

unbranded & unbridled: beyond the aesthetic

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'Branded: The Indigenous Aesthetic', the catalyst for the exhibition 'unbranded', was written almost ten years ago. In the original text I explored the alignment or misalignment of creative practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, to an accepted 'Indigenous brand'. Simply put, the text propositioned that the artworld and the general public's pictorial and conceptual understanding of the work emerging from Indigenous Australia needed an update.

The intent of the article, first written for the Centre for Contemporary Photography, following the inaugural National Indigenous Photographer's Forum, was to initiate, or perhaps reignite debates around the 'Indigenous brand' in the context of artworld politics, and the representation of Indigenous identities in their vast plurality. The text spoke to the much-needed critical debate around the 'Indigenous brand' unpicking *who exists within, who exists on the periphery* and *who sits beyond* its reach, beyond its branding limitations. In opening up these dialogues, the article spoke not only to brand, but to the politics of indigeneity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this continent we now call Australia, and the islands within its imagined and arbitrary border.

For me personally the article felt much like a business case, a pitch for the development of a far more nuanced understanding of Indigenous creative practice here in Australia, both within and beyond the artworld. Cultivating these new understandings demands commitment and investment at a number of levels. To eradicate these limiting stereotypes, we must foster change in our national psyche, amend the education offered in our schools and lobby for awareness in so called-governments. Our media must speak to our cultural diversity, in a way that refutes pan-Aboriginal ideology and share stories of our achievements, rather than the constant stream of one-sided journalism that documents our challenges, our struggle. With these larger structural changes, the meaningful and visible commitment from galleries

and museums to work with us in sharing our stories, can have a lasting impact on the minds and hearts of the *Australian* people, or perhaps, the people who call Australia home.

Ten years have passed since the commissioning of the article, which originally lived online. Since that time in 2009, the article has been published in Artlink Magazine and eventually re-published again in *Parallel Collisions* for the 12th Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art. In those years much has changed. Indigenous artists working in non-customary mediums and processes exhibit alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists whose works reflect enduring and continuous cultural lineage. Equally, many artists are now being exhibited within the broader contexts of contemporary Australian and contemporary International art. This is indeed progress, but after revisiting 'Branded: the Indigenous Aesthetic' again for the first time in four years many of the propositions still seem salient. Despite shifts in artworld practices relating to the presentation of Indigenous art, and broader developments in the knowledge of those who circulate around or within the artworld, there is still much work to be done in the broader marketplace, in the understandings and preconceptions of the minds of our public.

In that same ten years, the focus and tone of both my politics and my curatorial practice have been redirected with changes fuelled by new experiences and acquired knowledge. The article originally propositioned the need for inclusion of works made outside of the context of custodial tradition within the 'Indigenous brand', looking closely to artists working in mediums such as photography, installation and filmic work. In the last decade however, what has become apparent is that the very same limitations equally impact the lives of people living in some of the most remote communities of Indigenous Australia. It is true that diversion, invigoration, innovation, invention, reinvention and revolution in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander creative practice, is encouraged and celebrated by the progressive, all-

cheering artworld, but these same qualities remain a challenge, perhaps an obstruction to broader audiences.

It is commonplace for me to share space and time viewing works heralding from our communities alongside members of the public. In these spaces I am often surprised by the insight and sensitivity of approach that many people make in interpreting our manifestations of culture and identity. These moments are welcome reminders of our shared humanity. Equally it is in these spaces that I bear witness to a violent, aggressive, hyper-nationalistic and racist version of Australia; an Australia that many would like to think only exists in a historic narrative of our nation. The remarks I've endured in these spaces don't deserve your time, or mine – they emerge from a deep sense of dispossession felt by certain communities of Australians, whose enduring and ancestral belongings to far-away European lands, have been replaced by short term attachments to stolen Country. These lands are the cultural homelands to a myriad of First Peoples across this vast continent, we have deep attachments to them, as we have belonged to them for more than 50,000 years.

It is these small, vocal, and scarily influential communities, who clutch ever so tightly to the 'Indigenous brand' and with all of its limitations. It is a brand that locks our people, and our expressions of culture into a historical narrative. These communities hold great affection for the immutable qualities of the brand, and its static-state. After all, was it not first developed and employed by their ancestors, as an attempt to limit our ambition, to control our experience, and to determine the narrative by which we, as First Peoples of the 'great southern land' would be understood, documented, and silently remembered?

The Indigenous aesthetic and its associated brand has emerged from a little more than two centuries of misunderstanding, and misrepresentation of the First Peoples of Australia. This

misrepresentation continues to take place in Australian politics, media and is rife within broader society. It perpetuates mistruths about our histories and our lives. It makes omissions of our cultural autonomy, diversity, complexity and sophistication and instead whitewashes us into a banal singularity.

unbranded is a counter-voice to the 'Indigenous brand', but if we look deeply at what it represents, and what is shared through the work of artists in the exhibition, it is in many ways a counter-voice to 'Brand Australia', it challenges the national psyche and collective consciousness and hope to reveal all that's been swept under the *great national carpet*. It overtly challenges reductive and divisive modes of representation and interpretation, while simultaneously affirming the nuance, multiplicity and complexity of contemporary Indigenous experience, both live and inherited. *unbranded* explores the many ways our artists perceive, decipher and share their cultures, experiences and thoughts and feelings about the world with others, through their visionary art practices. *unbranded* is an exercise in truth-telling, it shares narratives of this continent, from its creation, to its invasion.

It has been a great privilege to have been given an opportunity to reconsider my own thoughts and perceptions a decade after first writing 'Branded: The Indigenous Aesthetic'. This kind of reflection and reconsideration of values and ideology that belong to the past is available to all Australians, in every moment. Some may consider this not as an offering, but as our collective responsibility. Others may choose to remain in the past, imprisoned within their bigotry and narrow mindedness, to one day, only be silently remembered.