



OCTOROON

Peta Clancy & Helen Pynor
Bindi Cole Chocka
Steven Rhall

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Peta Clancy & Helen Pynor, Bindi Cole Chocka and Steven Rhall

Curated by Michael Brennan & Bindi Cole Chocka

A LUMA | La Trobe University Museum of Art Travelling Exhibition

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GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Perhaps, it might seem, you've got to be either brave or stupid to call an exhibition featuring the work of contemporary Indigenous artists, *Octoroon*.

It wasn't my idea.

I don't mean that in an, 'It wasn't me, it was her,' blame shifting kind of way. I mean it wasn't my idea and nor should it have been. I, after all, am a white, middleclass man who also happens to run a University Art Museum. Surely we've learned by now that if someone is going to attempt to make definitive comment about the labelling or ascription of someone else's identity – particularly that of Indigenous Australians – then it certainly shouldn't be me. It's for this reason – among others – that I asked Bindi Cole Chocka to co-curate this exhibition with me.

And I think the title Bindi chose shows both great courage and insight. It is, of course, not without its contentions. For me, if anything, it confronts head on the racism embedded in our culture (in case you haven't encountered this word before, it refers to being one-eighth Aboriginal – resting on the assumption that a person's identity – and their right to claim that identity – can be measured in quotients based on generational blood lines). But in wrestling this word from its original context, it also opens up a space where identity politics and the emphasis of who and what you are, might be unpicked, turned over and tossed around. There is, of course, history and precedence when it comes to minority or marginalised groups subverting and reclaiming discriminatory language – repurposing words of derision in gestures of pride, triumph and empowerment. But in this instance it also leaves a weighty question hanging in the air for you – yes you, the reader of this essay and viewer of this exhibition – to ask yourself about your assumptions and expectations of Indigenous Australia and in particular, contemporary Indigenous art practices.

If anyone has the right to interrogate this sort of language and these sorts of ideas then surely Bindi would have to figure prominently among them. When she suggested *Octoroon* to me as the title for this exhibition, she did so with the parenthetical note that this is how she would have been officially classified. Bindi was also one of the nine Aboriginal people who successfully brought a class action against right-wing News Limited columnist, Andrew Bolt, following his racial vilification of them in a series of articles he published on his blog. Bolt levelled the accusation that his fair-skinned targets were wilfully and conveniently choosing to identify as Aboriginal for political and professional gain.¹ Embedded in his misinformed and bigoted argument is the expectation that claims of identity and cultural belonging should and can only be made based on appearance, dominant genetic genealogy and a narrow stereotype of how a culture is defined.

But perhaps this exhibition comes at Indigenous identity from another direction. It was Bindi's own practice that prompted me to think about putting together a show that addressed what I thought was a neglected and overlooked way of thinking about and framing Indigenous art practices. While Bindi has made significant works engaged with Indigenous culture and heritage, she is often playing on the periphery, challenging what we think we know about Aboriginal Australia. Her *Sistagirls* series celebrated diversity of sexuality in a remote community in the Tiwi Islands, while the collection, *Not Really Aboriginal*, boldly confronted stereotype through the use of blackface on portraits of her own fair-skinned family. However equally important are Bindi's works that look at evolution of identity and the plurality of who she is. These things don't always fit neatly into the dichotomous dynamics that underlie the Aboriginal identity affirming proclamations we've come to expect of exhibitions that present and celebrate contemporary Indigenous art.

And *Octoroon* is by no means an exhaustive survey of Indigenous artists working across this landscape of diversity in Aboriginal identity. But it's not as easy to locate these artists as one might hope or think. Amongst the contemporary Indigenous artists who enjoy the attention of the art establishment, by far the majority seem to be engaged in an affirmation and celebration of their Aboriginality. Don't get me wrong – this is very important and deservedly occupies a space that captures our attention. But I do wonder if the placement of this emphasis says more about our expectations of contemporary Indigenous art and artists – audiences, exhibiting institutions, collectors, funding bodies – than it does of the diversity of contemporary Aboriginal art practices. As Richard Bell so succinctly put it, 'Aboriginal Art – it's a white thing.'

