

I remember the opening of Gordon Bennett's exhibition *A Black History* in 1993 as an intense and unsettling experience. That Saturday afternoon on the way to the exhibition, I saw a man lying in the middle of one of the backstreets of Fitzroy. He looked drunk and barely conscious, and there was no one else in the street. I stopped the car to help him — to at least get him onto the footpath. Gagging from the stench of alcohol, cigarettes, urine and body odour, I lifted him up and the blood from his head wound smeared on my shirt and hands. He had just enough energy to call me a filthy black cunt before he passed out in my arms. I sat on the footpath with him, stressed and shaken by the fragility and ugliness that I had experienced. Finally a police patrol van stopped and took him away. Restless, I bought a new shirt and went on to the opening. I had never seen works of art that challenged the privilege of white history so uncompromisingly. As I looked down at the room sheet, I noticed that some of the stranger's blood remained on my hands.

GORDON BENNETT
NICK DEVLIN
KARLA DICKENS
MEGAN EVANS
JORDAN MARANI

19 MAY—
10 JUNE
2017

VCA
MARGARET
LAWRENCE
GALLERY

RESTLESS

The following transcript is from an interview between Ashley Perry, Honours Fine Arts (Visual Arts) Student at Victorian College of the Arts and Dr David Sequeira, Curator, Restless.

What interested you in Gordon Bennett's exhibition *A Black History* at Sutton Gallery in 1993?

Not only did *A Black History* highlight the cruelties of Australia's colonial values, more importantly for me, the work pointed towards contemporary manifestations of these values. These manifestations seemed everywhere – in our schools, museums and galleries. Until this exhibition I had never seen contemporary art that had been so critical of dominant histories. Bennett's work seemed to interrogate my understanding of art history and expose its weaknesses – that it was relatively unquestioned and that it had been constructed from 'white' values.

What was it about this show and these works that resonated in your mind until now?

DS I was especially interested in a suite of small works on canvas, some of which are included in *Restless*. Uniform in size and painted mostly in black and blue, these works were hung in a small room separate from the larger paintings. Parts of each canvas were painted in relief, in which cuts reveal a red interior. Bennett referred to these works as 'welt' paintings, and I was struck by his symbolic use of the canvas as a scarred and unhealed skin. Across the floor of this entire room, Bennett had written the words 'a black history' repeatedly. I became aware of myself engaged in the process of erasing 'a black history' as I walked across the room to look at each of these works.

From that, why now? Why re-address or revisit this work today, almost twenty-five years on from the initial exhibition?

DS In 2017 the welt paintings still articulate both personal and shared experiences, and shine a light on the processes of revealing and concealing the past. My assertion is that Bennett's work (particularly from this period) made a profound contribution to museology and curatorship in Australia. Through these works I learnt to question the hierarchies within museums and examine their role in the construction of identity and history. I became aware of how the placement of art objects within museums impacted my understandings of them. In addition to Bennett's un-packing of the complexities of history, his chilling imagery was a declaration of new possibilities and responsibilities for Australian artists and curators. Restless can be considered an exploration of those possibilities.

You have drawn together a range of practices for this exhibition. Could you talk about the context in which the artists produced their works, compared to when Bennett made his show?

DS I am clear that none of the works by other artists in *Restless* reference Bennett – it is unlikely that these artists would be overly familiar with his work. This is not the focus of the exhibition. The main point of Restless is to highlight the types of art and curatorship that can emerge from the ideas that Bennett so powerfully articulated.

In the early 1990s it was mostly indigenous artists who claimed the issues that Bennett brought to light. Now, issues around race, history, representation and colonisation are central to a broad range of Australian artists. There seems to be a shared responsibility about being an Australian artist that I find deeply moving.

Megan Evans
Megan Evan's work results from over 30 years of investigation into what displaces a sense of belonging in Australia. Although her Scottish family history in Australia can be traced back to the early 1800's, her late husband's Aboriginal culture is far more ancient. Evans' 'bleeding' sculptures - original 19th century heritage objects that she has beaded and embroidered – can be understood as articulations of acute awareness that the establishment of her family in Australia took place at the expense of his.

Nick Devlin
Implicit in Nick Devlin's series of altered Australian flags is a critique of the fabric of Australian-ness. Exploiting the traditional emblematic use of the national flag, Devlin's alterations question the type of Australia that the flag represents. These works suggest those Australian values recently identified by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull such as mutual-respect, democracy, freedom, rule of law, and a-fair-go are not experienced by all Australians.

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Karla Dickens
Karla Dickens assemblages refer to the rarely discussed sexual violence associated with colonization. Her haunting imagery, which incorporates branding irons, stockman's whips, bullock horns and Akubra hats, shatters the romance of the outback as a place of tranquility. Dickens' work addresses the rape and massacre of Indigenous Australians that is remains largely eclipsed by the mythology around the colonial pioneer.

Jordan Marani
The dark humorous quality of Jordan Marani's work points to the absurdity and offensiveness of Australia's recent history. His White Horse Trailer Police (a pun on White Australia Policy) mocks the arrogance of Australia's first parliament who promoted a homogenous population of northern European descent. The 1901 policy that was not completely dismantled until 1973 was designed with the assumption that someone with white skin was superior to someone with dark skin.

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