire would follow. Joann Russo, email to the author, September 28, 2020.

Belinda Golder Kngwarreye

Bush Yam Story (2020) is a celebration of Country, life, and sustenance. The artist's energetic dotted brushstrokes and blended warm colours dance across the canvas, mirroring the seasonal stages of the bush yam plant – a vital bush food gathered on her Country in Utopia. The work can be understood as depicting the cyclical nature of the bush yam from seed through germination and flowering and then to seed once more. The bush yam is a life-sustaining food that is associated with important Central Desert rituals.⁵

Elizabeth Gower

Cycles (2015) is a series of cyclic collage works, three of which are included in *Death Transformation Rebirth*. Each work is made through the artist's signature process of collecting, cutting, and reconstructing product packaging and junk mail. Gower's complex repetitious patterning of consumer culture remainders can serve as a reminder of continuity and infinity. Gower's processes bring order to Melbourne's barrage of grocery store catalogues. The circular form of her work – with no beginning or end – further highlights the themes of momentum and endlessness.

Chelsea Coon

Points (2020) is a participatory work that invites reflection on the relational contingencies that shape the body in space and time. The text "THE FURTHEST POINT IN SPACE IS ALSO INSIDE OUR BODY" is scribed on the reverse of a series of editioned photographs of the Orion Nebula that have been paired and sealed within one of ten envelopes. The artist invites each host to choose one envelope to open, to keep one of the prints, and gift the other.

Dean Cross

One day even the sun must die (2020) takes the form of a single yellow-coloured light bulb and the following instruction by the artist: replace an existing light bulb in your home with the yellow one provided for the duration of the exhibition. The invited action, and the work's dependency on an on-and-off switch, suggests the delicate balance between life and death. When activated, the yellow glow emitted illuminates all the other works.

⁵ "The importance of the Yam Dreaming narratives of Central and Western Deserts reflects the crucial role this food source played in the lives of traditional people. The Yam is presented in ceremonies through song cycles and dance performances ... At the centre of these ceremonies is the message of sustainability and social harmony in the appropriate management of the Yam resources, which were sown and harvested across western and central Australia." "Yam Dreaming," Japingka Aboriginal Art, 2017, <https://japingkaaboriginalart.com/collections/yam-dreaming/>.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

Chelsea Coon's performances are endurance-based experiments that examine phases, distance, points, mirroring, and the way in which the body on an elemental level is rooted to the constantly expanding universe. She received her BFA at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts (2012), MFA at Tufts University (2014), and Certificate of Advanced Studies in Theatre, Performance and Contemporary Live Arts at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Scuola Teatro Dimitri, Switzerland (2015). She is the author of *No One Thing is the Root of All Anything: Phases and Performance of the Imminent* (Not a Cult, 2018). She is the recipient of an Australian Commonwealth Government Research Training Program Scholarship and is a doctoral candidate at the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne.

Dean Cross's critical practice revisits and challenges colonial narratives of Australia and the Pacific through the lens of national, archival, and personal histories. He is interested in the object history of raw materials and the plasticity of ideas. Cross was raised on Ngannawal/Ngambri Country and is of Worimi descent. He is a multi-disciplinary artist primarily working across painting, sculpture, video, and photography. His artistic career began in contemporary dance, performing and choreographing nationally and internationally with Australia's leading dance companies. Following that, Cross retrained as a visual artist, graduating with a Bachelor of Visual Arts from Sydney College of the Arts and First Class Honours from the Australian National University, School of Art and Design.

Philip Denham is a Girramay man of the Murray Upper area north of Cardwell, Queensland. Denham creates work that reflects his cultural ties to Country. A language speaker and knowledge holder, Denham wants to share knowledge. He is a creator of traditional tools and has an extensive knowledge of the environment and its resources. Denham was taught by his parents, Andy and Daisy Denham, highly respected Elders of the area. Denham is a relatively new artist with the Girringun Art Centre but his creativity and interest in working with new materials is showing astounding results. He is keen to learn and is always ready to lend a hand.

Elizabeth Gower has been exhibiting innovative work, including collages and wall hangings, since 1976. Her interest lies in the human desire to create order from the chaotic. Gower creates stunning abstract compositions from humble materials, with an emphasis upon translucency, fragility, and impermanence. Her practice draws much of its content and form from the world of the everyday – commercial images and objects as well as familiar and domestic materials such as newspaper and tissue paper. Exploiting the associations evoked by such banal material, her work has often been connected with a feminist sensibility; however, this framing should be countered with recognition of the strong aesthetic concerns at play.

Belinda Golder Kngwarreye is an Anmatyerre artist from the Utopia Homelands of Central Australia. She paints the Bush Plum Dreaming story inherited from her

grandmother Polly Ngale. Her technique is to render the many colours of the bush plum plant as the fruits ripen. The bush plum is known as “anwekety” and only fruits for a few weeks each year. In the Tjukurpa Dreaming story the bush plum seeds were blown all over the ancestral lands by the winds and they bore fruit on Utopia lands. Her paintings engage techniques developed by master artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye to impart the many colours of the plant, seeds, flowers, and fruit of the bush plum. Golder Kngwarreye inherits aspects of the Kame Dreaming from her paternal grandparents.

Mandy Marshall Nakamarra was born in 1965 at Yuendumu, 290 km from Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. Her father was Nosepeg Tjupurrula (1915–1993), an Elder and a driving force in the outstation movement from the 1960s to the 1980s. He started painting at the beginning of the art movement in Papunya and was a great negotiator between cultures. Marshall Nakamarra was surrounded by artists and art as she grew up and from a young age experimented with different mediums and designs. She has spent time in her mother’s homelands of Yuendumu, more recently moving to Alice Springs with her husband where she continues to try out new styles and designs.

Mark Shorter is Head of Sculpture and Spatial Practice at the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne. His work questions dominant narratives around landscape, gender, and the body by stretching and tuning the ideologies that sit deep in their form to see what bends or breaks. While he often performs as himself, he also makes art through a variety of guises – vaudeville cowboy Renny Kodgers, the quixotic journeyman Tini La Bamba, and the time-travelling landscape painting critic Schleimgurgeln. These performance investigations express a contemporary grotesque and propose an art that is guttural, visceral, and not beholden to the cerebral.

Kellie Wells is a Tasmanian-born visual artist who completed her MFA at Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne, in 2016. Based out of Melbourne, Wells has shown her work in solo and group exhibitions in both Australia and overseas and was recently a studio resident at Phasmid Studio, Berlin, Germany (Mar–Jun 2017). Her research interests centre on ancient and contemporary devotional practices and rituals, and her work questions the often-labelled narcissistic art of modern self-representation. Through colourful spatial installations of drawing, photography, video, and crafted objects, her practice reflects a deep contemplation of selfhood via its own image and self-representation as consecrated pursuit and sacred occupation.