



TARRAWARRA BIENNIAL, AUSTRALIA

YEAR 2014
IMAGES 74

BREAKING BREAD WITH THE LOCALS

**'Tis true my form is something odd,
But blaming me is blaming God;
Could I create myself anew
I would not fail in pleasing you.
If I could reach from pole to pole
Or grasp the ocean with a span,
I would be measured by the soul;
The mind's the standard of the man.'**

Joseph Merrick, *The Elephant Man*

DJON MUNDINE AND NATALIE KING
CO-CURATORS, TARRAWARRA BIENNIAL 2014



In English, the word 'companion' came to mean someone with whom you 'broke bread' and shared a meal. Wheat bread was the main food in Europe until the late 1800s, and breakfast was often a small loaf. As such, bread was the stuff of life. In Australia, Aboriginal people processed the fruit of the cycad palm to remove toxins and then ground the seeds to flour as the main ingredient for baking bread, providing food for participants of large ceremonial gatherings. These loaves were gluten- and salt-free, but could cause cancer if the toxins present in the seeds had not been sufficiently leached. When processed wheat bread was introduced with the arrival of Europeans, it would cause more health problems for the indigenous people because of its salt content and other ingredients that were difficult to digest. The stuff of life has a darker side too.

In Jonathan Swift's 1726 satire on society, *Gulliver's Travels*, the writer reveals the illogical nature of human morality, and in the land of the giants, he exposes the grotesque ugly form of the human body under close scrutiny. If the face is the window to the soul, a picture of the mind and an image of one's heart, Søren Dahlgaard's portraits similarly depict a common face of bland plainness, if not ugliness. Like the deformities of Joseph Merrick, made famous as *The Elephant Man*, Dahlgaard's lumpy facial extrusions become dysmorphic; a reverse cast that is nonsensical. Draped in a lump of dough, the sitters enact faceless, sculptural portraits that are preposterous, partly improvisational and ephemeral. Dough is malleable and impermanent, making it perfect not only for Dahlgaard's obliterated self-images, but also for expressing the seeming impossibility of portraiture in the twenty-first century, given its weighty history.



The placing of a mass of dough on the face is similar to the casting of 'death masks', a practice by physical anthropologists looking for characteristics in faces to prove their racist readings of 'primitive' and 'criminal' types in their dealings of Aboriginal people. Here dough cloaks character, class, station, the famous and common, friends and strangers, people posed in casual clothes and arranged at rest in various common places. Who am I? What is my character?

Taking a line from Grace Jones's 1981 song 'Art Groupie' – 'Love me in a picture / Kiss me in a cast / Touch me in a sculpture / Whisper in my mask' – the TarraWarra Biennial in 2014 had the title 'Whisper in My Mask'. It explored masking, secrets and hidden narratives as psychological states. The mask in its multifarious forms and functions can both reveal and conceal personas: it can protect, beautify, frighten or pacify, universalize or eternalize, intensifying and amplifying expression. We invited a number of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists whose works explore different aspects of masking and elicit an emotional and sensory response.

Wherever possible, Dahlgaard involves locals in his iterative and evolving projects, thereby engaging with the nuances and particularities of place. For the TarraWarra Biennial, he arranged a weekend event in which members of the local town of Healesville on the outskirts of Melbourne could come and have their portraits taken within the grounds of the TarraWarra Museum of Art. Advertising in the local newspaper, he was able to mobilize and interest the community in his participatory and situational event. Families, couples, individuals and girls from

the Worowa Aboriginal College became part of the experiment. Further images were taken in the garden of Bunjilaka Aboriginal Culture Centre at the Melbourne Museum.

Renowned Aboriginal actor, activist, musician and elder Jack Charles became the subject of a billboard-size portrait stuck to the walls of the TarraWarra Museum as a way of addressing the local history of Aboriginal dispossession. Charles's great-great-grandfather had been at Coranderrk, a mission on the edge of Healesville. It was a self-sustaining, determined and vibrant Aboriginal community based on a revitalized farming life. When the government moved to close down the community in 1881, a fight for justice ensued with the Aboriginal Protection Board. During the Coranderrk Festival, established in 2013 to celebrate the strength and resilience of the original Coranderrk community, Dahlgaard had been introduced to the Aboriginal singer Bobbie Bununggurr, visiting from Ramingining on the Arafura Swamp. He became the subject of another dough portrait.

Dahlgaard elides and conflates age, race, gender and class in his bizarre faceless portraits, rendering everyone the same under the equalizing effect of the dough. Comedy, caricature, distortion, exaggeration, send-up, skit and cartoon can all be seen as systems or rituals of masking and unmasking. We are reminded here of Hans Christian Andersen's Danish fable 'The Emperor's New Clothes': a tale of deceit, disguise and invisibility. Dahlgaard deploys masking in a comic and exaggerated gesture of obliteration – a sculptural cast that fuses portraiture, photography and performance that is completely absurd, transformational and just plain fun.



The artist's youngest son Olau looks apprehensive as he waits for the dough at the TarraWarra Museum of Art (opposite). Meanwhile, Djon Mundine brings in the dough for Jack Charles's portrait at the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Culture Centre (top), and then gets his hands sticky as he puts the dough on the head of Bobbie Bununggurr (above).



DOM



BOBBIE



PHOEBE



VICTORIA



SUZANA



LIBBY



TIM AND ARTIE



DION AND NATALIE



ADAM



AUDREY



ELIZABETH; LUKE; AMANDA; AARIKA
 MONICA; TONY; DAWN; SKYE
 ALI; ASHA; OLAU; TESSA

SARAH; KÖNER; AURELLIA; JULES
 CHRISTOPHER; RASNMI; PIPER AND SUMMER; DENISE
 HELEN; FRANCES; MELISSA; ANTOINE