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***Defying Empire: The Third National  
Indigenous Art Triennial***  
National Gallery of Australia,  
May 26 – September 10, 2017

Marina Tyquiengco

### Exhibition Review

Exhibition catalog: Tina Baum, *Defying Empire: 3<sup>rd</sup> National Indigenous Art Triennial*. Canberra: National Gallery of Art, 2017. 160 pp. \$39.95 (9780642334688)

Exhibition schedule: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, ACT, May 26, 2017 – September 10, 2017

### About the Author

*Marina Tyquiengco specializes in contemporary indigenous art as a PhD student at the University of Pittsburgh working with Professor Terry Smith. She received her Master of Arts in History of Art and Architecture at Pitt in 2016. Her MA examines the contemporary reuse of ethnographic photographs by Aboriginal Australian artists. Her dissertation will focus on indigenous selfhood through artists' use of their own bodies from the 1990s to today in Australia, Canada, and the U.S. She will serve as Editor-in-Chief of Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture for a special issue on the topic of race and museums.*

# ***Defying Empire: The Third National Indigenous Art Triennial***

National Gallery of Australia, May 26 –  
September 10, 2017

Marina Tyquiengco

What is contemporary Indigenous art in 2017? The third National Indigenous Art Triennial, *Defying Empire*, demonstrates the breadth and diversity of Indigenous art, specifically in Australia.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary Aboriginal art, like contemporary art more generally, lacks a unified style and is connected by a concern for distinct temporalities and alternative histories.<sup>2</sup> *Defying Empire* evidences that art can be both indigenous and contemporary, as scholars like Ian McLean argue.<sup>3</sup> The term “Aboriginal” has mainly been used to describe art by Australia’s indigenous peoples based on distinct visual languages they have

passed down for generations, and presented in culturally specific mediums. The traditional aspects of remote Aboriginal art have led many art scholars from the 1970s, onward, to argue against its modernity and, thus, its contemporaneity. Until recently, artists of Aboriginal descent working in Western mediums were marginalized—qualifying as neither contemporary nor Aboriginal art.

*Defying Empire* opened to the public at the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) in Canberra on Friday, May 26, 2017. As part of the opening celebration, curator Tina Baum delivered a lecture, which was followed by several artist talks. The date of the opening was chosen to coincide with Australia’s nineteenth annual National Sorry Day, a day commemorating the publication of *Bringing Them Home*, a national report on the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their homes and communities, which took place from 1910 to 1970. These displaced Aboriginal people, known as the Stolen Generations, encountered considerable abuse and ill treatment at the hands of church and government schools outside of their communities. The Stolen Generations is just one example of the many human rights atrocities committed against Aboriginal people with the complicity of the Australian government. The following day, May 27th, marked the fiftieth anniversary of the “Yes” vote for the 1967 Referendum, a ballot initiative removing a reference to Aboriginal people and a discriminatory clause from Australia’s Constitution.<sup>4</sup> The Referendum’s success allowed Aboriginal people to be counted in the census. As Aboriginal activist and historian Gary Foley argued during a panel discussion on the Referendum, the impact of the Referendum is still controversial. The timing of this exhibition opening with politically significant anniversaries could suggest an explicitly political reading of the exhibition but the works on view, in fact, demonstrate exceptional nuance and subtlety. *Defying Empire* asks what, if anything, has changed for Aboriginal people and their creative practices since these historic moments. One answer, according to Baum, herself a member of the

<sup>1</sup> I will refer to the National Indigenous Art Triennial as the Triennial generally and the iterations of it by their subtitles.

<sup>2</sup> Aboriginal, a Latin rooted word meaning “from the beginning,” is the term commonly used for Indigenous peoples of Australia.

