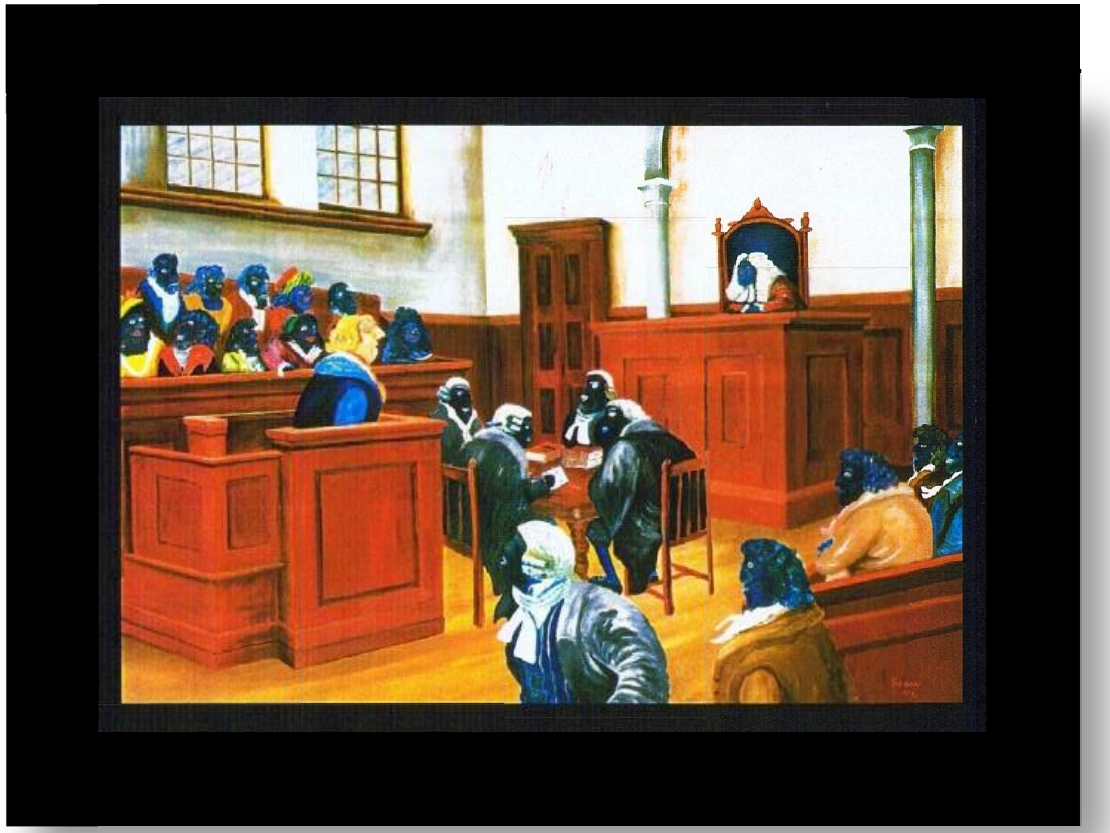

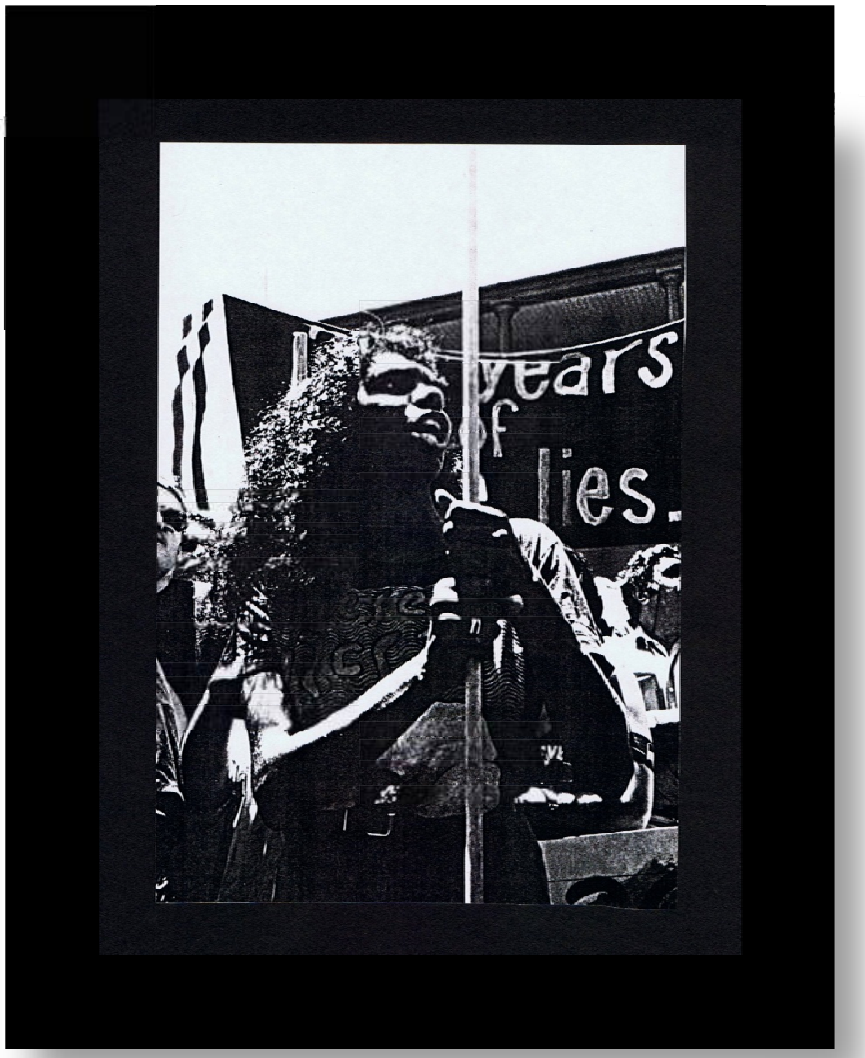
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Aboriginal Deaths in Custody - A History

through the paintings of Gordon Syron and the photographs of Elaine Pelot Kitchener

The works of Gordon Syron and Elaine Pelot Kitchener are personal expressions of support for the fight for Aboriginal rights. Brought together for this exhibition, they form a powerful statement of black and white communion against the inequities that have been the enduring focus of Aboriginal struggle. The problems Aboriginal people face today are not simple but the message these artists present is clear: these problems are not about race but about justice and equality.

Gordon Syron notes with irony that his Australian credentials are stronger than most: part white man, past racist, convict and Aborigine. Syron, the artist, paints to show the plight of Aboriginal people in an unjust society. Syron's career as an artist began in prison. He has observed and experienced society's injustices. During his trial, Syron's identity was brought into question as he witnessed the prosecution arguing with defence counsel about the integrity of his aboriginality.

From these experiences Syron painted the renown *Judgement by his Peers*, which holds a mirror up to a canon of British law and reveals in the process the inadequacy of the Australian judicial process for Aborigines, providing an insight to the issue of Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. In *Judgement by his Peers* Syron exposes the myth of the fairly weighted legal system. The image is purposefully didactic: the white man in the dock is portrayed staring wide-eyed in terror at the proceedings. As we scan the room we see the reasons for his concern: black prosecution and defence counsel are seated before him at the table crouched together in judicial collusion; the black jury, disinterested and bored, sit together behind him in a pack. The black judge and members of the public observe the proceedings unmoved. The reversal of power relations hints at the frustration and hopelessness felt by the defendant, completely alienated in the dock.

This method is also deployed in *Mabo*, which depicts the British colonisation of 1788 as an invasion. In this version, however, it is black men in British naval uniforms, carrying the

Aboriginal flag, who claim the territory, while a group of white "natives" look on. The image serves to highlight the fact that until recent times, white Australian history has denied the pre-existing rights of the Aboriginal inhabitants. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody made clear, amongst many of its recommendations, the need for Aboriginal land rights to be recognised in order to expedite a solution to the problem.

Syron makes this point by depicting the central figure as Eddy Mabo. The landmark Federal Mabo legislation on Aboriginal land rights takes the name of an elder who championed land rights in his region. It overturns the notion that Australia was a "terra nullius" (uninhabited land) before white colonisation and in so doing has opened opportunities for Aboriginal groups and individuals to re-claim their traditional lands.

