



Brook Andrew *YOU'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO BE BLACK, (white friend)*, 2006. *TU VISADA NOREJAI BUTI JUODAS*, installation view: Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius. Photo: Paulius Mazuras. Image courtesy the artist and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne.

# Not just **BLACK** and **WHITE**

■ Cath Bowdler



**F**or Indigenous artists cultural knowledge, ownership of land and layers of metaphor and meaning are often encoded in abstract geometric patterns. These are handed down and interpreted through the generations. The diamond patterns of Yirritja clan designs used by the Yolngu people of eastern Arnhem Land are painted on the bodies of boys at initiation, on coffins of the deceased and on artworks sold for the fine art market. These patterns, which encode identity, hold a multitude of meanings determined by context and relationship and now are subject to stylistic reinterpretation and aesthetic innovation, whilst retaining their cultural integrity.

Aboriginal artists in other parts of Australia also reinterpret patterns invested with meaning associated with their country or, in fact, create their own visual language of pattern and metaphor. Some Indigenous artists work in an altogether different way taking images associated with their country and re-contextualising them to open up new discourses.

Brook Andrew, an artist of Scottish and Wiradjuri descent, uses pattern as a component in a number of works, which span a multitude of media and themes. Andrew's considerable body of work is largely conceptual and uses post-modern and post-colonial strategies of appropriation and cross-cultural quotation, irony, humour and ambiguity to comment on issues in a global as well as national context. He is informed by the history of his people's country, as well as other histories, European art history and critical debates surrounding identity politics and the nature of representation.

Andrew has been researching in ethnographic archives in Australia and overseas for many years and the objects and images he uncovers form the building blocks of his conceptual practice, which is at once a reanimation of cultural material and a critique of museum practices. His most celebrated early work, *Sexy and Dangerous I*, was based on the re-working of an archival image of an unknown Indigenous youth, blown up, re-coloured and adorned with Chinese text. More recently he has sourced and re-presented Wiradjuri iconography. Andrew has appropriated and modified patterns from dendroglyphs, or carved trees, once commonly found in Wiradjuri country and used for centuries as burial markers for 'celebrated men'.<sup>1</sup> The designs carved into the surface of trees varied – some were geometric and others organic and some were even figurative in style. Andrews focused on one diamond shaped design, which he reduced to a repeat pattern of intersecting black and white lines. He further transformed this iconography into a hard-edged abstracted pattern informed by the modernist optical art styles of Bridget Riley and Victor Vasarely. They have been described as "a euphoric and blinding blend of Wiradjuri Op and Wiradjuri Pop".<sup>2</sup>

This motif, a cipher of Andrew's heritage, has become his signature, his tag, and it appears in a myriad of different configurations in his work – as massive wall paintings, as printed fabric on deckchairs and costumes, as the pattern on a blow-up jumping castle and a retro caravan, as part of the design on huge inflatable clowns and as the background for a number of digital prints and installations. In this way the patterns from the dendroglyphs have been brought into the

digital pop-culture present, transmogrified through the filter of modernism and re-presented as something other.

The dendroglyph design can be seen in Andrew's installation *YOU'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO BE BLACK (white friend)*, an animated neon wall painting shown at the Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius, Lithuania in 2006. The wall painting measuring 550 x 900 cm features the optical pattern writ very large, referencing the language of advertising and billboards, overpowering the viewer. Running across the surface is the title of the work in multi-coloured neon text in the Wiradjuri language.

