

Jon Rhodes: Cage of Ghosts

Opening remarks by Professor Howard Morphy, Director of the Research School of Humanities, Australian National University at the opening of the exhibition at the National Library of Australia on Wednesday 26 September 2007.

It is difficult to imagine an exhibition in which an Indigenous welcome is more necessary than this, as Jon Rhodes photographs take us into the Aboriginal landscape of New South Wales. Indeed as Matilda House noted, when welcoming us to Ngambri country, we see in several of the panels the heritage of her own people in the forms of some of the surviving Indigenously scarred trees of the ACT.

The opening of an exhibition is an exciting occasion. One that generates enthusiasm, feelings of warmth, an atmosphere of celebration and an appreciation of human creativity. But it is seldom the best time to view the works. One of the great advantages of opening an exhibition is that it gives you the excuse; indeed it almost demands that you view the exhibition before it opens. And I had the great privilege yesterday morning of walking around this exhibition with the artist and photographer Jon Rhodes. Walking around the exhibition and walking into the photographs, because each set provides a means of entering into a place.

This is an exhibition that demands that the visitor spend a long time looking at the sets of images, and moving between them and the text. It is an exhibition of immense richness. But it is also an exhibition that can delight the eye and have an immediate impact through the strengths of the individual images and by the way they work together. And they work in quite different ways.

In some cases the sets of photographs in combination appear to create a single abstract image. In panel 9 *War Memorials* we see the scarred and canoe trees of Wanniasa standing in front of us, alternating with a line of concrete sculptures on ANZAC parade - almost as a set of soldiers ready for inspection. The panel comprises 12 photographs but from a distance we see it as an integrated whole; an aesthetically powerful reminder of the Memorial that isn't there — to the Aboriginal people who died defending their own countries.

In other cases we are taken on a journey into a place, we can follow the sequence of images leading us on, taking us closer, to the carved tree or the engraving — weathered with age and almost lost in the darkness of the rock shelter. You will be able to travel in different directions, adopt different view points, but will also always be able to connect one image to the next by a reference point that recurs or shapes that echo across the frames. You can make those connections intellectually, but, if not, they will be subjectively present.

In panel 11 *The Boorolong Carved Trees* we find the trees in residence in the Armidale Folk Museum. We see in nearly every frame the strong image of a painting of a giant goanna hanging on the wall; an image that dominates as we enter the Folk Museum. But then our attention is drawn to a series of photos that enable us to look into one corner of the room. There a carved tree stands upright beside the door, in one - two - three images and then is suddenly no more. A soldier in full military gear standing to attention by the very same door replaces it. The Armidale Folk Museum's Exhibition has changed — the carved trees once from Boorolong have again been removed from view.

And of course that sequence is a microcosm of two of the main themes that dominate the exhibition, the sacred and scarred remains of Aboriginal Australia, as ghosts of

times past, and their subsequent incarceration as they become part of the national heritage.

And image after image reflects on this theme. We can see the carved trees of Collymongle imprisoned for their own protection — yet not sufficiently protected that some could not be stolen (Panel 22). We see others from the same set removed long ago from their original location to a museum store to become *Cherished Museum Exhibits*, apparently restrained in straight jackets so that they cannot run away (Panel 23). We are taken to the *Cage of Ghosts* of the Djabwurrung at Mount Stapylton in Victoria where ‘the sculpted ‘super-grille’ dominates the mouth of the cave’ (Panel 15), And later we visit a cave at Glenbrook in Gundungurra country in New South Wales where in Jon’s words the painted red hand in its perspex cage ‘has become impenetrable to vandals and viewers alike’ (Panel 29).

And ghosts are present everywhere: in the faded image of thylacine, *The Last Tasmanian Tiger*, recorded by an archaeologist in the recent past, but today a trace of red ochre, hard to decipher, incorporated into the rock surface (Panel 20). In the *Foyer Bora* (Panel 13) at Toomelah School in Gamilaraay country, reversing time, the Indigenous children of today seem almost to disappear as they rush past the solid carved memorial trees made by their ancestors in the past. And at Molong a place of the Wiradjuri people and the gravesite of Thomas Mitchell’s *Most Useful Native*, Yuranigh, we can see today only a hint of the designs carved into the body of the trees (Panel 5). They are still there but masked by the bark that has regrown around them.

And yet the genius of this exhibition is that it moves our thoughts in many different directions, positive as well as negative, and though full of opinions strongly expressed in word and image, it is fundamentally non-judgemental. The sites of Aboriginal presence in the landscape are imprisoned by the need to protect them and

yet they are strong markers of the Indigenous mapping of the land; and Jon's photographs convey their aesthetic power and a sense of the spirituality that underlies the land. And although we can see the ghostly images of cars wiping out the middle portion of the scarred trees of Wanniasa, we can also see the trees remaining firm in the transient presence of the motor cars (Plate 25). At the exhibition's end we can imagine the presence of the designs 'belonging to country' underlying the bark of every tree, part of its core identity, an identity that connects landscape to people. And we are beginning to see the landscape in an Indigenous way, yet, at the same time, in a way that should resonate with the present concerns to all Australians.

This is an exhibition by an artist at the height of his career, taking on new directions, using the full potential of the camera as an instrument of the creative imagination. Yet it is also an exhibition that challenges established genres, that transcends the artificial divisions between abstraction and representation, crosses the boundaries between still and moving images, gives clear messages — but many of them — and leaves open enormous room for interpretation. It is an exemplar as far as I am concerned of how to bridge the artificial gap between research and creative practice. It has been an honour to open this exhibition.