

Approaching Sixth Sense

the perceptive feeling of the spirit

Sixth Sense - Noun

A supposed intuitive faculty giving awareness not explicable in terms of normal perception: eg. sixth sense told him he was not alone.

Aboriginal people are generally believed to have an intuitive sixth sense, and some artists at large are thought to possess the 'sixth sense'. It is something pre-renaissance, pre-rationalist, beyond the usually considered 'five senses'; sight, sound, taste, touch and smell. These days other senses – such as equilibrioception (sense of balance) and proprioception (sense of body position, or kineosphere) – are also commonly accepted physiological senses. Inevitably, our personal and social frameworks, experiences, histories and other factors influence our senses and responses.

When the pieces fall apart or are lost we just regroup and reform as the issue or idea calls. Contemporary society increasingly leads us into a world of simulacra, away from the earlier meanings of 'sensible' – *perceptible by the senses*. We often think of the spiritual as a light, but can it not also be a smell, a taste or a touch? Daniel Boyd, Destiny Deacon and Virginia Fraser, Karla Dickens, Fiona Foley, Nicole Foreshew, Willurai Kirkbright, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Gabriella Mangano and Silvana Mangano, Archie Moore, Nasim Nasr and Skye Raabe feature in this exhibition as contemporary artists whose approaches span generations, race, cultures and gender. They share aspects of the spiritual and incorporate elements of the senses in their artwork.

The Sixth Sense exhibition touches on; reality, existence, God, consciousness, life, time, self, sleep, and death. Human sight evolved into the; I would think, little appreciated, form of binocular vision we have today. 'Stenopaque lens glasses for people with myopia, have opaque lenses of many pinhole perforations, that each admit only a narrow beam of light, reducing the 'circle of confusion' on the retina by assisting it to focus on the image and lengthening the depth of field.. The work of Daniel Boyd works with this focus metaphor in both his walls of light and black space in viewing the actual world and in the historic images

that we are bombarded with in our everyday lives. NSW Aboriginal Jimmy Governor exploded in rage against, continual, persistent, colonial racism at the end of the 1800s; killing nine colonial people. Using his tracking, and sixth sense 'bush' skills, he evaded thousands of police, soldiers, and armed civilian volunteers for months, until he was wounded, captured, tried, and sentenced to death in 1900. His execution date in 1901, (in fact in the NAS buildings where this exhibition was installed) was shifted, so as, not to clash with the independence celebrations; gaining self-government from England.

Daniel Boyd works with this focus metaphor in both his walls of light and black space, in viewing the actual world and in the historic images that bombard us in our everyday lives. For *Sixth Sense* he has made new work for the Gallery, an untitled window piece with many pinholes, which transform the exterior into a dotted vision. He also presents two new pointillist portrait paintings – based on photographs of Jimmy Governor (1875-1901), who was imprisoned in Darlinghurst gaol and hanged there in 1901.

Deaf people can write music, and performers dance in silence. The Sixth Sense is that of the mind – that of the imagination, a feeling beyond the physical but more to do with memory and creativity.

I was once told by an art historian how a particular artist 'suffered' from a synesthesia condition-response; a neurological phenomenon defined as a 'union of the senses'. The subject matter in the paintings of the late Emily Kame Kngwarreye in Aboriginal terms are sensed as song, dance movement, taste and scent rather than static visual images.

Nicole Foreshew's video also presents dancing. The artist extracted minerals from her land and dyed fabric that she shared with her mother and aunts. She invited them to perform for her camera, to move with the fabric, and dance freely – their graceful movements are free-flowing and unchoreographed. They dance, responding to the music of their imaginations and memories.

In Ivan Sen's bleak docodrama *Toomelah* (2011), the little Aboriginal boy and central character, Daniel, is never touched, hugged or embraced, either physically or more

importantly, emotionally. Touch can be both brutal or sensual, or as fleeting as light on your skin. Karla Dickens' found objects evoke physical interaction of the most intense and traumatic kind. *Clipped Wings* comprises a metal form in which people were hung from trees to be publicly humiliated, or worse, abandoned to be picked apart by birds. *Work horse II* comprises a horse's yoke; an orifice-form stuffed to bursting with sharp pointed stakes. It expresses the slavery of stolen generations of Aboriginal women trained and forced to work as domestic servants by day and as sexual slaves by night. The artwork was prompted by the recent sex murder of an Aboriginal woman of NSW's north coast, where Dickens lives and works. The murderers, who had confessed the crime, were on the verge of remaining uncharged and free, despite the overwhelming evidence against them.

