

Beyond the brand / Beyond the frame

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unbranded as a curatorial project came about through an ongoing conversation between Glenn Iseger-Pilkington and myself over the past twelve months. The idea to collaborate on an exhibition was initially sparked by Glenn's essay 'Branded: The Indigenous Aesthetic', originally written in 2009. Much has changed in both the art world and in Glenn's politic since the essay was first published a decade ago, however many of its key points remain salient. Branding serves the purpose of neatly packaging objects in order for them to be marketed and sold, and as such *the brand* Glenn is referring to continues to reaffirm audience expectations, aesthetic assumptions, cultural stereotypes and reductive modes of thinking around contemporary Indigenous art. It is my hope that *unbranded* presents a very direct challenge to *the brand*, offering an alternative that replaces reductive and insular modes of thinking with a more expansive conversation around contemporary Indigenous art. *The brand* may have shifted in form and scale, but it continues to assert its aesthetic frame nonetheless. Just like all *good brands* it is standing the test of time... Just like all *good brands* it is resilient... Just like all *good brands* it is persistent.

Relationship first

Over the course of the past year, Glenn and I have built a strong and very honest working relationship. We have formed a bond as friends and as collaborators, based around our mutual love of art among other things. During our first teleconferencing meeting, Glenn spoke of the importance of relationship in all of his work. "Relationship first", he said. This building of relationship occurred very naturally from our early conversations across the continent and since then, Glenn and I have shared many stories from our personal and working lives, with brutal honesty. This approach to working collaboratively, by building relationship first, paves a foundation of exceptional strength, built on a deep sense of trust. It also shows a mutual commitment to the purpose behind our collaboration, as something ongoing and meaningful.

All of the artists contributing to *unbranded* are connected through *relationship* to some degree. Whether based on long-term connections to Glenn or more recent ones to myself, they are based on relationships between people. It is through establishing genuine and lasting relationships that an exhibition such as *unbranded* can be made possible between Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaborators and be meaningful on multiple levels to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences, bridging cultural experience and doing its bit to usurp *the brand*.

It almost needn't be mentioned, but art provides a very powerful means of transcending and transmitting experiences between people. It has taken great trust, commitment and belief in the power of art to bring people together, that has made *unbranded* possible. It is through art that an

artist living and working in Jimbalakudunj Community, near Fitzroy Crossing in Western Australia and people in regional Victoria can be brought together. The fact that this experience is taking place beyond the nation's major cities, in a regional location, is also an achievement worth celebrating.

Beyond the frame: Presentation / ~~Representation~~ / Collaboration

As a curator of contemporary Australian art, I am always working with other people's artistic expressions of their culture. Whether the artist is an Indigenous Australian or a non-Indigenous Australian, their cultural context always differs from mine, this is the nature of our humanity. Their unique experiences, reflected in their artwork, are never my own and as such consultation and collaboration are critical in my practice, which is simply put, the presentation of art to audiences. Effective consultation and collaboration requires honest conversation, which can only come about through establishing meaningful and genuine relationships with people.

Glenn has spoken about being a *conduit* in the role he plays between the art-world, artists and communities. I feel very much the same way in my role as a curator. As opposed to gathering the knowledge and experiences of other people, representing, reinterpreting and reframing them as my own, my role as a curator allows me to act as a *conductor* bringing two experiences together, a *vessel* that allows one person's cultural experience to be expressed and communicated in another context.

This shared outlook has very much shaped our approach to the curation of *unbranded*, placing a strong focus on *presentation*, as opposed to *re-presentation*, to build an exhibition that provides access to knowledge direct from artists. *Beyond the frame* of the institution. *Beyond the brand*.

A work of art can only give us a fragment of insight and can only be the start of a much more expansive, detailed conversation that extends *beyond the frame*. The picture is never whole, only ever part of that story, as there are always conversations, experiences, ideas embedded within a work that take place around the work, in its proximity, and which often never make their way into the work itself. This is important to remember when viewing *unbranded*, to avoid reducing the works to mere objects, limiting their capacity to express lived experiences and living culture.