<sup>3</sup> See Ian McLean, ed. *How Aborigines Invented Contemporary Art: Writings on Aboriginal Contemporary Art* (Sydney: Power Publications, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> “The 1967 Referendum: Fact Sheet 150,” Australian Government, accessed May 28, 2017, <http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/fact-sheets/fs150.aspx>

Larrakia/Wadaman/Karajarri peoples of the Northern Territory and Western Australia, is that, “We defy by existing,” a pronouncement she repeated throughout the opening celebration.<sup>5</sup>

All three curators of the triennials have been of Aboriginal descent, demonstrating the NGA’s commitment to promoting Aboriginal artists and Indigenous curatorial practice. Baum is the Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at the National Gallery of Art and contributed to previous triennials, thus providing a degree of curatorial consistency. Artists in the show represent every state of Australia based on their language and people associations. The first NIAT, *Culture Warriors*, was curated by artist and scholar Brenda Croft, then–Senior Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art. *Culture Warriors* provided an encyclopedic survey of Aboriginal art, with thirty artists representing equally urban and remote areas of Australia. The exhibition presented the artists as culture warriors, fighting for either preservation or reconnection with their respective cultures. The second NIAT, *unDisclosed*, organized by Curator Carly Lane, sought to correct the over-representation of geographically remote artists in Aboriginal art globally and nationally by focusing heavily on urban-based artists.



**Figure 1**

Installation view, *Defying Empire: The Third National Indigenous Art Triennial*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, ACT, photo courtesy of National Gallery of Australia.

<sup>5</sup> Tina Baum, conversation with author, May 27, 2017.

*Defying Empire* mirrors both the scale of *Culture Warriors* and the geographic emphasis of *unDisclosed* providing space for artists to claim and proclaim their Aboriginality while eschewing the stereotypes of Aboriginal art. As Baum states, “When people think of Aboriginal artists, they think of bark painting and dot painting so we need to challenge that by featuring those artists among everyone else as well.” Most artists in the exhibition utilize nontraditional mediums such as film, installation, sound art, and multimedia works. Baum’s deliberate refusal to showcase the expected is a strength of *Defying Empire* and exhibitions like the *National Indigenous Art Triennial*. As Baum states, “They are contemporary artists who happen to be indigenous, who happen to be gay or lesbian who happen to be mothers, fathers, or brothers.” Baum, like the exhibition overall, presents the artists’ indigeneity as one, deeply felt, identity, among others.



**Figure 2**

Installation view, *Defying Empire: The Third National Indigenous Art Triennial*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, ACT, photo courtesy of National Gallery of Australia.

The exhibition begins in the NGA’s main entrance with Reiko Rennie’s *OA\_RR* (2016), a painted Rolls Royce. The title of Rennie’s piece is a riff on the term “OG” or “original gangster” — “OA” stands for “original Aboriginal.” As Rennie’s title indicates, street art and hip hop culture influence his work as much as his Kamilaroi heritage does. The gold luxury car with its Kamilaroi- and graffiti-inspired designs exemplifies these dual influences on urban Aboriginal people. Most of the exhibition is in the NGA’s temporary exhibition space next to its Australian gallery; two striking exceptions, however, are Yhonnie Scarce’s phenomenal *Thunder Raining Poison* (2015) and Dale Harding’s thought-provoking installation *their little black slaves perished in isolation* (2015) (Figure 1). Scarce’s sculpture speaks to the devastating health effects of nuclear testing at Maralinga in South Australia,

her home state. *Thunder Raining Poison* is composed of two thousand fetus-like glass-blown yams, tinted green, suspended in the air—poignant and breathtaking—and resembles an eerily beautiful storm cloud. Harding’s installation of a room burnt black on the interior is a memorial to a teenage Aboriginal domestic servant who died when a fire broke out while she was locked inside her quarters. Each of these works requires physical and contemplative space unavailable in the main galleries, and their placement attempts to disseminate *Defying Empire* throughout the NGA. The works are labeled but more visual markers would be helpful to insure visitors do not bypass these important works. The main gallery space is expansive, fitting the scale required for each work, with a few deep-blue-hued galleries and one with a warm burnt umber color breaking up the massive white walls so typical of contemporary art spaces.