Octoroon brings together three significant video and photomedia installations, each created by, or in collaboration with, contemporary Indigenous artists and each foregrounding aspects of identity other than Aboriginality. Bindi Cole Chocka's own confronting yet sublime *EH5452* speaks of the transformative and redemptive time she spent in an English jail as a young adult and the space it opened up to allow her to find faith and encounter God. In this beautifully intimate work, Bindi reads excerpts from the diary she kept while incarcerated, letting the audience into her inner most thoughts and feelings from that time, allowing us to bear witness to the formation of this essential part of who she is.

Elsewhere in the gallery, eight flat screen televisions line the wall in Steven Rhall's *Home Ground*, echoing the display of these essential consumer items in the electrical departments of homemaker chain stores. Framed by these windows onto the world of entertainment are a series of photographs taken by Steven in his hometown of Geelong. Shot within a single day – AFL Grand Final Day, 2009 – Steven reflects on his place in and against the dominant culture as he sees it. Notions of belonging and non-belonging – unity in victory and defeat – play out against an anthropological snapshot of the mainstream.

And then there's Peta Clancy's collaborative project with non-Indigenous artist Helen Pynor. Peta and Helen's video installation, *The Body is a Big Place*, asks questions of the relationship between body and identity. Working with the subject of organ donation and transplantation, Peta and Helen give form to the permeability of human boundaries. Documentary footage reveals a performance-cum-operation whereby the artists – in collaboration with a heart surgeon – give life to recently removed pig's hearts, connecting them to a mechanical circulatory system that allows the momentarily still organs to beat back to life. On an adjacent wall, two large projections let us into an underwater waiting room. This submarine space is the stage for a meeting of transplant recipients, donors and their extended support circles – a poetic expression of the ultimate fluidity of what makes us who we are.

In an interview with Robin Jennings in 2013, Bindi muses, “My art can only reflect where my identity is. It's impossible for me to continue making art about the same thing over and over; I wouldn't be presenting the journey that I'm on.”² It is a sentiment that we might hope is true for all who make art. Freedom to be multiple; to challenge; to be authentic yet changeable and fluid. The proud and strong affirmation of Indigenous identity in contemporary art is, of course, of critical and unquestionable importance – so long as there is also space to challenge assumptions.

Indigenous art practice should not be defined by what we expect to see.

Michael Brennan
Acting Senior Curator

LUMA | La Trobe University Museum of Art

¹ Bolt, A., ‘*Column – White is the New Black*’, http://blogs.news.com.au/heraldsun/andrewbolt/index.php/heraldsun/comments/column_white_is_the_new_black, blog accessed 1 February 2015.

² Jennings, R., ‘*Bindi Cole: For Such a Time as This*’, <http://massculture.com.au/bindi-cole-interview/>, accessed 1 February 2015

THE SUM OF MY PARTS

A few weeks ago, I turned forty. It's a big deal. I couldn't face a party so took the family on a holiday instead. Perhaps it was a divine idea because I came back with a strong sense that my life is only just beginning. It's taken a while but I've finally come to a place where I love who I am and that's a great position to launch off into the next forty years from. It didn't just happen. It's required much effort to become a person who is somewhat whole. After spending so many years hating me and feeling like I was unworthy, I'm now comfy in my mixed up, muddled up identity. The first half of those forty years left me wounded, traumatised and without any sense of self. I had no idea who I was. I knew bits and pieces. My Mum's side of the family had all grown up in St Kilda, three generations, and my Grandmother and Auntie still live there. We are mad St Kilda supporters. Dancing, theatre, writing and the arts are a huge part of that side. My father's side is large and Aboriginal. We were not close. It wasn't much really but it was the beginnings of a foundation on which to build upon. Not knowing who I was had affected my sense of being and belonging.

My Mum is the person who had the greatest impact on me early on. Being a single mother with an only child lends itself to an extremely close relationship. Life was hard for her, she wasn't made for this world and it overcame her. At eight years of age I was taken from her as she was unfit to look after me. She didn't even say goodbye and I remember thinking about how insignificant I was. There was a deep realisation that I alone was not enough for her. My love for her didn't have the power needed to keep her with me. I wasn't enough.