James Tylor makes us acutely aware of this with his photographic works from his *Deleted Scenes from an Untouched Landscape* and *Erased Scenes from an Untouched Landscape* series,

physically removing parts of the image and lining the void that remains with black velvet. In his work, James Tylor investigates the complex intersection of his Nunga (Kurna), Māori (Te Arawa) and European Australian ancestries, drawing our attention to what is included and excluded, *erased* or *deleted* from our shared history, also reminding us of the way written histories are privileged over unwritten histories.

Damien Shen's *Still Life After Penn* series, consisting of six tin-type photographs, challenges the institution of the museum and its attempt to reduce culture to a containable, collectable set of objects to be housed in collections and trundled out for display to reaffirm the interests of the collector or collecting institution. Shen, a South Australian man of Ngarrindjeri and Chinese ancestries, produced this remarkable body of work during his 2017 residency at Kluge-Ruhe Art Museum at the University of Virginia (UVA). *Still Life After Penn* directly calls into question the dehumanising museological practice of collecting human remains, a practice that is unfortunately, not yet of the past, with human remains yet to be repatriated from major institutions nationally and internationally. Through this series of photographs, Shen demonstrates the disjuncture between the complex reality of living culture and the inability of objects and collections to adequately engage with that culture. The very nature of collecting results in specific things being included and others omitted, resulting in some stories being told and others remaining silent.

A number of other artists exhibiting in *unbranded* explore this disjuncture in their work. In *Dead Babies* (2018), John Prince Siddon presents deeply harrowing content, in the form of a hypothetical question, alluding to a possible history omitted from the story of life in the Kimberley, perhaps too troubling to mention or talk about, however painting it allows the question to be asked. Prince describes the work stating;

Nobody mentioned this before. But did we really have disabled children, even the blind or a serious limpchild out bush in the desert?

And how did the mother and dad and families cope with the child? The Ngutu Cooleman was like a cot, just the right size to fit a small sick child. The Ngutu was used in many ways to carry food, water, a child, also bush medicine. Anyway, did any disabled children make it out from the desert? Did the parents and family make a big decision to leave a disabled child out bush?

Because the pressure and slowing things down was difficult for them. The pain they had to face and the choice they had to make, life was tough. Imagine leaving your own disabled child behind alone. Some had perished or were eaten by ants, crows, eagles or wild dingos. Leaving the body in the ngutu cooleman was tough.

Did they? But nobody can tell, the secret remains in the Desert.¹

In *Our Babies* (2019), Sharyn Egan shares her experience as a woman of the Stolen Generation. Sharyn's work comprised of 100 faceless figures, laying in 100 small sardine tin beds, may be physically small in scale individually, however the work imparts a monumental impact on the viewer. Each bed is unique, yet at the same time each is just like the one next to it in the row. Despite the highly emotive impact of *Our Babies'* subject matter, this can only express a fragment of insight when compared with listening to Sharyn share her story, as she did for those lucky enough to be in attendance at the opening launch of the exhibition. The work itself can only be the starting point for that much bigger conversation.

The need for conversation *beyond the frame* is also an important aspect of Dean Cross' work for *unbranded*, which subverts nationalistic mythologies and the privileging of certain narratives and voices over others. Dean Cross' installation is comprised of three artworks and a wall treatment, created using still images from the silent film, *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (1906). Dean has "lifted these images from the moments in the film where the silver nitrate had begun to degrade. It seemed perfect that the materiality of the myth was eating itself."² Each of Dean Cross' works invite us to rethink the histories that have become mythologised and become part of *the national consciousness* - that said, the idea that a singular *national consciousness* exists at all is not particularly helpful.

All of the artists exhibiting in *unbranded* are innovators of Australian contemporary art, working *beyond the brand* aesthetically, conceptually and through the materiality of their work, challenging assumptions and expectations around the materials commonly associated with Indigenous art. Nongirrrja Marawili, Gunybi Ganambarr, Wukun Wanambi and Patrina Mununggurr are Yolŋu artists living and working within close proximity to Yirrkala in North East Arnhem Land. All four of these artists make us rethink our expectations of Yolŋu art, particularly assumptions around *traditional* forms of artmaking such as bark painting³, assumptions built on reductive *traditional / non-traditional* binary relationships.

