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My boomerang won't come back

Destiny Deacon

Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia

April 29 – May 29, 1994

There is a particular kind of excitement which surrounds an event in which Destiny Deacon is involved. Earlier in the year Deacon, and poet and friend Lisa Belleair (who is a part of the performance aspect by reciting her poetry), spoke at *Artists Week*, Adelaide Festival. Both times the duo's effervescence and wit has created a surface where it is possible for white and black, particularly women, to make contact. It is almost a soft electricity. It is also through Melbourne visitors that more nungas in Adelaide become visible in some white domains. Destiny makes visible more than what we expect to see. Lisa makes audible more than we expect to hear.

Deacon's art re-presents colonial capitalism's Aboriginal kitsch products. These Bad Taste Artefacts are familiar cultural and economic icons, so well known the initial gaze seems to begin from the same point. "These photos are funny. Funny — eh?"¹ Cultural kitsch is global: soap operas, tea towels, model natives and wooden artefacts collide in airports. Deacon's semi-retrospective, has boomerangs hanging from the ceiling — *My boomerang won't come back*. In her work cultural collision isn't

simply mimicry or ridicule, her nexus is complicity.

Hers is an art where the audience must empty the shelves and look under the carpet. Didactic is a term often derided or denied in Adelaide's art circles, yet Deacon's work adroitly steps around local embargo — because we can all laugh at the same things... at first. *TV dream works*, (1993) is a photo essay commenting on the desecration of a billboard advertising Stan Grant, an Aboriginal journalist and anchorman for a commercial television station's current affairs program. Humorous: a public site that is also a 'sacred site' in popular culture and, an image through which racism is violently manifest. The 'neutral' format of the photo-essay, documents the action and demands redress. Perhaps she could use a billboard of her own?

Destiny says that what she would *really* like is a video camera, nothing flash, but a camera that is manageable. In the exhibition is *Destiny's home video* — a video that really is a home video. There are no credits, even for her cameo appearances for ABC television's *Blackout*. Despite the studied non-professional style of the video, this is not one which puts the viewer to sleep.

Pick a stereotype: Aboriginals don't make good mothers, they're drunk all the time, can't feed their kids, don't care about them, can't control their own violent outbursts and abuse the welfare system whenever there's an opportunity. Although, mind you they always seem to be having a good time. This is the world of *Destiny's home video*.

*Lisa and I might have been born whiter, but our mums outran the missionaries*².

The video consists of four long shots, edited in camera (simply by turning it off). The thing about the video though, is that they're obviously having a good time while they're making it. The kid is keen to cooperate, happy to play along with the charade. The underlying relationships between those in the shot, tell another story, undermining the stereotype — just by the way they do it. It is this successful sliding between urban/mythical aboriginal life and the one that energises on a day-to-day basis that enfolds the viewer in a sharp cocoon, like something made out of raw fibreglass.

It is colonial Australian culture which is being looked at. Our culture is described for us in a way that is palpable and tangible. The boundaries are being crossed in such a way as to intimate that while colonial Australia still exists, there is also the possibility for an anti-colonial stance whereby the very kinds of relationships Aboriginal people have with each other elide the pre-condition for colonial mentality³.

Destiny's home video describes the sites of Aboriginal contact with white Australia: kitchen, school, pub, social worker's office,

Destiny Deacon, *Going, going, gone*, 1994. Colour polaroid laser copies. Courtesy CAC. Photography by Alan Cruickshank.



refuge, the idealised bush. The kid goes to school, but what does mum know about what happens there — “not much” (kid, scene 1, kitchen). While *Destiny's home video* might be about victims of institutionalised racism — “I love the grog, yeah especially on days like this” (mum, scene 2, pub), the victimisers are described by their absence. “I’d like my mum to be able come and live here” (kid, scene 3, refuge), material goods come with a price — separation from family.

The way out is to get some cash, take to the bush, and live in a house boat, which is also a metaphor for maintaining mobility and a relationship with the land. These elements are not immediately apparent. The confronting aspects to Deacon’s work which deconstruct and reclaim mythology are like the proverbial dropping penny — with the kangaroo on one side and Queenie on the other.

In the photo essay *Chuck A Zulu* blaks mimic blacks. The Zulus have become part of our lives through apartheid and international sanctions. Mandela is Prime Minister of South Africa — in our time. *Chuck A Zulu* is a cute parade, but can also be read as a call to defiance, as support for continuing the waves of Aboriginal resistance — chuck a fruity, chuck a zulu. Destiny Deacon’s art intervenes (in all the right places), humours, resists, celebrates, mimics, makes cultural ambiguity less opaque and allows the gap to slide.

Cecelia Cmielewski

notes

- 1 Kerry Giles, opening talk, Destiny Deacon, *My boomerang won't come back*, 1994.
- 2 Destiny Deacon, speaking at the launch of the Tudawali Award, *Artists Week*, Adelaide 1994
- 3 Marcia Langton, “...I heard it on the radio, and I saw it on the television..”, Australian Film Commission, Sydney, 1993.



VNS Matrix, *Splatter Sim*, frame from, *All New Gen*, interactive

ALL New C

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Experimental Art

Oct-Nov 1

*Their surveillance narratives grew so dense it was impossible to know who was in control.*¹

At this year’s *Artists Week* in Adelaide, Virginia Barratt, one of the co-generators of *VNS Matrix*, was a panel member at one of the Festival Forums. With her on the panel was Penny Arcade, performer of *Bitch*, *Dyke*, *Faghag*, *Whore* and Aboriginal artist Heather Shearer. Their topic was the relevance of gender issues to their work. For Shearer, this was not an issue. For Susanna Ventura (Arcade), her message also was a supposedly gender-neutral or gender-equal liberationist one. It was Barratt who drew the animus of the audience (and of Ventura), with her techno-message and technospeak,

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