Syron is no stranger to politics. His art has always reflected this. This is, perhaps, the reason why some public institutions have skirted his work since the early eighties. Its strong political statements make for powerful exhibition material but this factor is more often than not frightening to those who have to assess its collectability. Its value cannot be diminished because it is not easily labelled as recognisably Aboriginal. Commentator and sociologist, Dr Vivien Johnson, has credited Syron with being the first urban Aboriginal artist, saying that he should be recognised as the pioneer of a style of westernised, overtly political urban art. Artspace's *Koori Art '84* exhibition introduced the concept of urban Aboriginal art to the general public. Overtly political Koori art, like most political art, has had a more difficult journey to acceptance in the mainstream art world. Despite this, some Aboriginal artists, like Gordon Bennett and Richard Bell, have now been acclaimed for their "intellectual terrorism" and their works feature prominently in State art institutions.

Syron's *Pandora's Box* or *Gordian Knot* as it is otherwise known, is typical of his up-front political approach. Painted in direct response to the Bodkin report into corruption amongst Government-funded Aboriginal bureaucracies, Syron depicts the report as the explosive opening of Pandora's box. The early Christian church used the pagan story of Pandora as a counterpart to the story of Eve and the fall of Man: the opening of Pandora's box caused all the ills of the world to be released, with hope alone remaining inside. Syron's painting connotes the explosive political and social consequences of the Bodkin investigations for

black and white bureaucracies. He is critical of both. 'Pandora's Box' points at the corruption rife in each and highlights the symbiosis as a contributing factor in black deaths.

Syron is also able to bring to life the spiritual torment felt by many of today's Aboriginal people. His 'Bury the living' is a soulful representation of the helplessness felt by prison inmates. This image, drawn from Syron's personal experiences, depicts a burial witnessed through the bars of a prison cell. The burial is in itself a metaphor for imprisonment: the viewer of this work, as the transposed inmate, silently witnesses their own interment.

Of the remainder of Syron's works in this exhibition, the major series on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody tell the stories of ten of the forty or so individuals who have died in custody between 1980 and 1994. The recommendations of the NSW Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody canvass many of the issues that are highlighted in Syron's works, outlining areas of reform within the legal system, the administration of social support mechanisms, family and community links, land rights, the media and government agencies.

Syron's paintings of this series are heartfelt narratives of loss, frustration, loneliness and despair. They recount the cycle of circumstances into which each victim fell: displacement, loneliness, drugs and alcohol abuse, wrongful convictions for misdemeanours, non payment of fines and ultimately, custodial sentences. His retelling of these stories on canvas are simultaneous, multiple narratives of each person's lives: the picture plane in each work is divided into small vignettes with a central portrait or narrative, while the borders of each work are framed by a repeated image central to the deceased's story. The circularity of this device serves to reinforce the notion of the cycle of despair in each story.

Constant among the iconography of Syron's Aboriginal Deaths in Custody series are the simple white crosses which detail the names and life dates of the deceased. These white crosses can also be seen in several of Kitchener's photographs, borne aloft in the parades of protesters against Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. Repeated in combination, on canvas and in photographs, they form a powerful and lasting image of innocence and tragedy, reminiscent of the images of the graveyards of war dead, with their hundreds of rows after rows of uniform white crosses.

Kitchener's documentary photographs date from the late seventies and coincide with the mobilisation amongst Aboriginal communities of resistance activities aimed at promoting Aboriginal rights. Marches, meetings, pickets, personalities and cultural expressions of resistance are broadly documented. Her photographs deliver a condemnation of Aboriginal Deaths in Custody by both Aboriginal and non Aboriginal Australians and, together with Syron's paintings, form an incisive portrayal of black and white protest.

Documentary photography has always been embroiled in debate. In the context of the photographic recording of Aboriginal events, the debate has focused on the photographer's ethnicity. Some Aboriginal people have been recorded saying that they feel angry when they see non-Aboriginal people documenting Aboriginal happenings. This attitude fails to recognise the history of white cooperative involvement that extends to the early days of the mobilisation of Aboriginal resistance, when there were no Aboriginal photographers on hand to record this hugely seminal period of Aboriginal heritage.

