



BUYUHYN-WANA
The transformative persona

31 AUGUST - 13 OCTOBER 2013



LISMORE
REGIONAL
GALLERY

front cover:
Snow lion
19th Century
Himalayan
timber
Collection of Robert Bleakley

BUYUHYN-WANA :: The transformative persona

Listening to Robert Bleakley talk about his collection, developed over a long period of time, is an opportunity to consider of systems of belief from across the globe. Robert has an intimate knowledge of all these objects, and a deep passion for where they come from. It is that conversation that we hope to share with you in this exhibition.

When we started discussing this project, Robert suggested involving leading Australian curator Djon Mundine to offer his insight into the collection. What Djon brought was a contemporary spin on these objects, bringing them into the contemporary by placing them against new media works by Angelica Mesiti, and Aboriginal artists; Fiona Foley, Nicole Foreshow, Daniel Boyd and Bindi Cole. This juxtaposition does not clash, instead it teases out that idea that artists for eons have been interested in the way that the body and mind can be transformed from one place to the next.

This idea, in many ways, also speaks about the Northern Rivers as being a place in which people come to transform themselves. It is our hope that people view this exhibition within that framework – how can we consider the use of art and art making to be a vehicle for change.

I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to Robert Bleakley for trusting us with this project, and for so willingly embracing its possibilities. I would also like to thank Djon Mundine for his usual insightfulness and intelligence. Both have been a delight to work with.

I would also like to acknowledge the Gallery's curator, Kezia Geddes for bringing the many complex elements of this project together and Matt Hill for so cleverly weaving a sound component into the exhibition.

I trust viewing *Buyuhyn-Wana: the transformative persona* will be an enlightening experience for you.

Brett Adlington

Director, Lismore Regional Gallery



Sati, Devotional object
c.18th Century
India
bronze
Collection of Robert Bleakley



image left:
Pilachamundi, lion mask
18th Century
Karnataka, South West India
bronze
Collection of Robert Bleakley

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image right:
Monpa Sherdukpen, deer mask
19th Century
timber
Collection of Robert Bleakley

Transformation through the manifest world

Robert Bleakley

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In selecting works for the exhibition, *Buyuhyn-Wana; The transformative persona*, the theme of personal transformation as revealed in physical objects has informed the choices. The works in my collection largely conform to the broad category devotional objects used in seeking intervention from higher powers. The cultures reflected in the exhibition are mainly Indian and Himalayan, Australian Aboriginal or other primary cultures, as it is towards these cultures that I have been most drawn and with which I have worked professionally over more than three decades.

As visual objects, the impact upon the viewer is concerned with iconography in the case of the Tibetan and Indian works, although within this there are many other

elements contained. As the complexity of the icons represented is deep, I will draw attention to some aspects of this in the descriptions accompanying the objects. Other works such as the masks fulfill a variety of roles in effecting transformation through calling upon primal energies which enable the masquerader to actually embody the deity or the energy of a specific entity that is being summoned to intervene on behalf of those engaged in the ceremony.

Seen as they are in the context of an exhibition, the objects are inevitably diminished in the power which they would evoke in traditional manner of use where other elements of sound, movement (both of which encode specific meanings) and of course the essential element (or spirit presence) which rises up through the collective minds of the participants in traditional ceremonies, the origins of which extend back through many centuries.

In light of the above, we can only glimpse the embodied power and must allow our imaginations to approximate the impact which was once conveyed through their use by masters and which inspired supplicants. There is also the direct pleasure which we derive as people mainly brought up within the Western cultural tradition of appreciating the refined aesthetic contained within these works.

As the items are drawn from diverse cultural traditions, one can understand them according to their historical and cultural use. These perceptions evolved in my personal study of the artworks and cultures themselves combined with my personal study of yoga and meditation and the esoteric over many years. A former colleague recently identified himself together with me as being one who subscribes to the Primordial Tradition that is drawing from many esoteric traditions without aligning specifically to one. This is possibly what lies behind the connection, which persists between the works held in this collection in spite of the great cultural diversity.