In *Lightning* (2017), *Lightning* (2017) and *Bol'ŋu Djapu* (2017), Nongirrrja Marawili embraces layers of matte and gloss enamel paint on highly reflective aluminium composite board, reclaimed from discarded materials left by *balanda* (white people) on Yolŋu country. Painting on this material reclaims the discarded object, making it Yolŋu in order for it to make sense in the complex system of relationships that comprise Yolŋu culture under the Dhuwa and Yirritja moiety system⁴.

Gunybi Ganambarr also draws on reclaimed discarded materials with his engraved galvanised steel and etched enamel works exhibited in *unbranded*. The sheet of metal that provides the material support for *Milŋurr Naymil font* (2016) has been reclaimed from a discarded water tank

at Gāngan, where the artist lives and works (see inside cover image). Gunybi's Larrakitj (memorial poles) also provide fine examples of innovation and the artists remarkable ability to not only embrace existing formal structures that have been culturally significant for thousands of years, but an ability to reinvent them. These works undermine arbitrary categorisations such as the *traditional / non-traditional* binary, as they clearly operate in-between these constructs.

Wukun Wanambi has also developed a unique and innovative visual language with his Larrakitj. Wukun's aesthetic and subject matter depart from the more established practice of painting *miny'tji* (sacred clan designs) onto the surface of hollowed logs, inherited from their former use in funerary ceremony. In some cases Wukun adopts an extremely minimalist aesthetic, embracing the raw, natural qualities of *gadayka* (stringybark) or occasionally coating the hollowed log with a very fine wash of gapan (white clay). Wukun's signature works, such as the two Larrakitj titled *Trial Bay* (2016) exhibited in *unbranded*, are characterised by highly layered depictions of mullet, swimming and swarming around the cylindrical form of the hollowed log. According to Wukun the fish are "travelling ocean to ocean, creek to creek, river to river, representing you and I, when we travel looking for our destiny."⁵

Patrina Mununggurr represents the next generation of artists working in Yirrkala with The Mulka Project, embracing digital media, photography and film. Patrina's Telstra NATSIAA winning *Dhunupa'kum Nhuna Wanda (Straighten Your Mind)* (2018) illustrates the intersection of ceremonial tradition and contemporary culture in North East Arnhem Land. Patrina's film embraces digital technology as a new form of storytelling, showing the artist painting-up for ceremony using gapan (white clay), with the *manikay* (men's song) sung by Meṅa and Larritjpirra Mununggurr.

Yolṅu paint gapan (white-clay) on their face and body for ceremonial purposes. My film shows me painting my forehead with gapan which represents the Dhuwa waṅupini (cloud). My people, the Djapu people, sing the cloud song. This songline tells Yolṅu to paint themselves with gapan. The old people sing this ancient songline to ask Yolṅu to paint themselves with gapan before they start performing *bungul* (ceremonial dance). Gapan is used in our artwork, for medicinal properties and it is very powerful. Yolṅu have always used gapan – past, present and future. Gapan helps us to stand strong.⁶

Beyond the materiality of the works exhibited in *unbranded*, Glenn and I have attempted to curate a selection that redefine and undermine the aesthetic assumptions associated with *the brand*, particularly those around *colour*, with *big, bold, beautiful* acrylic paintings dominating the national and international commercial art market.

The colour palette of *unbranded* is extremely minimal, dominated by tones of black, grey and white. Colourful works have been deployed very sparingly and it is no coincidence that the most colourful works in the exhibition present the most confronting subject matter; John Prince Siddon's *Dead Babies* (2018) and Sharyn Egan's *Our Babies* (2019).

Nyurpaya Kaika Burton's *Ngayuku tjukurpa, mara walytjangku palyantja - My story, written in my own hand* (2019) provides an alternative to much of the contemporary painting that comes out of the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands (APY Lands), which is dominated by large-format, bright, colourful acrylic canvases. Nyurpaya's work presents her personal biographical story and her thoughts, painted in her first language, Pitjantjatjara. This painting in Pitjantjatjara re-centres our attention on the artist and the story she wishes to tell through her artwork, on her terms, in her language.