Another version of this installation, presented by the Melbourne International Arts Festival and the NGV in 2006, featured an actual dendroglyph borrowed from the Museum of Victoria which was exhibited with a variety of other elements including a number of taxidermied cockatoos, kitsch items of Aboriginalia from Andrew's collection, a soundscape and a looped segment of film that was given to the artist. The film, which was projected onto the surface of a boxing ring, turned out to be a disturbing piece of 'found history'. It depicted the removal of the carved trees from their place in 'country'. Marcia Langton described the scene:

The film, probably dating from the 1930s or 1940s, depicts men from the Museum of Victoria using a giant chainsaw to remove trees with dendroglyphs...A truck with the museum's title on its door appears in several scenes, and later it is seen leaving the area loaded with tree trunks. The landscape in which these shocking actions occurred may be western New South Wales...The showing of the film has rescued a small part of history. Now we know how the museum acquired the carved trees. The cultural crime itself was revealed, and Andrew's installation serves as retribution for it.<sup>3</sup>

This conjunction of imagery lies at the heart of Andrew's larger concerns – the bricolage of high and low culture, the melding of past and present, local concerns with global implications and the undoing of the colonial edifice of the museum. He draws attention to a particular act of cultural vandalism associated with his country which displays modes of behaviour and thought from the past that still linger today – the authority of the museum and the assumption that Aboriginal people in the south have died out and it is OK to take the remnants of their culture and house it in ethnographic collections for other people's edification. This linkage of multiple tropes, themes and references is a hallmark of Andrew's work.

Another work featuring the dendroglyph design is *Jumping Castle War Memorial*, created in 2010 for the 17th Biennale of Sydney. Andrew's inflatable bouncy castle sat at the entrance to the crumbling edifice of the old shipyard on Cockatoo Island. In stark contrast, with its bright, shiny and mesmerisingly inviting aura, the Jumping Castle beckoned patrons with the promise of fun and play. This conflation of the war memorial with the theme park ride made for an uncomfortable spectacle. Firstly it was not for children. Only those over the age of 16, and therefore old enough to possibly understand what they might be doing, were allowed on it. Also inflatable heads of Aboriginal figures could be





Brook Andrew *Jumping Castle War Memorial* 2010, PVC vinyl. 7 x 7 x 4m. Installation view, Cockatoo Island, 17th Biennale of Sydney. Image courtesy the artist and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne.

seen careening around in the turrets, like lotto balls in the spin. A black figure rising victoriously from the epicentre of the castle, (apparently a reference to Soviet-style triumphal statuary) added to the ambiguity of the piece. It is another work in which the viewer becomes implicated - to jump or not, to enter this playfully confusing world or to stay aloof and watch from the sidelines. Andrew is interested in the collision of serious themes such as the disrespect of Indigenous culture and the construction of history with that of the theme park, the fun ride, the boxing ring and the carnival.<sup>4</sup>

Andrew has been criticised for the way he has used Wiradjuri and other Indigenous iconography, removing it so far from its source, filtering it through so many layers of stylistic reference and as a backdrop for larger concerns.<sup>5</sup> The mining of the ethnographic archive is used by a number of Aboriginal artists including those from remote communities who have been granted access to long hidden ethnographic collections containing artefacts made by their ancestors, the viewing of which has invigorated their art practice. This can be a complex, highly charged process where cultural protocols need to be closely observed so that the materials are treated with respect and viewed by the right people. Apart from protocol issues, Andrew's work causes unease for some other Indigenous artists as he has pushed his appropriation of Wiradjuri iconography beyond the usual bounds, way past that of his identity alone, as well as using strategies of detachment and irony.

Some commentators also take issue with Andrew's collapsing of histories of oppression of minority groups and Indigenous peoples from around the world and his referencing of multiple allusions and styles from other cultures. However for Andrew it is not just Aboriginal people who have been, as he puts it 'disappeared'.<sup>6</sup> His humanist approach and the issues he addresses cannot be divorced from the global contexts of colonialism and contemporary art.