Mum's Diary Entry 29 March 1987

The planet is a better place for having Andrew in it. Not so, I'm afraid, is it better for having had me on it. I am a disgusting junkie who is always hanging out, manipulative, preferring to sell my body for a hit than to be a decent clean human being. I have been very lucky to have had Andrew for this last 12 months. I will always love him even to my grave and beyond. I must see Bindi before I go and tell her, even though I failed her, I love her with all my heart and soul. I'm so sorry I couldn't give them both what they wanted from me. As I said I'm a weak hopeless failure. But I won't fail this time, I feel so calm, I know I will be successful for the first time in my life, the end of my life. It's a shame Andrew has been so sick and tired today as it is the last we will probably spend together. Tomorrow he works and Tuesday I'll be gone. I love you very much Andrew, thank you for loving me.

She didn't do it but it was only a matter of time until she left this planet, leaving me a shredded, young and vulnerable human being in the process. For many years, I battled the sense of not being enough coupled with a deep grief and in the process developed a well-rehearsed script of self-hatred that drove me. Even as that tiny girl, I believed I was not good enough, insufficient, unwanted, powerless and alone. I wasn't anyone's priority. So it became that I would never prioritise myself. Even now I struggle with self-care. It doesn't come naturally. I just didn't care about myself for so long as a result of not being cared for properly. I had to work hard to change the way I thought about myself, to figure out who I was and to find a sense of belonging. To rewrite deeply held ingrained patterns that outworked destructive behaviors was a long labour of self-love.

My Dad is Aboriginal. I've always known it. I didn't begin identifying as Aboriginal during my adult life. I have always done so. Some of my earliest memories are of sitting on the floor playing with toys, hearing my Mum telling her friends that I was Aboriginal. It was the only part of my racial heritage that was ever actively acknowledged and celebrated. I grew up being told I was Aboriginal and my father's family have always identified as such. It's in my DNA, whether I look like it or not. I'm proud of my Western Victorian Wadawurrung heritage. It's an important and cherished part of who I am.

My Mum and Dad separated when I was a baby. I saw him on and off throughout my childhood, living with him for a while. When Mum died, even though they had not been together for over fifteen years, they still had not divorced. Once, when I asked Dad about this he said that he had always had some hope that maybe one day they would get back together. I thought that was so cheesy at the time but I believe him. Our relationship has been a tumultuous one. It's taken many years for it to get to a place where it is full of life and love. That's not entirely his fault. I was such a broken and hurt person that for a long time I could only ever see him through that filter. As I changed, I began to treat him differently and gradually we have been reconciled to each other. I love him. He's a kind and generous man who has a heart for the Victorian Aboriginal community and has devoted much of his life to serving within it. He is very charming. Everyone that has ever worked with him has always pulled me aside to tell me how much he or she love him and how great he is. They always let me know how proud he is of me too, that he's always talking about me. Funny, cause whenever I'm around him, he's mostly taking the mickey out of me. Still, that's pretty much how he shows affection.

Perhaps he got that from his Mum, my Nanna. I spent years living with her as a young girl while my Mum sorted her life out. She was the one who researched her genealogical history to discover exactly where her Aboriginal ancestors originated. During those years, I had the privilege of watching her figure it all out and saw all the pieces of her heart mend. She was so proud of a heritage that had once been denied out of fear and shame. She passed away not long after my Mum.

Then there's me carrying in my heart and mind the experience of all three of these people. Not forgetting the many others who have played a role in shaping who I am today. I'm made up of many parts including my lived experience, culture, genealogical heritage and predisposition of my DNA, all of them equally important and deserving of attention. At different times in my life, I've focused on different fragments, which may have made me seem one-dimensional, but it's been so important to spend time reconciling each one until I made a whole. I needed to know where I've come from to know where I'm going. Having lost two of these three most significant people in my life early on, I realise that I may as well be who I am. The easy bits, the messy bits, the hidden bits and the shiny bits. The multi-dimensional, ever changing, beautifully imperfect me that can never be known fully by another and certainly not in a brief summing up. Time is short and what a great waste it would be to live your life according to others' beliefs about you, after all, we are greater than the sum of our parts.