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From the period of the 18th century the “Grand Tour” which many English gentlemen embarked upon until the early part of the 20th century to accumulate kind of the “cabinets of curiosities” has been a mark of cultural imperialism. Sensitive to that, I recognize the cultural plunder which has led to so many of these objects becoming available on the market and traded through dealers and auction rooms. My own attitude towards ownership of these items has evolved to an appreciation of the stewardship of these cultural objects in a way close to the understanding I now have of the “ownership” of land. Both notions of ownership strike me as a fiction and it is my hope that the works can inspire and evoke a broader understanding of the deeper elements of our collective being, breaking down cultural and ethnic barriers.



Buyuhyn-wana :: The transformative persona

The Robert Bleakley Collection + Moving Image work by Daniel Boyd, Bindi Cole, Fiona Foley, Nicole Foreshew, Angelica Mesiti

Djon Mundine OAM

In the beginning was the word – a sound – a sonic action – an emotional response that leads to reflection and thought. Hearing was believing-time and space in an acoustic, horizon-less, boundless, olfactory space (Marshall McLuhan). When Europeans came to our land they brought ideas; metaphysical concepts that were western Christian in character and around 2,000 years old – some more recently quote Buddhist concepts that also developed on this time scale. Being the first may be an inconsistent and pointless argument in spiritual

matters. Metaphysics is a Greek word and they preceded the former two beliefs and followed the Egyptians (5,000 BCE) however Aboriginal ideas of being, thought, reality, sense, fact and values have formed and endured here in this environment for nearly 50,000 years (BCE).

In Aboriginal society in the north, Wanggarr; the original creative spirit, gave Aboriginal people the Yidaki (didjeridu), and its particular high note, the voice of the Rainbow Serpent, similar in tone to the Conch. In many religions the word ‘truth’ is from ‘what is heard’ (from God) – the direct sound or word from God. The revealing of a type of truth and often a trace as in a mark (a design), a scar, is left behind. Wanggarr smelt a rotting beached whale coming with the north-east wind bringing the ‘nose’, the beginning, of the wet season to transform the world.

To reinforce the temporal aural element of existence Japanese performance artist Akio Suzuki ‘played’ a glass sheet and a length of string, in response to Nicole Foreshew’s silent dancing, slowly revolving women. At the opening performances with the local Arakwal Aboriginal Dance Group, they recited a poetic statement from their now deceased mentor Lindsay Gordon Mundine.

The Soul is born old but grows young. That is the comedy of life. And the body is born young and grows old. That is life’s tragedy.

Oscar Wilde¹

An Aboriginal life is one of transformation from the spirit world to the secular, and with each successive revelatory ritual or life experience returns to the spirit world. It begins at conception, not birth. And, then with puberty, a sequence of, increasingly deeper, exposure to the spirit world.

“My mother and father found me at Malwanatharra in Mildjingi country. They went for oysters and tortoiseshell. My mother and her sister thought they saw a dinghy from Milingimbi coming in the water but it was the Dog spirit from that place - my spirit. My spirit is like from that place.”

Jimmy Wululu²

At conception the father has an unusual hunting experience: a man, an artist, told me of how he was walking through shallow fresh water when a tortoise crawled onto his foot. He caught it and took it home to eat. That night the tortoise came to him in a dream and said; *“my father, why did you kill me; I’m your daughter”*. The next morning he told his wife of the dream, she confirmed that, yes, she was pregnant. This could suggest a form of re-incarnation but Aboriginal people deny this or didn’t extend the line of thought in this conversation. However, in the film *The Ten Canoes*, when one of the two main characters is about to die, as is customary, he dances the dance of his totem, into his death.

06 echidna hunt
c.1950s
North West Arnhem Land,
Northern Territory
natural earth pigments on bark
Collection of Robert Bleakley

image right:
Attributed: (Paddy) Captain
Jambuwal
Creature of the Dreamtime
c.1960s
OenPELLI (Gumbalanya)
Collection of Robert Bleakley



Angelica Mesiti
Rapture (silent anthem) 2009
film still, Australian
High Definition Video,
silent, 10 mins 10 secs duration 09
coutesy the artist and
Anna Schwartz Gallery
Sydney & Melbourne



image left:
Jayinyanu David Downs
c.1925-1995
Kurtal making heavy weather
c.1984
Fitzroy Crossing
Western Australia
Natural earth pigments and
synthetic binder on linen
Collection of Robert Bleakley

image right:
Yirawala c.1897-1976
Lorrkon (log coffin) ceremony
c.1950s
Marugulidban, Arnhem Land,
Northern Territory
natural earth pigments on bark
Collection of Robert Bleakley