Brook Andrew, like a number of other Indigenous Australian artists, does not want to be stereotyped or identified as a solely Aboriginal artist or as an overtly 'political' artist. He asserts the right to create works that reflect the world in all its diversity and complexity and states "[m]y art is not always driven by Wiradjuri and other colonial discourses within Australia...My art has always had international perspectives and interests."<sup>7</sup> Anthony Gardner laments that critiques of Andrew's work are still determined by "tropes of identity politics" and that for a number of critics his Wiradjuri identity "defines the intent behind his career and limits his potential to engage with (or critique) other cultures."<sup>8</sup> He goes on to say:

The rethinking of art's histories after the postcolonial requires a shift...It demands a re-framing of art practice that does not magnify differences between one person or culture and another, but insists upon their connections; that does not project notions of value and quality on the



basis of such distinctions, but embraces the coexistence and even the interdependence between art practices and cultural histories in different parts of the world; that keeps the ambitions of 'postcolonial constellations' alive by recognizing how the globe's diverse art histories exist in contiguity instead of isolation.<sup>9</sup>

This is also true of other Indigenous artists. The Yolngu of east Arnhem Land, where this essay began, are no less affected by globalisation than is Andrew, or any of us for that matter. The Yolngu have been dealing with a globalised world for a long time and using art as intermediary to assert their rights in relation to Governments and multi-national corporations for decades. Before that, as is well-known, they had traded with the Macassans for centuries and incorporated aspects of their language, technology and visual art into their own dynamic culture. In 2010 they shared the limelight at the 17th Biennale of Sydney with Brook Andrew with an installation of 60 *larrakitj* or burial poles. Acclaimed cultural leaders and artists such as Djambawa Marawili from Yirrkala travel the country and the world as advocates for their culture and are an inspiration to a younger, totally connected generation of Yolngu artists.

In August 2011 Gunybi Ganambarr won the *Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards* with his contemporary interpretations of Ngaymil clan designs. In this installation he pushes the bounds of bark painting, building up and sculpting the surface of the bark and incorporating unlikely materials such as conveyor belt rubber and bright, reflective insulation material. This is bricolage of the most inventive kind. Byproducts from the mining industry that once threatened the integrity of Ganambarr's country have been harnessed by the artist to enhance the optical shimmer of the *rarrk* to create works whirling with energy and power. He has also

modified the pattern of his clan design, rendering it fluid and curvilinear, reflecting the artistic influence of his father-in-law Marawili.

There are some that would see Andrew's and Ganambarr's work as incommensurate, that they inhabit totally different artistic worlds. However both are contemporary artists, working in the aftermath of modernism. They are both operating at a conceptual level, as bricoleurs in a globalised world, inventing new juxtapositions of materials and revealing new ways of seeing the world through the prism of local histories and traditions. ■

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1 Ronald Briggs *Carved Trees: Aboriginal Cultures of western NSW*, State Library of NSW, Sydney 2011, p8.

2 Anthony Gardner, 'The Skin of Now: Contemporary Art, Contiguous Histories in *Theme Park*, AAMU, Utrecht, p28.

3 Marcia Langton 'Tinsel Dreams' in *Theme Park*, AAMU: Aboriginal Art Museum, Utrecht, 2008, p39.

4 *Theme Park* was Andrew's Gesamtkunstwerk – or total work of art – which took over AAMU: the Aboriginal Art museum in Utrecht 2008-09 in what curator Georges Petitjean called "a roller-coaster ride through the spaces of the museum". In it the museum itself became the work of art and the ultimate subject of the exhibition.

5 Fiona Foley, "When the Circus Came to Town" *Art Monthly* #245, 2011 pp5-

6 Peter Minter, Brook Andrew Interview with Peter Minter, [http://www.brookandrew.com/images/Peter\\_Minter\\_interview.pdf](http://www.brookandrew.com/images/Peter_Minter_interview.pdf), np.

7 *ibid*

8 Gardiner, *op cit*, p77.

9 *ibid* p76.

**Gunybi Ganambarr (L-R)** *Dhangultji* 2010, hollow log coffin; *Burrut'tji* 2010, ochres on bark; *Lorr* 2010, ochres and insulation material; *Buyku* 2010, ochres on bark; *Milngurr* 2010, ochres on rubber; *Gunyuru* 2010, hollow log coffin; installation view, *Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards* 2011. Image courtesy of the artist and Buku-Larrngay Mulka Art Centre, Yirrkala and Art Gallery of WA. Photo: Bo Wang.