Bindi Cole Chocka

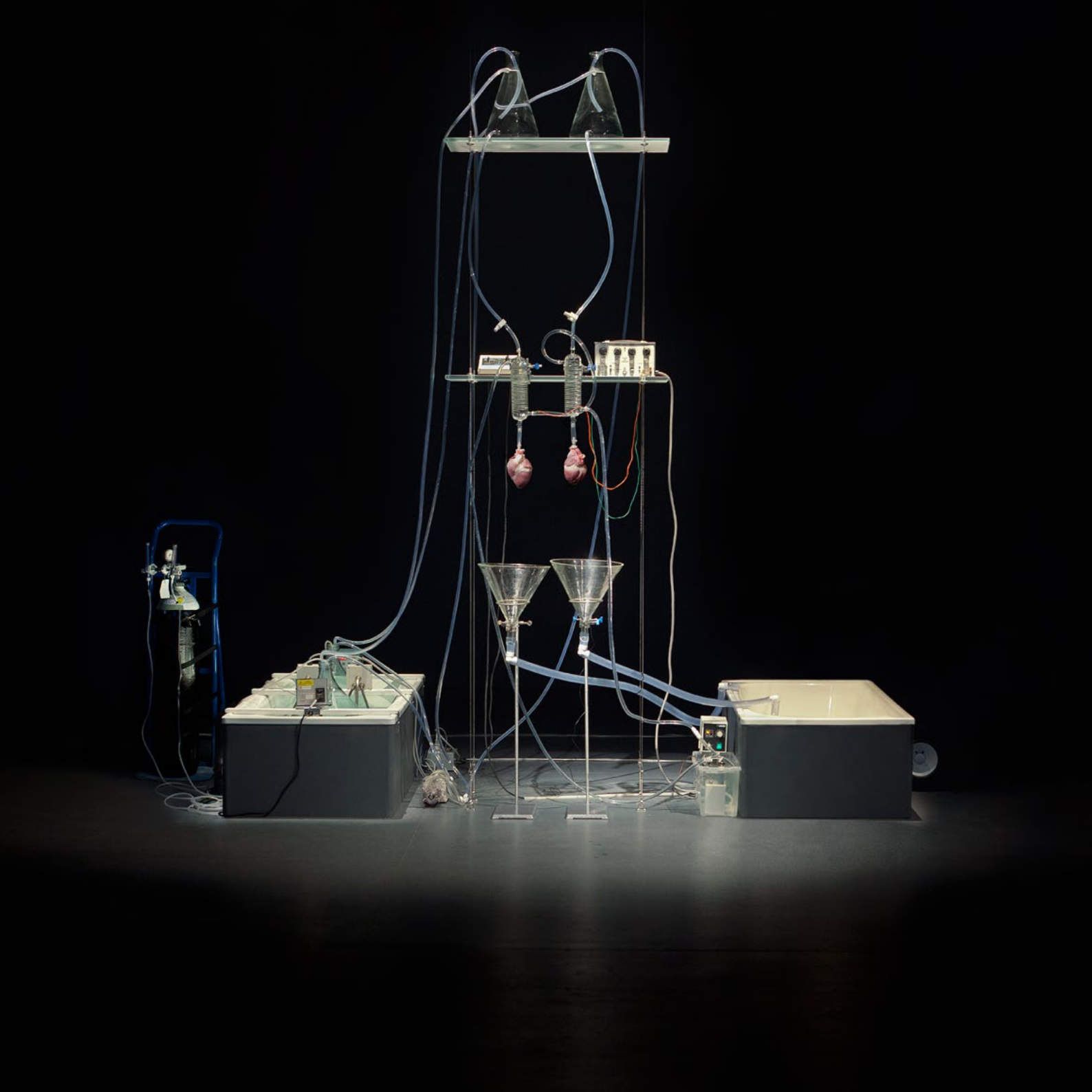
THE BODY IS A BIG PLACE

Peta Clancy and Helen Pynor

Peta Clancy and Helen Pynor, **The Body is a Big Place** (2011)
Video production still
Installation and pig hearts performances
5-channel video projection, heart perfusion device, single channel video on monitor, soundscape
Performance Space, Sydney, November 2011
Sound by Gail Priest
Photograph by Chris Hamilton