In an examination of the history of documentary photography of Aboriginality in New South Wales, Kitchener's energy, drive and wealth of images stand outside the mainstream. Her archive is remarkable not only for its breadth of coverage but also for its lack of sentimental indulgence, a practice popular with many early photographers of Aboriginal subjects. Her works may nonetheless be regarded as evincing a strong humanist emotion, with the majority of them presenting a strong challenge to the prevailing stereotypes of Aboriginal people.

Amongst the many positive images in this exhibition, Kitchener presents us with portraits of Aboriginal legal practitioners such as Lorraine Liddle, Pat O'Shane and Bob Bellear; community activists such as Mum Shirl, Maureen Watson, Isabel and Paul Coe; families and Aboriginal people with everyday jobs behind desks, such as the staff of the Aboriginal Legal and Medical Services and Gullama. Many of the works focus on the proponents of Aboriginal politics through cultural pursuits, such as actors Lillian Crombie and Lewis Lampton, members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Dance Theatre and Bangarra Dance Theatre Australia. Her photographs of protest are powerful, defiant and direct.

Kitchener's philosophy and practice share particular issues of concern with Aboriginal documentary photographers, although this factor is rarely highlighted by critics and curators.

It seems that in today's political climate, even non-Aboriginal writers and curators are unwilling to acknowledge that there have been, and still are, many white photographers who are actively involved in the endeavour of Aboriginal communities and their struggle for rights. As has been observed by a more astute curator, Catherine de Lorenzo, Kitchener was one of a few white photographers who actually pioneered new imagery in the 1970s and who "shared a deliberate political strategy to show the energy and determination of individuals and communities fighting for the rights of their peoples...".

A curious side effect of this trend can be seen in the Queensland Art Gallery's latest catalogue of their photographic collection. Kitchener, who is represented in their collection by her 1981 depiction of an 'Urban Corroboree' is referred to thus: "Political expression through documentary photography has continued into the 1990s, some of the most potent work being produced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists such as Elaine Pelot Kitchener and Ricky Maynard". This glaring error on the part of the curator, and by extension, the institution, is even more astounding given the current debate about white documentation of Aboriginal happenings. This example is not the first time that Kitchener's photographs have been used to strengthen arguments of Aboriginal self determination. It is a tribute to her that as a non Aboriginal photographer Kitchener was able to produce such a potent image of Aboriginal cultural determination.

It makes no sense, and in the long run is potentially more damaging to pretend that the black struggle was born of, or is propelled by, a wholly separatist vision. White policy makers have been guilty for two hundred years of promoting fictitious accounts of history, but assuaging this guilt by wiping out all white involvement in Aboriginal processes of self determination is not a valid or constructive form of redress. To quote de Lorenzo again, what should be made apparent, is the recognition that now, "...with able photographers on both sides, the climate is ripe for a new era of challenging imagery that addresses changing black and white relations developing [with] respect for cultural difference". It is within such a climate that Kitchener and Syron have combined forces to present their history of support for Aboriginal rights in this present exhibition.

Jane Raffan
1996

THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD
FRIDAY, OCTOBER 4, 1996

GALLERIES

BRUCE JAMES

CLOSING today at NSW Parliament House is an exhibition on Aboriginal deaths in custody curated by Jane Raffin and examined through the photographs of Elaine Pelot Kitchener and the paintings of Gordon Syron. Dispassionate and professional, Kitchener's works are portraits of a minority population engaged in a righteous struggle for judicial equality. Syron's are gasps of air from an individual on intimate terms with the rope. His are political outpourings in keeping with the urban Koorie art of which he is a pioneer. Yet they aren't sentimental or propagandistic – qualities reserved for a state image of the Queen nearby. Her Majesty's yellow-green iceberg of a dress invades the show.

Syron is a match for it. His clarity and briskness of attack and humanist imperative underpinning every brushstroke result in narratives of exceptional force. The names of Nita Blankett, Misel Waigana, Jimmy Njanjii, Maxwell Saunders and others are commemorated in pictorial epitaphs with a bitter edge. His figurative style has the candour and vitality of graffiti, often crude, occasionally clumsy.

An early work, *Judgement by His Peers* (1978), was painted during a life sentence in jail. Showing the accused as a lone white figure amid an all-black jury and judiciary, it has the same claustrophobia and craziness as Nolan's version of Ned Kelly's trial.