

## Got to be Black

Suzanne Spinner

*Beyond the Pale*

Art Gallery of SA, March 4 - April 16

Unquestionably, Indigenous art occupies the prominent position in this festival. There are 3 core exhibitions centrestage and numerous other exhibitions. The opening of the Aboriginal Cultures Gallery at the SA Museum is the fulcrum and next door at the Art Gallery of SA, *Beyond the Pale* the Adelaide Biennial, is exclusively devoted to the work of contemporary Indigenous artists. To complement these two, *From Appreciation to Appropriation* at Flinders University Museum Gallery, fosters debate across the problematic use of Indigenous imagery and identity. Not only is Indigenous art foregrounded, it's also contextualised.

*Beyond the Pale* is the flash show. It has the big white space, the biggest catalogue and some of the best examples of Indigenous artists working now. Curated by Brenda L Croft, it is elegantly displayed, beautifully lit and well chosen with just enough space between one work and another, one artist and another, and considering there are 25 artists represented, sufficient examples of their work for an audience to get a fix on each of them.

In her excellent essay, "Beyond the Pale: empires built on the bones of the dispossessed," Croft quotes Hetti Perkins' comment about Indigenous artists as contemporary practitioners being "obliged to assume an homogenous identity which has assimilationist overtones in myriad ways."

Croft's essay places the history of Indigenous art in the context of colonialism and racism. Thorough accompanying notes on each artist combine artists' statements and short essays by a variety of informed and responsive writers. In addition there are full colour reproductions of the works, exhaustive artist biographies and an extensive biography of Indigenous art. It's well worth the cover price.

My concern is the long essay "2000's Got to be Black" by English artist/curator Eddie Chambers. It follows Croft's signature essay

and is about the same length. However, it is not referred to by Croft nor Ron Radford in his foreword. What is more surprising, perhaps strange even, is that Chambers himself makes no reference to the exhibition or to the work of any of the artists involved. Nor does his manifesto seem to connect with the germane issues raised by Croft. Chambers argues that black artists in Britain are in a perilous and marginalised position and that they get pushed further out when major British galleries and institutions import overseas Indigenous shows and somehow think they have fulfilled their obligations to black artists. He then goes on to argue that "black" or "indigenous" artists must be afforded "ultimate validation and acknowledgement in the form of solo exhibitions in major galleries" so that there is an opportunity "to look at the individuality of an artist's work." And furthermore, that black curators need "to advance to strategically important positions in the art establishment."

We would all agree with this—but nowhere in this catalogue do either Croft or Chambers acknowledge that the situation for Indigenous artists in Australia actually fulfils Chambers' desideratum. For evidence, you need only study the artists' biographies and the bibliography in which I recognised the names of a dozen important strategically positioned Indigenous curators who have been curating significant (frequently landmark and benchmark) national and international exhibitions over the last decade. Brenda L Croft has curated numerous exhibitions including (with Hetti Perkins) *fluent*, Australia's representative exhibition at the 1997 Venice Biennale which featured the work of 3 Indigenous women artists, 2 of whom (Judy Watson and Yvonne Koolmatrie) are featured in *Beyond the Pale*.

Using the biographies provided as the basis, let's consider their tally on solo shows. There are 25 artists drawn from all over the country from communities and urban areas; some of them are extremely well known, some young, some older, some have been working as artists for a long time, others have recently begun exhibiting. Some employ traditional styles and media, others work in acquired media and with contemporary technologies.

Fifteen of the 25 have had significant solo shows and in addition, 2 (Koolmatrie and Ken Thaiday Sr) have not had solo exhibitions but have featured prominently in national and international shows. Koolmatrie figured in the Venice Biennale

and last year was a finalist (and the only Indigenous artist) in the Clemenger Award for Contemporary Australian artists. Thaiday featured in *Ilan Pasin: this is our way* and was one of the 8 Indigenous artists in *Eye of the Storm*, both exhibitions toured nationally and internationally.

Further, among those artists who have had solo shows, artists like Ginger Riley and Rosella Namok at opposite ends of the spectrum suggest that the individuality of Indigenous artists is well established. Riley has had a major retrospective at the National Gallery of Victoria (albeit not curated by an Indigenous curator) becoming the first Indigenous artist to have a major retrospective in his lifetime—one of the few living Australian artists to be so chosen.

Rosella Namok is an artist at the beginning of her career, one of the few in *Beyond the Pale* whose work I had not seen before, and no wonder! Rosella is the youngest artist in the show (at 21 she has been exhibiting since 1996) and last year had her first solo show at Hogarth Galleries in Sydney. She is a bold and gifted painter and I was excited by her work. There are not many 21 year old artists anywhere in the world who could command this degree of attention and exposure.

*There'll be more on Beyond the Pale in RT4*