For Aboriginal people the land is cleansed periodically through fire and water (flooding). In Willurai Kirkbright's performance, the artist works to cleanse herself (and all Aboriginal people) of the trauma of a violent colonial history overlaid with the imposition of the Christian belief system as she softly sings the hymn of slavery 'Amazing Grace'. Kirkbright performs at dusk in her womb-like bathtub on Cockatoo Island, itself child-like and adrift in the waters of Sydney Harbour at the junction of the Parramatta and Lane Cove Rivers.

Gabriella Mangano and Silvana Mangano present *Lux* (2014), a two-screen digital video featuring the artists performing in colour-saturated landscapes and contexts evocative of the intensity of a bushfire, in a quietly intense soundscape. In the filming of out-of-doors scenes, either documentary or drama, a sound recordist always documents 'atmos', the background sound of the location. Lux is a unit measurement of light intensity and reflection. As the silence of every place is unique – so too the light intensity and tone character that move through marked seasonal variations, creating affect that reflects your moods and emotions.

In the landscape you have a particular nuance or perspective on that landscape. The reality of the landscape is often less, not what it's presented as – in our new work we're colouring the landscape – masking the landscape. You know going into the country 'masks' you. You're a different person, you can sense something in a landscape, you metamorphose into something else.

- Gabriella Mangano (2014)

If a tree falls in forest and no one witnesses it, does it make a sound? In this European construction there are histories that are quiet, stories that are quiet. How far away can you be and still hear a leaf fall, the ticking of time, a heartbeat, a gunshot, a body fall? Is it the same for each ear? _People talk of acoustic shadows where you can be very close to a loud incident and yet hear nothing. Sound can't be heard in a vacuum. This can be a very convenient excuse for not registering massacres, murders and other acts of 'ethnic cleansing'. Until now our national history existed in a sound shadow where the cries and screams of thousands of unknown Aboriginal victims remained unheard. People can make themselves heard through many means.

A youth participating in the 2011 London riots said: *You only come to hear us now (after the riot)!* The Koori Mail, Australia's national Indigenous newspaper, reported the story of the gassing, assaults and abuse at the Don Dale Juvenile Correctional Centre in 2015, to no response, until the ABC television program Four Corners confronted the public with video images of the abuse almost a year later.

Fiona Foley presents a new installation *IOU* (2016), a response to an extended visit to the Pilbara region in north-western Australia. Foley visited the Burrup Peninsula as well as Millstream Chichester National Park, Weeli Wooli Creek and Newman and met Traditional Owners in each place. The Pilbara includes the 'written-inscribed' landscape of the disputed Burrup Peninsula, comprising over one million examples of Aboriginal rock art, with images dating back to over 18,000 years. This major new installation by Foley incorporates honey and ash, and is a 'memorandum of understanding' on what has been taken and owed to the Aboriginal people of this country.

Perfume, aroma, smell, stink. As a child, the most felt racist insult for me was 'you stink'. They didn't have to say 'because you're Aboriginal'. That was understood. It made me feel ugly and despised. There is no defence for such stigmatising remarks. In later life it still stung. In their own personal way, everybody smells – everybody stinks.

I once wrote of the work of Karla Dickens that memories flutter and bristle like coloured hair or strips of brightly dyed cloth in the breeze to catch your attention. They can evoke a Proustian response, where you're automatically moved to tears, or laugh out loud, and don't quite know why, by a sound, a word, a wind, heat or cold, or the scent of garlic, or a blossom. How beautiful and powerful are these moments, without even knowing the source of the emotional release. They lead us to search our minds for the small fragment of memory, time and event that stirred these strong feelings.

With 'Hongi', Maori people share air, breath of life, one's soul, and inadvertently smell. A bonding ritual of smoking marijuana is the 'shotgun' where both ends of the 'joint' are smoked at the same time to share the aroma, and people are face to face up close and personal. Smoking ceremonies are now a widespread, common pan-Aboriginal ritual for most public events. I've often found this as now almost impersonal and perfunctory. A just as important, but it would appear little known ritual in the south, is the rubbing of your sweat on the mouth, eyes, ears, face, limbs and body of another person, to make your smell their smell, to heal and protect. It was the smell of the land, and the smell of the people. It was the smell of the ancestors of that 'country' so they will recognise you. It is as intimate as kissing, or sex and, due to this nature, is little practiced in present day social exchanges. It's a very different sort of intimacy and still practiced seriously in a large number of Aboriginal groups.