Peta Clancy and Helen Pynor, **The Body is a Big Place** (detail) (2011)
Installation and pig hearts performances
5-channel video projection, heart perfusion device, single channel video on monitor, soundscape
Performance Space, Sydney, November 2011
Sound by Gail Priest
Photograph by Geordie Cargill



Peta Clancy and Helen Pynor, **The Body is a Big Place** (2011)

Performance still

Installation and pig hearts performances

5-channel video projection, heart perfusion device, single channel video on monitor, soundscape

Performance Space, Sydney, November 2011

Sound by Gail Priest

Photograph by Geordie Cargill

OVERLEAF

Helen Pynor and Peta Clancy, **The Body is a Big Place** (2011)

Performance still

Installation and pig hearts performances

3-channel video projection, heart perfusion device, single channel video on monitor, soundscape

Galerija Kapelica, Ljubljana, Slovenia, May - June 2013

Sound by Gail Priest

Photograph by Miha Fras

Helen Pynor and Peta Clancy, **The Body is a Big Place** (2011)

Performance still

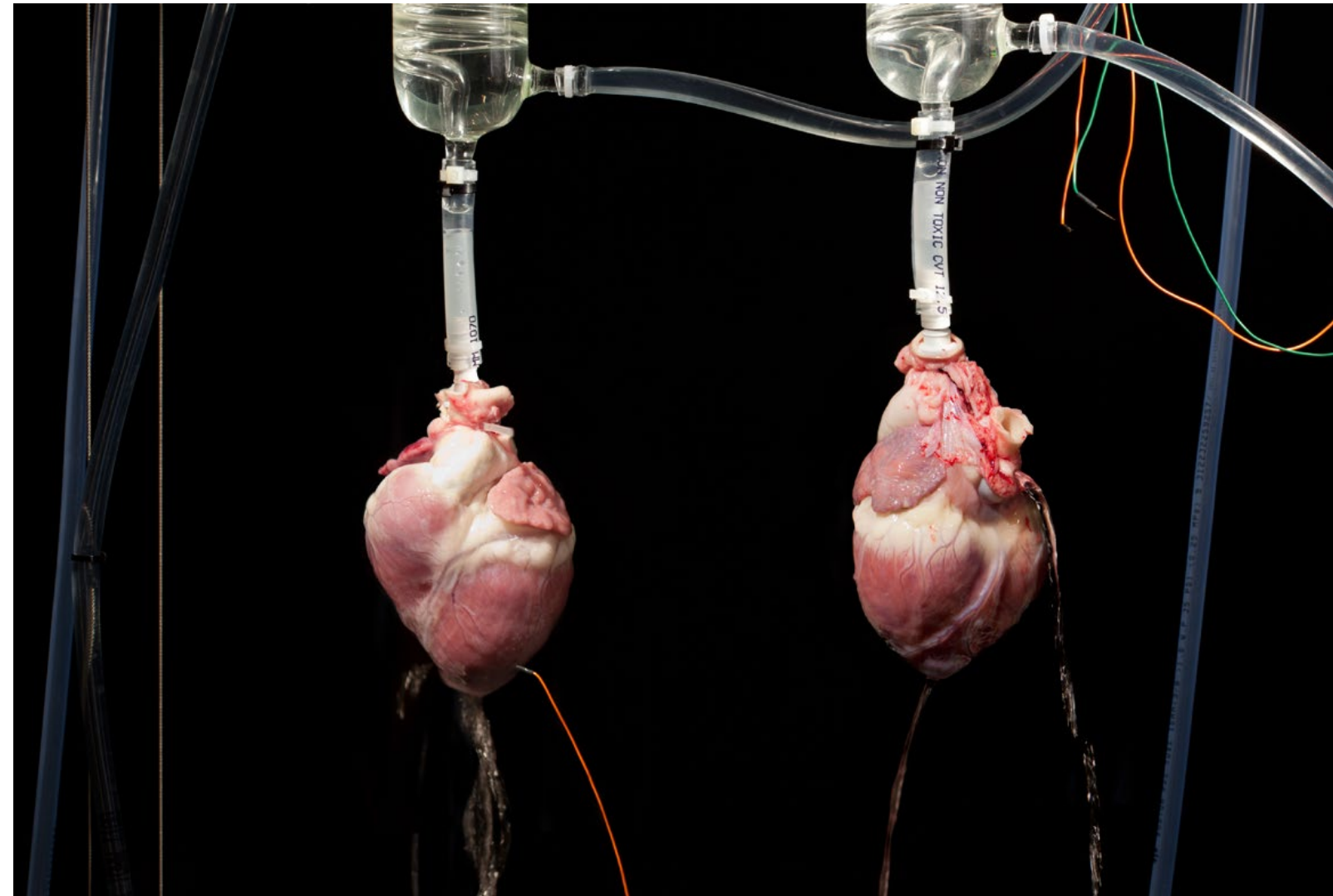
Installation and pig hearts performances