Gupapuyngu artist Jimmy Wululu (dec.) was conceived and died in August-September; the season for oysters and native honey. In the Sydney-Hawkesbury basin it's the wattle flowering season and mullet runs. On the north Australian Arnhem Land coastal shores, Namarrkon, the lightning spirit is associated with Aljurr, Leichhardt's or the spectacular grasshopper (*petasia ephippigera*). The species emerges, mates and is most active and visible in the season known as Gunemeleng between October and December when there are intense electrical storms. Aljurr is then said to be 'looking for' Namarrkkon, the lightning spirit – it's appropriate to exhibit this image at this time of year – just before the season of lightning storms late in the day and the 'nose'; the first storms, of the wet season.

David Malangi once spoke to me of 'totem' and 'god'; "*The Djang'kawu (sisters) gave birth to the first children and made the springs that brought water to the land fertilizing it and bringing the birds, animals and fish into being but 'God' made the Djangawu.*"

image left:
Namarrkon (the Lightning God)
c.1940
Kakadu, Northern Territory
natural earth pigments on bark
Collection of Robert Bleakley

"Is 'god' a white Christian 'god' or an Aboriginal 'god'", I asked further?

"God is for *everyone!*," he replied

Children begin by loving their parents; after a time they judge them. Rarely if ever, do they forgive them.

Oscar Wilde ³

We must all rationalize our relationship with our parents if not forgive them. Especially after their death, when we become the parent. How much can we forgive? Can forgiveness in a personal issue (so as not to be held hostage to the past), be applied to societal issues and a history approaching a 'holocaust'? How does the personal and the societal relate to each other? The Jewish response to the Holocaust and how it was largely ignored by civilized western society was a defiant '*Never Again*', not '*I forgive you*'. Melbourne-based Aboriginal artist Bindi Cole explained to me in 2011 that in order to progress in her own life, upon her mother's death, she had to rationalize and forgive her own mother for any and all possible deficiencies in Bindi's



upbringing. She had to let go of the past. She then suggested to me that in order for Aboriginal people at large not to be held hostage to the trauma of a colonial past that they should also now forgive ‘white’ Australian society for this brutal history. She proposed to record and make public these statements of forgiveness. A number of Aboriginal people volunteered to perform this ‘absolution’ performance for her and the resultant powerful moving image artwork is called *Seventy Times Seven* (2011).⁴ I did not agree with the proposition; yes, there may be a need to let go of; to be free of the personal psychological baggage but there is more to a society and a history than me. I cannot speak for all Aboriginal people, and very serious historical and political consequences need to be resolved before the trauma can be healed. Of course there can be forgiveness, but within that must be a willingness to secure and retain the truth. Forgiveness is not about forgetting but remembering. As a companion performance work in conversation with the artist I wrote *‘I forgive you – I will remember’* seventy times in columns alongside the video image. As an involvement of audiences, visitors were offered the opportunity to write the own forgiveness/remembrance line on a set short wall near the entrance of the exhibition.

I have used the body to perform the absence of space. I have incorporated the presence of cloth as object to really write and speak through the movement of the physical body. These women have impacted on my understanding of this place. I asked your sister and niece to take part in the film too; I asked them “what is your freedom?”

Nicole Foreshew

The third major transformation; to be in communion with the spirit – to become the spirit is through dance; whether singularly or in social grouping. Aboriginal dance appears in a short repetitive, almost Butoh-esque movements, over and over again. In Nicole Foreshew’s video: *belong to all yet to none 3* (2012) women (her close family) play-twirl, styled and arranged in her fabric – see Wonder Woman (spider web – *The Kiss of the Spider Woman*). Wonder Woman has her ‘lasso of truth’ that she spins, twirls, and throws over, capturing escaping villains.

