

## Danie Mellor

born 1971

### *A Question of Being* 2020

synthetic polymer paint and oil on linen with gesso  
and iridescent wash  
156.0 x 113.5 cm  
signed, dated and inscribed verso: A question of being/  
Danie Mellor 2020

Danie Mellor is one of Australia's most esteemed contemporary artists, whose works activate historical intersections with Indigenous peoples through an iconographic lexicon that is erudite, complex and richly textured.

*A Question of Being* stems from Mellor's exposition of landscape as 'landspace': a reading of the canon as a layered field in which memory, Aboriginal ancestral presence and relationship with Country coexist with different historical narratives.

Photography in northern Queensland coincided with frontier expansion from 1859.<sup>2</sup> Frontiers are imagined spaces with invisible, shifting boundaries, and the medium was employed as a tool of settler power. In Mellor's recomposed images, past and present coalesce: works appear evidentiary, while quietly undoing colonial photography's truth-bearing claim. Sepia tonality, iridescent veils, and painted artefacts of time's ravages evoke blemished surfaces of historical photographic relics. Their authenticity is, however, illusory. What emerges is not archival power re-affirmed, but the archive unsettled: a narrative where colonial seeing is interrupted, ancestral presence returns, and history becomes multidimensional rather than fixed.<sup>3</sup>

Mellor's recent oeuvre is fittingly described as 'fugitive': 'Richly rendered ... but defying proscriptive readings, they pull at the loose threads of Queensland's colonial and Indigenous histories; messy, murky, murderous and magical.'<sup>4</sup>

*A Question of Being's* potency therein is revealed through three critical lenses: aesthetics, haunting as a decolonial register, and the disempowerment of the archive.

In philosophical terms, the proposition that 'aesthetics precedes ethics'<sup>5</sup> catalyses a decolonising force in the present work through luminosity and painterly instability, rather than didactic rhetoric. Its surface seduces, before complicating emotional responses with the recognition of colonial ethnographic framing of photography's 'truth'. *A Question of Being* thus operates allegorically. As Simon Schama posits, visual truth may be poetic rather than literal;<sup>6</sup> a work's aura and lyricism 'draws us in instead of setting us on our heels.'<sup>7</sup>

Through the second lens, haunting emerges as a decolonial register<sup>8</sup> wherein histories cannot be settled, archived or ignored. Here, haunting is not supernatural vestige, nor trauma to be resolved, but a persistent return that refuses settler desires for closure or reconciliation. *A Question of Being's* painterly character draws us into a spectral encounter. Like a ghost deprived of rest,<sup>9</sup> the photographed subject breaks through the conditions of ethnographic looking, no longer confined to the historical moment or purpose of his framing.

The third critical lens turns on Mellor's destabilisation of the archive. The uncertainty over the circumstances of the source

### PROVENANCE

Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne, 2020  
Private collection, Melbourne

### EXHIBITED

*Danie Mellor: The Sun Also Sets*, Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne,  
7 August - 5 September 2020

\$40,000 - \$60,000

photograph<sup>10</sup> sharpens *A Question of Being's* conceptual force. The scaled-up photograph is not evidence, having been transformed through painterly mediation. Mellor disempowers the archive without denying its historical charge. The figure is not subjugated, or typed as curiosity, but emerges as a dignified presence, standing tall before us (indeed, above), adorned with cultural authority and resistant to the ethnographic classificatory framing that once sought to contain him.

Mellor's standing was consolidated by his 2009 *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award* and the 2012 *National Indigenous Art Triennial*, NGA; *Sakahàn*, National Gallery of Canada, 2013; *Primordial: SuperNaturalBayiMinyjirral*, a solo exhibition at the National Museums of Scotland, 2014; the *Asia Pacific Triennial*, QAGOMA, 2015; and the Adelaide Biennial, 2016. He has been the subject of two major Australian solo exhibitions: *Exotic Lies Sacred Ties* (University of Queensland Art Museum, 2014); and QAGOMA's 2025 *marru | the unseen visible*. He is represented in major Australian and international collections, and has held leadership roles with the Australia Council, MCA Australia and Create NSW.

### FOOTNOTES

1. '... landspace activates ... understanding ... in relation to time ... simultaneity of past, present and future that is the foundation of 'everywhen' in Aboriginal cultures.' Mellor quoted in Smith, B., 'Danie Mellor on Creating "Landscape" with Painting and Photography', *Art Guide Australia*, 19 August 2020
2. Nampitjinpa Sambono, S., 'Themes in the exhibition', *Danie Mellor: marru | the unseen visible*, QAGOMA, March 2025, <https://collection.qagoma.qld.gov.au/index.php/page/mellor>: (accessed 30 June 2026)
3. Ray, R., 'In the Forest of the Living: Country, Memory and the Unseen in the Art of Danie Mellor', in QAGOMA, op. cit., accessed 30 June 2026, and Mellor, '... the colour and atmosphere of sepia imagery authenticates it chronologically and as an emotional space where memory can be almost dreamed about', in *Landscape and memory (in glades of dusk) II* 2023, in 'List of works', QAGOMA, op. cit. (accessed 30 June 2026)
4. McLean, B. J., 'Frontier Fluidity: The Colours of Danie Mellor's Country', in QAGOMA, op. cit.: (accessed 30 June 2026)
5. Ferrell, R., *Sacred Exchanges: Images in Global Context*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2012, pp. 2–3, arguing that images generate ethical and political consequence. Re Mellor, the luminous reworking of archival photographs changes the terms of encounter, transforming the archival subject into a presence that requires renewed ethical attention
6. Schama, S., *Landscape and Memory*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1995, p.11
7. Smythe, L., 'Danie Mellor: The Sun also Sets at Tolarno Galleries' (exhibition review), *Memo Review*, 5 September 2020
8. Hauntology: coined by Derrida as a pun on ontology – from what simply 'is' to what persists spectrally: unresolved pasts, returns, absences, historical debts and presences. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, Kamuf, P., (trans.), Routledge, New York, 1994, p. 10; re decolonisation, see Tuck, E. and Ree, C., 'A Glossary of Haunting', in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, Holman Jones, S., et al (eds), Left Coast Press, California, USA, 2013, pp. 642–650
9. Croft, B., 'Laying Ghosts to Rest', in *Portraits of Oceania* (catalogue), AGNSW, 1997, p. 9
10. Smythe, op. cit., notes Mellor attributed the source photograph to Walter Roth

### Jane Raffan

Jane Raffan is an accredited valuer under the Commonwealth Government's Cultural Gifts Program. Her arts consultancy encompasses curatorial services, collection management, and a broad range of humanities-based research and writing.

