

Maralinga

Tjaruta and Adjoining Lands

Kathy Arbon

Between 1953 and 1957 in the supposedly dead heart of continental Australia a secret narrative, with tragic and far-reaching consequences unfolded. During that time 9 atomic bombs were dropped at Emu Plains and Maralinga in the Great Victorian Desert in South Australia.

This deceptively fragile country, seemingly devoid of human and animal life has always had a history of habitation. It was not an empty land. The Pitjinjatjara, Guguda and Tjaruta lived, traded and held ceremonies in the lands affected by the testing of British atomic bombs. Rich in bird life, fragile plants and animals, and in ceremonial history this land was seen as a vacant wasteland that could be exploited, ravaged and experimented with: *terra nullius* yet again.

Scant efforts were made by the authorities to round up and move local Aborigines. Many, including Kathy's grandmother, were relocated wholesale to Yalata. Signs were erected warning of dangers, only a help for those few who could read. But many people were missed in the round up as they wandered through the proposed test site. The bombs exploded and the fallout, thick clouds of radioactive dust, which left a greasy, black deposit on everything, engulfed the country, in some instances spreading radiation over several thousands of kilometres.

In 1953 Sir Robert Menzies, the then Prime Minister and well known anglophile, stated, "No conceivable injury to life, limb or property could emerge from the test that has been made at Woomera.....conducted in the vast spaces in the centre of Australia.....with all our natural advantages for this purpose." Nothing could be further from the truth.

Yami Lester, who was instrumental in bringing about the Royal Commission that finally led to the exposure of the cover up, said, "When I was a young boy, living in the desert, the ground shook and a black mist came up from the South and covered our camp. The older people said they'd never seen anything like it before and in the months that followed many people were sick and many died....I lost my sight and my life was changed forever."

Kathy Arbon's paintings in this show depict the results and repercussions of these tests on the land and on her people, the Arabana of eastern Lake Eyre. These are not pretty paintings. They reveal their secrets and clues to the narrative slowly. Seen as a whole they represent, or bear witness to a sombre line up of figures and literal grounds. Kathy has set up a painful dialectic that reverberates between seeing the canvasses as either fields of skin or areas of land, as the effects of the blasts were equally imprinted on the soft dermal layer of the body as on the thin crust of the earth. The colours and distressed textures of these grounds refer to the colour of the people and the

after effects of the explosions, leaving burns, ulcers and scarring on them as well as on the environment in which they lived.

The intimate relationship of the inhabitants to the land is brought into sharp focus by this two-way dialogue. For many years after the country was referred to as sickness country, as the effects of the radiation lingered and seeped into the soil, polluted waterways, and also possibly contaminated gene pools of future generations.

Kathy's interest in the land and materiality extends to the surfaces of the canvasses that she has encrusted with sand and dust, embedded with plastic and others detritus, literally burned into the surfaces. The results echo crusty scabs, ulcers, and yaws. Black rocks, black holes and rows of blackened dunes like keloid scars on an initiated torso. One canvas has small luminescent specks dotted throughout the surface, a reference to the lumps of Cobalt 60 that littered one test site. These fluorescent rocks, like deadly magnets, were attractive to children and adults as they glowed in the dark; objects of magic and awe.

One other painting shows evidence of an appropriated dot painting, only marginally visible under a welter of over-painting and burning back. This reference to traditional painting on the body and in the sand, with its ariel views and hints of journeying through country is for me the saddest image of all. The field of dots has been desecrated and dislocated as has the culture and the well being of the inhabitants of this region, by something as remote and abstract as cold war paranoia on the part of a country on the side of the world.

Kathy Arbon's paintings bear witness to this narrative of paranoia, secrecy and politics played on a big stage where the ends justify the means. They tell another story. They are paintings about ownership, not of country, but of this story, the secret history that can now be shared and learned from.

Cath Bowdler
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References: *No Conceivable Injury*, Robert Milliken, Penguin, 1986