Sonia Kurarra's paintings, *Matuwarra* (2015) also operate beyond *the brand* of highly sought after bright and colourful acrylic paintings that dominate the commercial market, offering an alternative that draws our focus back to the artist's multi-planar depictions of her Country, rendered in highly contrasting black and white paint;

Martuwarra is my river country; this painting is all about the Fitzroy River which flows down through Noonkanbah where I live. All kinds of fish live in the water, we catch big mob of fish here. I like Parlka (barrumundi). We catch catfish and brim here too. Nganku (shark), Wirritunany (swordfish) and Stingray also live here. These fish live in these waters long after the flood has gone. Also this painting is about barrumundi swimming on the surface of the water, you can also see the Wakiri (pandanus tree) and rocks all around. When the barrumundi get tired they go back into the rock holes. These rock holes hold all the Parlka (barrumundi) that live in the river. Kalpurtu (creator serpent-type being) also live in these rock holes and swim all around the Palma (creeks) and all around the Wakiri that grows in the river.⁷

Three generations of men from Country in close proximity to Fitzroy Crossing in Western Australia are represented in *unbranded*, senior Walmajarri boss-man Ngarralja Tommy May, John Prince Siddon and Illiam Nargoodah. These three artists exemplify the sheer diversity of contemporary artwork being created at a national level, but also within communities and the art centres that support and represent artists, such as Mangkaja Arts in Fitzroy Crossing.

Ngarralja Tommy May's three works exhibited in *unbranded*, from the Harriett and Richard England Collection, Tasmania, are titled *Jitirr* (2017), and depict a large rocky hill east of Kaningarra in the Great Sandy Desert. These three paintings present a combination of painting, drawing and etching into enamel paint on metal using engraving tools and paint pens. Mr May's minimalist, yet

highly detailed compositions contrast greatly with the figurative, epic narrative-driven work of John Prince Siddon, which again differ greatly to Illiam Nargoodah's installation of raining knives. These individual knives are made from reclaimed materials found on Illiam's family property, Jimbalakudunj. The installation, comprised of seven works display Illiam's exceptional skill as a craftsman, the knives serve a functional purpose, yet are crafted with keen aesthetic consideration.

unbranded sees La Trobe Art Institute solidify its commitment to engaging with contemporary Indigenous artists and curators on a national level through our exhibitions and public programming, in a meaningful way that reflects a consultative and collaborative approach based on relationship building. It is my hope that *unbranded* as a curatorial project does its bit to shatter the reductive frame of *the brand*, as well as the institutional frame so often placed around contemporary Indigenous art, in attempts to neatly explain and contain a vastly diverse range of work within a single genre.

It is also my hope that *unbranded* provides audiences in Central Victoria with an opportunity to focus on contemporary Indigenous art *beyond the frame* of the institution and *beyond the brand*, presenting (not representing) a story of increasing diversity, driven by the individual experiences of artists, with a considered curatorial approach that broadens our collective understanding, rather than reducing it. Leading towards a more engaged, expansive and detailed conversation that extends *beyond the frame*.

¹ John Prince Siddon, artist statement, 'Dead Babies', 2018, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 155 x 155 cm. catalogue number 242/18. Courtesy of the artist and Mangkaja Arts.

² Correspondence with Dean Cross, October 2018.

³ It should go on the record that I use the term 'reductive assumptions' here to point out that this attitude towards 'bark painting as traditional' also shows a misunderstanding around the complexity of work produced by contemporary Yolŋu artists who are innovators of this form.

⁴ For more information about Yolŋu artists, Yolŋu culture and the moiety system visit the Buku-Larrngay Mulka website at <https://yirkala.com/culture-and-environment/>

⁵ Wukun Wanambi, *Larrakitj*. Courtesy of the artist, Buku-Larrngay Mulka Centre and The Mulka Project.

⁶ Patrina Mununggurr, *Dhunupa'kum Nhuna Wanda (Straighten Your Mind)*, 2018, filmic work, 1 minute and 33 seconds. Courtesy of the artist, Buku-Larrngay Mulka Centre and The Mulka Project.

⁷ Sonia Kurarra. Courtesy of the artist and Mangkaja Arts.