

Abi see da classroom: Destiny Deacon and Virginia Fraser

— Djon Mundine & Natalie King

Don't you wish that you can be a little Aborigine?

The boomerang he learns to throw and that is all he needs to know.

From Destiny Deacon and Virginia Fraser, *Schoolroom*, 2007

The Boomerang is that unique Aboriginal object that returns to the thrower. The Yolngu Aboriginal term *buku-bakarama* refers to a reciprocity not in numbers or modern currencies but in time and performative emotional values. Historically, all Indigenous art was, though initially personal, fully expressed collaboratively as well as site- and event-orientated. It formed from related people coming together across age and genders in a spirit of reciprocity to bring into being art across all forms.

This intertwinement and syncopation are like the collaboration and partnership between Destiny Deacon and Virginia Fraser, as an Indigenous and non-Indigenous duo. As reflected by Fraser, 'Her Blakness and my not-Blakness aren't solid objects'.¹

Together, Deacon and Fraser collated, dissected, rearranged, slowed down and stitched together an assortment of footage derived from unfettered access to the ABC's archives for the broadcaster's 50th anniversary. Twenty Australian artists were invited to trawl through five decades of footage and reimagine histories for the exhibition *Yours, Mine & Ours: 50 Years of ABC TV*, which was presented at Penrith Regional Gallery and Campbelltown Arts Centre in 2006–07.

The 'perils of participation'² and the 'crime of collaboration' are two tropes or concepts discussed by several writers who develop ideas into physical projects and societal practice (including artworks and exhibition proposals). There is a peril in presenting an idea to another(s) and it being critiqued into reality. One may lose control in the move and a totally unknown outcome might appear, for better or worse. To participate with others is to expose one's somewhat unguarded self, in trust, to another, sometimes revealing vulnerabilities, commonalities and profound differences or even discord. Conversely, it's also posited within this concept that in teaching-explaining proposals, recipients will learn-understand more quickly and are happier if several angles or paths are presented as possibilities to choose from.

To paraphrase German philosopher Rainer Maria Rilke: living in a relationship, one must work at it every day. And, further, although the merging of two people is impossible, one must realise and in fact admire difference, and recognise that an 'infinite distance' exists, even between the closest people. The term 'collaborator' has often carried a negative 'tinge', of collaborating with an occupier power in assisting their colonising process. However, in the colonial environment of collaborating across lines of age, race, religion, class and power, coloniser and colonised can re-examine history to up-end the master-slave relationship and create a form of creolisation: a vibrant richness. In this case, two forceful personalities and intellects, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, working-class and middle-class, with a set of divergent spiritual beliefs, have created together.

Australia's history has a dark shadow. It's written in black and white. All photographic image-making (whether chemical or digital) is a meeting of black and white, light and shadow. All historical memory is of light and shadow. And this project, at its core, was a re-imaging of this history, strengthened and made true through the fact of the collaborative, insightful, dual seeing across the race line of these two partner researchers – partners and collaborators in work and life.

Both Deacon and Fraser have hinted at confronting childhood moments and could be seen to have recognised that in each other. At least in making art, they have been able to effect some control over their destiny (sic): to make one feel better, to be oneself, despite everything, to nurture special visions of the world – a world otherwise filled with prejudice. The relationship (and attendant issues) has been, to some degree, beyond questions of Indigenous identity alone.

For *Abi see da classroom*, Deacon and Fraser conducted a search for any footage tagged with keywords starting with 'Aborigin-' and dating from the beginning of the ABC until the referendum year of 1967. The work is presented across two screens or monitors and was later transformed into the installation *Schoolroom*, with a variation of the work shown at the 10th Havana Biennial in 2009. In recent correspondence, Deacon reflected on the commission:

We requested news and variety show footage from the late 1950s to early 1960s, which was sent down to us on loan. Two videos on two separate screens. Spooky stills from them as photos on the wall. Plus a classroom installation, e.g. dolls on little wooden chairs, etc.³

There are many levels of experiencing, reading and living Blak. They ambiguously exist as separate paths of familiarity and understanding. One sequence in *Abi see da classroom* shows black-and-white footage of Aboriginal children attending a missionary-type school and a close-up of a bell ringing repeatedly, defining the rigidity of colonial and Christian education in remote communities. The small children perform in starched frocks and ironed shirts, collectively repeating in unison the spelling of the words 'baby' and 'Mary' while a nun in a white habit instructs them with a long stick.

In another sequence on this screen, Tommy plays a button accordion while a polite, white lady with pearl earrings and a chignon sings 'Walking on the green grass / Walking side by side...'. Side by side seems preposterous and meaningless yet strangely potent as the young children are instructed in white, irrelevant ways. An Aboriginal woman teaching a Sunday school class on a mission sings the Christian assimilation song / children's jingle 'Hear the Pennies Dropping'. Deacon and Fraser's mash-up is unsettling and discordant yet revealing.

By contrast, the second screen presents clips of white people taking on the guise of Blakness. The first sequence is an excerpt featuring Julitha Walsh: a woman with blonde hair, blue eyes and fair skin who sings a traditional women's song in language with clapsticks. Walsh performed in one of the first broadcasts on Australian television, on 5 November 1956, and had spent much of her childhood in the outback. This is followed by footage of dancing minstrels slowed down to an eerie, inelegant groan. Three 'mammie' caricatures perform in blackface

while the audience snoozes and yawns. Deacon and Fraser cleverly subvert the stereotype of the devoted, dark-skinned caregiver and domestic servant by interspersing this imagery with footage of a white audience clapping jubilantly and menacingly. Deacon and Fraser heighten the preposterous frisson by suturing discordant footage.

When preparing for an exhibition shortly after making *Abi see da classroom*, Fraser remarked:

Among the recent events that were going through my mind while 'Whacked' was being made was the Federal Government's intervention in the NT, the material in the ABC archives we used for the 'Schoolroom' installation, the previous Federal Government's citizenship test, and the increasing use of the Australian flag for all sorts of quasi and pseudo patriotic purposes.

In making this work, the artists have asked: What have been the images of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on our television screens during this time? What story has been told and from whose perspective?

Notes

- (1) Rose Vickers, 'On Collaboration: Destiny Deacon & Virginia Fraser', *Artist Profile*, issue 51, May 2020, p. 88.
- (2) Cybil Scott, 'The Perils of Participation: How We Pay for Online Existence with our Privacy', *Tech Culture*, 25 April 2019, <https://www.iperity.com/tech-culture/the-perils-of-participation/>.
- (3) Destiny Deacon, email correspondence with the authors, April 2021.

Images

pp. 56–57 Installation view, *This brittle light: Light Source commissions*, with Hossein Valamanesh & Nassiem Valamanesh, *What Goes Around 2021* (detail)

p. 61 Installation view, *This brittle light: Light Source commissions*, with Destiny Deacon & Virginia Fraser, *Abi see da classroom 2006* (detail)

pp. 62–63 Installation view, *This brittle light: Light Source commissions*, with Destiny Deacon & Virginia Fraser, *Abi see da classroom 2006* (detail)

p. 64 Installation view, *This brittle light: Light Source commissions*, exhibition reading room