Women spin as a centrifuge, to throw off their outer every day coating, to reveal their inner power.⁵ The simple silent graceful movements here could be said to be seductive; and it is part of the performance, but also expressing a powerful, warm,

image left:
Bindi Cole
Seventy Times Seven
2010
(film still)
single channel video
10 mins 21 secs
duration
image courtesy the
artist and Nellie
Caston Gallery,
Melbourne

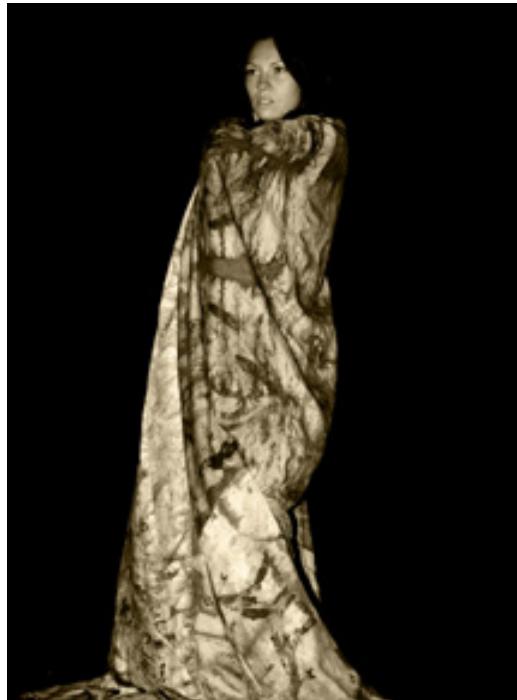


image left and right:
Nicole Foreshew
belong to all yet to none, 3
2012 (film still)
single channel video
silent
30 minutes duration
courtesy the artist

purposeful yearning. Vanity – but a modest coquettish vanity – a display of affection and tenderness beyond words.

Men divest themselves of their outer garments to expose their power differently – tear open their shirts to reveal their chests and power (Superman).⁶

In traditional Aboriginal society you wrap sacred objects, ritual gifts, special foods, valuable ochre-colours, bodies living and dead. You use paper-bark or specially decorated fabric. And what is more a sacred site than a woman's body.

Toe to toe

Dancing very close

Barely breathing – almost comatose

Wall to wall-people hypnotized

And they're stepping lightly

Hang each night in Rapture

Blondie (1980)

Angelica Mesiti's silent evocative 'Rapture' (*Rapture, silent anthem* 2009) captures the young transformed by music, dance, and physical, social exertion to a state of pure spiritual bliss – a touch with God. Their faces becoming another being, mirrored in a set of open mouthed African and Asian masks across the short centre room of the gallery space. It was not accidental that Mesiti's work won the *2009 Blake Prize* for religious art. It's interesting that this work of intense emotion (and Nicole Forshew's) is in silence – most people find silence difficult to endure. Catholics say that in silence you hear the true word of God. The very word 'rapture' has associations with the bible⁷ and the believed final transformation of the second coming when God carries away the repentant converted to heaven leaving the rest to perish.

The mindful do not die

But the heedless are as if dead already!

The Dhammapada, verse 21

Possibly, I think, a binary exists of how to reach revelation – Firstly, fasting and deprivation, to remove distractions, to crystalize the essential. Secondly, to partake, to indulge; to discern the 'real' – to perceive the core, from the crust. But revelation is to be found in the everyday and common things. To be found in the mindfulness of the ordinary. It's definitely to be found in the absurd and mirthful, in wit and in laughter.

In Xanadu, did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure-dome decree:

Kubla Khan, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1797 (published 1816)