3-channel video projection, heart perfusion device, single channel video on monitor, soundscape

Galerija Kapelica, Ljubljana, Slovenia, May - June 2013

Sound by Gail Priest

Photograph by Miha Fras





EH5452

Bindi Cole Chocka

ONLY

EH5452
COLE

COLE



Bindi Cole Chocka, **EH5452**, (2012)
HD video (video still)
09:54
Courtesy of the artist and Nellie Castan Projects, Melbourne
La Trobe University Art Collection, purchased 2014

OVERLEAF

Bindi Cole Chocka, **EH5452**, (2012)
Diary
Courtesy of the artist and Nellie Castan Projects, Melbourne

Bindi Cole Chocka, **EH5452**, (2012)
HD video (video still)
09:54
Courtesy of the artist and Nellie Castan Projects, Melbourne
La Trobe University Art Collection, purchased 2014

PREVIOUS PAGE

Bindi Cole Chocka, **EH5452**, (2012)
Collage
Courtesy of the artist and Nellie Castan Projects, Melbourne



for the one.

DAY ② 5th September 99 (D3)

Started even earlier, but the morning
 peace, quiet and contentment
 sur in the sun. sharing
 who have nothing.
 Notice reception day - Sat 1/2 day. - did not have
 Paper or pen or a lighter for that matter.
 who have nothing. nine pleasure

DAY ① 5th September 99 (D3)

Some people have to have everything taken away
 just to appreciate what they have or had, no
 little that is or was. I'm one of H.
 my situation, it's what I had.
 I would give anything to
 had back.

The day is the
 coupled
 what
 from
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HM PRISON SERVICE