The one thing we now know from scientific research is that what definitely repels sharks is the smell or stench of a dead shark. Many animals (dogs) mark their territory, their boundaries with their scent. Perfume trade chemists, or really magicians, are known as a 'Nose'. Archie Moore worked 'hand-in-hand' with the Brisbane based perfumer Jonathon Midgley of Damask Perfumery to achieve this amazing and intensely personal exhibition of mnemonic triggers. Archie Moore from Queensland presents *Les Eaux d'Amoore* (2014), an installation of aromatic portraits comprising custom-made perfume compounds in glass bottles. And so here with the work of Archie Moore, 'Un Certain T'y' (his father smelt of clay and burnt wood), 'Presage' (French for initiation for his first day at school, where he smelt wood pencils), 'Sapphistication' (smell of rum and Brut 33 from his auntie's lesbian friends), 'Investiture' (his first girlfriend wore Rose water and the commercial Elizabeth Arden fragrance Red Door), 'Amoore' (a self-portrait personified by chewing gum, chocolate and dried apricots), 'Wulu'

(Kamilaroi language for Wattle representing his 'country'), 'Bougres' (French for uncultured men found in a local country pub of stale beer and cigarettes).

The work is powerfully evocative on many levels, drawing on the artist's personal experiences growing up in Queensland. Scent evokes memory and gives form to realities upon which Australian mainstream culture is built, including racial prejudice. In an age in the west where we strive to be odourless, this essential mnemonic sense curiously, 'silently' persists. For this exhibition, Moore has added a new digital video *Les Eaux d'Amoore No 5* (2016) in which the artist ironically references Brad Pitt who advertises a well-known perfume. In Moore's version, the words are taken from speeches delivered by Pauline Hanson in her maiden speech to the House of Representative of Federal Parliament when she was elected in 1996.

Iranian born, Sydney-based artist Nasim Nasr comments upon both specific and universal cultural concerns in contemporary society. Her photography and video practice engage complex issues of state and self-censorship, the transience of cultural and personal identity, and global concerns of civil, social and political unrest. Her new photographic series *Forty Pages* (2016) contemplates personal identity in the context of movement from one culture to another, referring to the forty pages in the Iranian passport and the notebook in Iranian primary school known as 'forty pages'. Self-identification, or actualisation, is a sense we must constantly state and maintain, against the often Kafkaesque, indifference and insensitive 'official' stereotyping or prejudices that threaten to assimilate and obliterate us.

I was told that to communicate with the deaf one must be visible, be clear, concise and be patient. Skye Raabe's installation comprises two bodies of work produced in response to a residency in Darwin and the climatic-atmospheric sense of place she experienced there. When the monsoon storms impede and halt all daily activity, time stands still and we retreat into a womb-like, other space. Our senses are heightened, we lie low, try to stay safe, and hope to survive the incredibly powerful forces that swirl around us.

The voice you hear is not my speaking Voice – but my mind's voice

- Ada, The Piano, 1993.

Bitterness is an emotional state as well as a taste. Whilst pungent, the qualities of salt (as well as sugar) are pervasive through contemporary life. Destiny Deacon and Virginia Fraser's playful *Misdirection* (2014) had its genesis during a residency in Hallein, near the Austrian city of Salzburg. Hallein is renowned for its ancient salt mines, operational for over 7,000 years since Celtic times. Among picturesque Austrian alps, the artists sensed both beauty and an underlying current of restraint. Memories of the Nazi horrors were palpable, but reluctantly discussed.

Misdirection speaks of perverted cultural tradition and histories through dual representation of free-form singing – Maria Braun's traditional Austrian yodelling on one screen contrasted with the bitter-sweet country and western sounds of, a supposed cultural opposite in Australia – Talgum Edwards, an Aboriginal man of the Gunangara Gundidj people. He is, considered to be, distant, removed or diverse – yet he embodies the indefinable qualities of the sixth sense.

Djon Mundine OAM - 11 August 2016