The exhibition was thoughtfully curated around seven themes: *Forever Memory, Recounting and Revival, Resistance and Refusal, Disrupting Invisibility, Asserting Presence, Rising Passion, and Bearing Witness*. More than pithy phrases, these themes reinforce the continuity amid instability of Aboriginal cultures, and the curatorial staff’s deep respect for traditional knowledge despite what one might expect from a show focused on urban-based artists. These short and deceptively simple phrases lend an intentional poetics to the exhibition. *Defying Empire* compels viewers to consider how each work relates to the specific and general themes. The *Recounting and Revival* gallery was perhaps the most remarkably curated, with Dale Harding’s *Body of Objects* (2016) opposite Ray Ken’s *Kulata Tjuta* (2016) paintings and traditional spears made by Ken’s grandson (Figure 2). Harding’s installation emasculates traditionally male-gendered objects such as nails, horseshoes, and other tools by molding their shapes into black silicon wax, rendering them harmless and flaccid. These objects reflect colonial efforts to emasculate Aboriginal men by eliminating their access to weapons—undermining their ability to provide food and therefore effectively subjugating entire Aboriginal communities.<sup>6</sup> “Kula Tjuta” means spear-making in Pitjantjara, a skill that Ken, as a senior man, teaches to the younger men in his community. The pairing presents weapons as purely symbolic and as important means of reinforcing deep ties to country, culture, and future generations.

Women are well represented in the exhibition, totaling thirteen of the thirty artists included, and their contributions were some of the most memorable in the Triennial. Yhonnice Scarce’s work, detailed above, provides one notable example. Other examples consist of a thought-provoking film and installation by Julie Gough, Maree Clark’s impressive traditional necklaces created on a wall-size scale, and beautiful traditional water design paintings by Nonggirnga Marawili. Karla Dickens’s three works are also particularly memorable for their scale and setting against burnt umber walls. Her *Assimilated Warriors II* (2014) references activists from the Aborigines Progressive Association active during the Great Depression through a looming installation of farm equipment hung with black business suits adorned by dangling woven strings (Figure 3).<sup>7</sup> These works display a knowledge of history enacted through the suggestion of corporeality, provoking the viewer to imagine the bodies inside the suits.

<sup>6</sup> Tina Baum, conversation with the author, May 27, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Karla Dickens, Artist Talk on *Defying Empire*, May 26, 2017.



**Figure 3**

Karla Dickens, *Assimilated Warriors II*, 2014, emu feathers, textiles, leather, metal, wood.  
 Installation view, *Defying Empire: The Third National Indigenous Art Triennial*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, ACT, photo courtesy of National Gallery of Australia.

The works in *Defying Empire* are large and look contemporary in terms of spectacular scale and meanings that are not obvious at first glance. Overall, the exhibition could be compared in its impressiveness and diversity to other triennials and biennials, not only those of indigenous art. Drawing from different mediums and techniques, the works address temporalities outside their own, on the massive scale of modern work, but expressly without modernity's relentless pursuit of progress. Disregarding such ambitions, the artists of *Defying Empire* are free to explore the past as well as the future and deeply consider their own being in the present; thus fulfilling the mandate of contemporary art, as notably defined by Terry Smith as a theoretical framework for art after Modernism, which is with or between times.<sup>8</sup> It is virtually impossible to discuss a major exhibition of indigenous art without some reference to the dichotomous way that it is often discussed, for example traditional versus contemporary, remote versus urban. By organizing the galleries thematically, these dichotomies are subverted so connections rather than distinctions between works arise. According to Baum, "All the artists in the exhibition draw from traditional knowledges some more deeply than others." The artists are contemporary people who are Aboriginal regardless of whether they live in remote or urban areas. Like all artists working now, they draw from a

<sup>8</sup> See Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004) and *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (Sydney: Prentice Hall, 2008).

variety of influences, of which their heritage is one. Baum stresses the need to challenge what people think of Aboriginal art—bark paintings, dot paintings, and the like. This exhibition defies categories—and empire—by demonstrating the breadth of extant Aboriginal art today.



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