SEND

EH5452

COLE

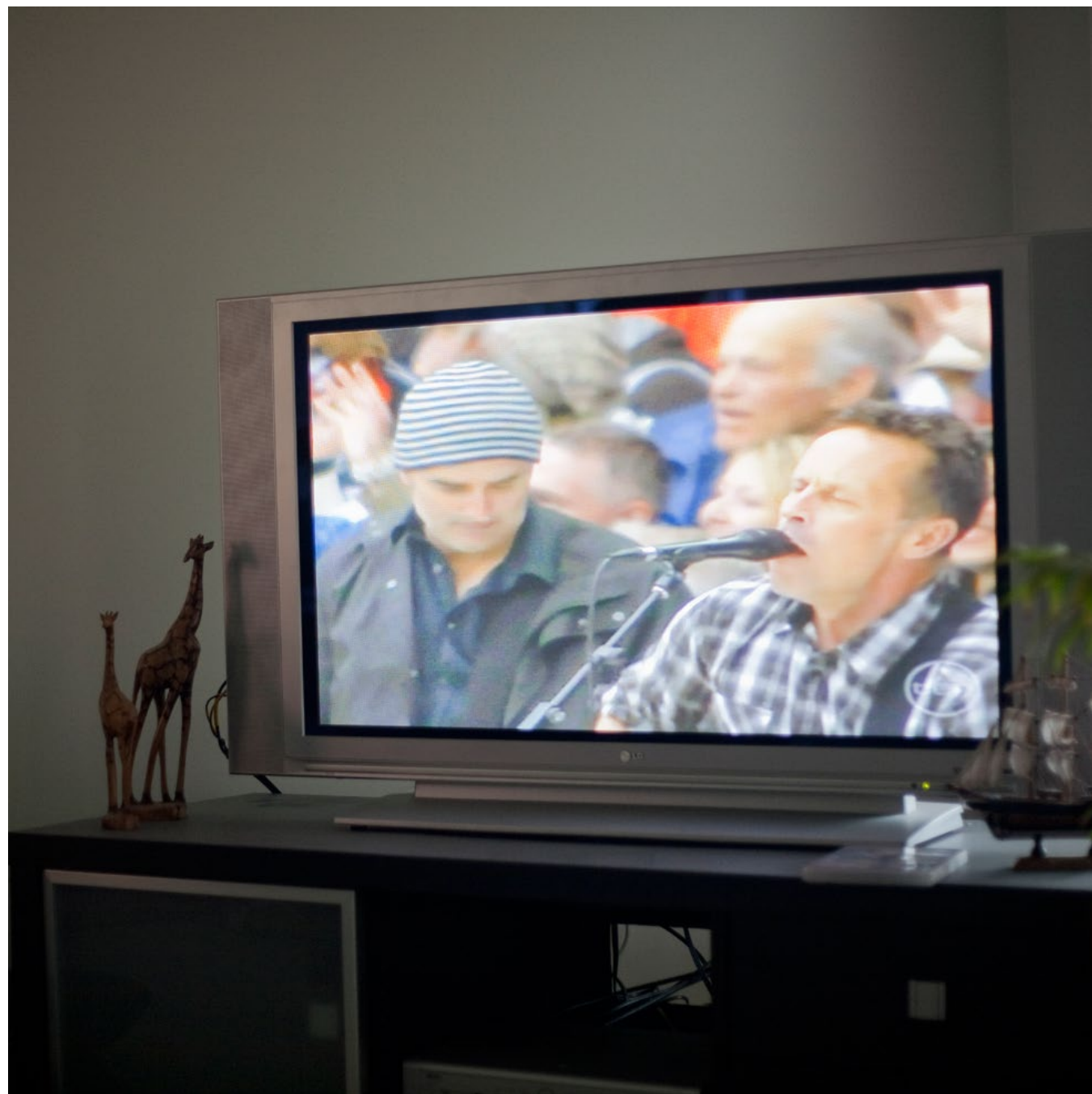
Signature..... *Bico*

HOME GROUND

Steven Rhall









List of Works

Peta Clancy & Helen Pynor, **The Body is a Big Place** (2011 – 2013)
2-channel video projection, single channel video on monitor and
soundscape
Courtesy of the artists

Bindi Cole Chocka, **EH5452**, (2012)
HD video
09:54
Courtesy of the artist and Nellie Castan Projects, Melbourne

Steven Rhall, **Home Ground**, (2008 - 2015)
Polyester fabric prints, Found televisions
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

PREVIOUS PAGES

Steven Rhall, **Home Ground**, (details) (2008 - 2015)
Polyester fabric prints, Found televisions
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

OCTOROON

A LUMA | La Trobe University Museum of Art Exhibition

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Bundoora, Victoria.

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Cover image

Peta Clancy & Helen Pynor, **The Body is a Big Place** (detail)
Video production still
2011
Photo: Chris Hamilton
Image courtesy the artists

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Peta Clancy & Helen Pynor, **The Body is a Big Place** (2011 – 2013)

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Helen Pynor and Peta Clancy, **The Body is a Big Place** (2011)
Pig hearts performance, 2-channel video, soundscape
Performance by Helen Pynor and Michael Shattock
Science Gallery Dublin, February - April 2013
Photograph by Freddie Stevens