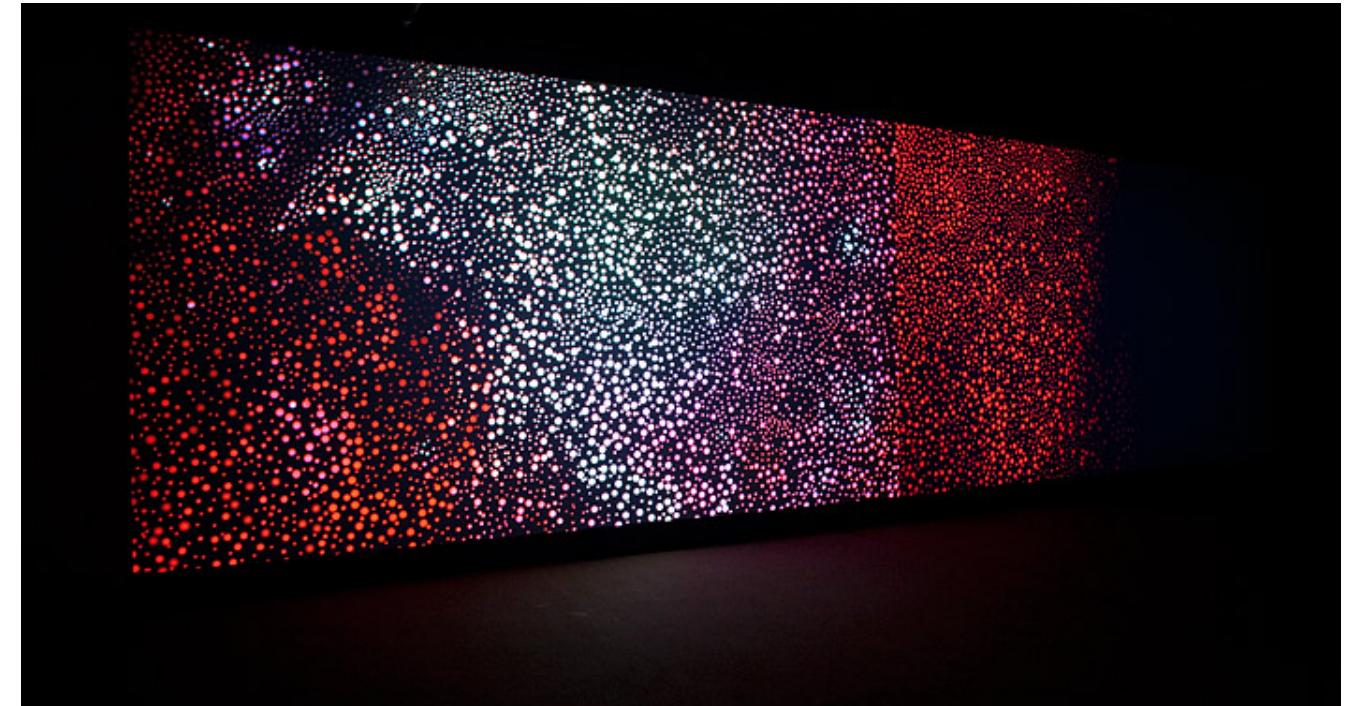
In 1797, around the time of the arrival of British colonists in Australia, English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), wrote *Kubla Khan*, and *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*. Coleridge was a very frequent user of opium, which he thought necessary to see his visions. Philosophers talk of the majority of the population living in a dream world, unaware of the reality of existence. It is this point alluded to in Fiona Foley's *Bliss* (2006) where the general population is living oblivious to the true history of race relations in Australia and the consequences and their responsibilities; and where opium was woven through it.



image left:
 Fiona Foley
Bliss 2006
 (film still)
 single channel video
 10 mins duration
 Collection Lismore Regional
 Gallery

When the British came to what is now Sydney they saw light dance across the physical landscape but failed to see the dark matter – the cultural, social, and spiritual Aboriginal space. To see the truth one must focus and be conscious of things beyond the obvious. Look at the dark and not the stars, not the light. Scientists now tell us of the ‘dark matter’ of the universe and that there is in fact three or four times more ‘dark matter’ than light in this limitless space. The space could be the miniature of the inner atomic world or the infinite manifold stars of the universe. Physicists now talk of an energy field; Higgs Field, that joins everything in the universe. Daniel Boyd’s work references landscape, not just the physical but the social, cultural, and experiential landscape, surrounding art objects.

Certain inherent features of a technology can make it appear as magic but can also shut particular people out from access to it; from knowledge of, or a system of power associated with it. A previous exhibition of mine; *Shadow Life*,



described projected contemporary art as a shadow, a soul, disembodied art, visible but transient and intangible. It is to this purpose that I have juxtaposed evocative contemporary moving images with images of God (deities in differing forms), masks, and metal figures, to attempt to draw out direct emotional responses to the objects here across temporal and cultural spaces.

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- 1 Oscar Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*, Act One.
 - 2 Conversation with the author (1986).
 - 3 Oscar Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), Acts Two and Four.
 - 4 From the Bible – The parable of the unforgiving Servant – Then Peter came and said to Him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.” Matthew 18:23
 - 5 First told to me in personal conversation with John von Sturmer 2013.
 - 6 Op.cit personal conversation with John von Sturmer 2013
 - 7 Matthew 24:29-31



LISMORE REGIONAL GALLERY

Published by Lismore Regional Gallery

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