

arena ←
MAGAZINE

THE AUSTRALIAN MAGAZINE OF LEFT POLITICAL,
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL COMMENTARY

seven
dollars
seventy
inc gst

№ 132

10-11 2014

Epidemic Ebola

Stephen Cordner

War Preparations

Paul Barratt

Thomas Piketty

Chris Gregory

Tagore's Piano

Barry Hill

Gordon Bennett, Militarised police, Labor and the unions, Poetry, GFC art

The Art of Gordon Bennett

Bob Lingard

.....

Art that challenges the 'post' in 'post-colonial'

Gordon Bennett's art career began in 1988—a most propitious moment for its reception, given his political interests: the bicentenary and attempts to proffer revisionist histories of Australia's colonial past. Having worked as a fitter and turner and a Telecom linesman, he entered the Queensland College of Art at Griffith University in 1986 as a thirty-year-old. He achieved great success and critical acclaim from very early in his career, for example, being included in *Perspecta* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1989 and the Ninth Biennale of Sydney: *The Boundary Rider* in 1992, winning the prestigious Moët & Chandon Australian Art Fellowship in 1991, and having a survey show at Ikon Gallery in Birmingham in 1999–2000. Ian McLean's monograph *The Art of Gordon Bennett* was published in 1996, which indicates the rapid establishment of Bennett's reputation. This monograph also includes Bennett's own *Manifest Toe*, where he commented on his late awareness of his Aboriginal heritage and its significance to his work in the following way: 'It is the collapse of the conceptual gap between the binary opposites of self/other, civilized/savage, sophisticated/primitive, or perhaps more appropriately its gradual disintegration and my process of integration that forms the substratum of my life and work'. In the naming of his *Manifest Toe*, Bennett was critiquing former Queensland Premier Bjelke-Petersen's acerbic observation that, for many people in high places, 'if an Aboriginal came along and held up his toe, they'd lick it'!

His early success was also recognised in the use of his 1990 painting *The Nine Ricochets (Fall Down Black Fella, Jump Up White Fella)* on the back cover of the 1991 version of Bernard Smith's classic *Australian Painting, 1788–1990*, with new updating chapters by Terry Smith. This was an extraordinary acknowledgement of an artist only two years out of art school. Terry Smith also wrote the catalogue essay for the Ikon exhibition. Bennett's quick success was also indicative of the symbiosis between his work and the zeitgeist. Today, we see that Bennett's art—the paintings, the prints, the drawings, the installations and the performance videos—stands collectively as a great contribution to Australian art. His critical and exhibition success continued on both the national and international stages until his death on 3 June this year.

His challenging and often confronting 'history paintings' reinterpreted Australia's colonial past and demonstrated unequivocally that 'post-colonialism' remained an aspiration in Australian life. In historian Eric Hobsbawm's terms, much of his art was a 'protest against forgetting'. After September 11, his work confronted global challenges—his *September 11* and *Notes to Basquiat* prints and paintings were manifestations of this global turn. His growing and consolidating international reputation was evident in his inclusion in significant exhibitions such as *Documenta 13* in Kassel, Germany, in 2012 and in the Eighth Berlin Biennale this year. Thirty of Bennett's notepad drawings from 1995 were included in the Biennale, an indication of how accomplished his practice was right from graduation. Currently his work is displayed in *An Appetite for Painting* at the National Museum of Oslo, where it sits alongside the work of internationally recognised artists such as Chris Ofili and Marlene Dumas.

Bennett's oeuvre, while politically and cognitively challenging, was also aesthetically and formally very sophisticated. His art often appropriated iconic works from art history, Australian and interna-

tional. There were references to Piet Mondrian, Jackson Pollock, Colin McCahon, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Australian artists Margaret Preston, Robert MacPherson and Imants Tillers, amongst others. There was also a recontextualising of common historical, colonial images from Australian history, especially from social-studies textbooks from his youth. With the painting *Possession Island* (1991), there was a reworking of a school-textbook representation of European colonisation of Australia, shrouded by Pollock-like drips on the canvas and representing ironically an Aboriginal welcome to invasion! His work was thus in tune with postmodern appropriation but worked against it in its use of appropriation for political purposes and challenges. Some of his paintings were screened by dots, central to both Aboriginal Western Desert painting and also the mechanical reproduction of images. Text, including racist epithets, was often used. His art was of its time but distinctive in its political and aesthetic sensibilities.

Bennett 'discovered' his 'Aboriginality' as an adult, and identity issues set against post-colonial politics informed his art. This is evident in his 1994 painting *The Recentred Self*, a very clever appropriation of Imants Tillers' painting *The Decentred Self* (1985). Bennett's appropriation had red welts on the black surface of the canvas that were also used in a series of works such as *Self-Portrait Interior/Exterior* (1993) and were central to some of his confronting and scarifying performances, including *Performance with Object for the Expiation of Guilt: Violence and Grief Remix* (1996), where he flourished a cattle whip, calling out racist words.

His work was set against the so-called culture wars and debates between 'black-armband' and 'white-blindfold' narratives of Australia's histories. Bennett's biography, his work and the times coalesced in the classic way that certain ideas arise in particular social contexts. More broadly, his work challenged the supposed rationalities underpinning Western epistemologies and ontologies and demonstrated their colonising and legitimating roles in Australia's egregious settler-colonial history. This Western epistemological exclusion of Aboriginal world views is represented in many of his earlier works through geometric shapes being placed across images of colonisation. His broader post-colonial challenge is evident in a range of work, for example *Triptych: Requiem, of Grandeur, Empire* (1989), in the collection of the Queensland Art Gallery, which represents rationalist epistemologies and layers certain geometries and a Western gaze over colonial histories of various kinds. His

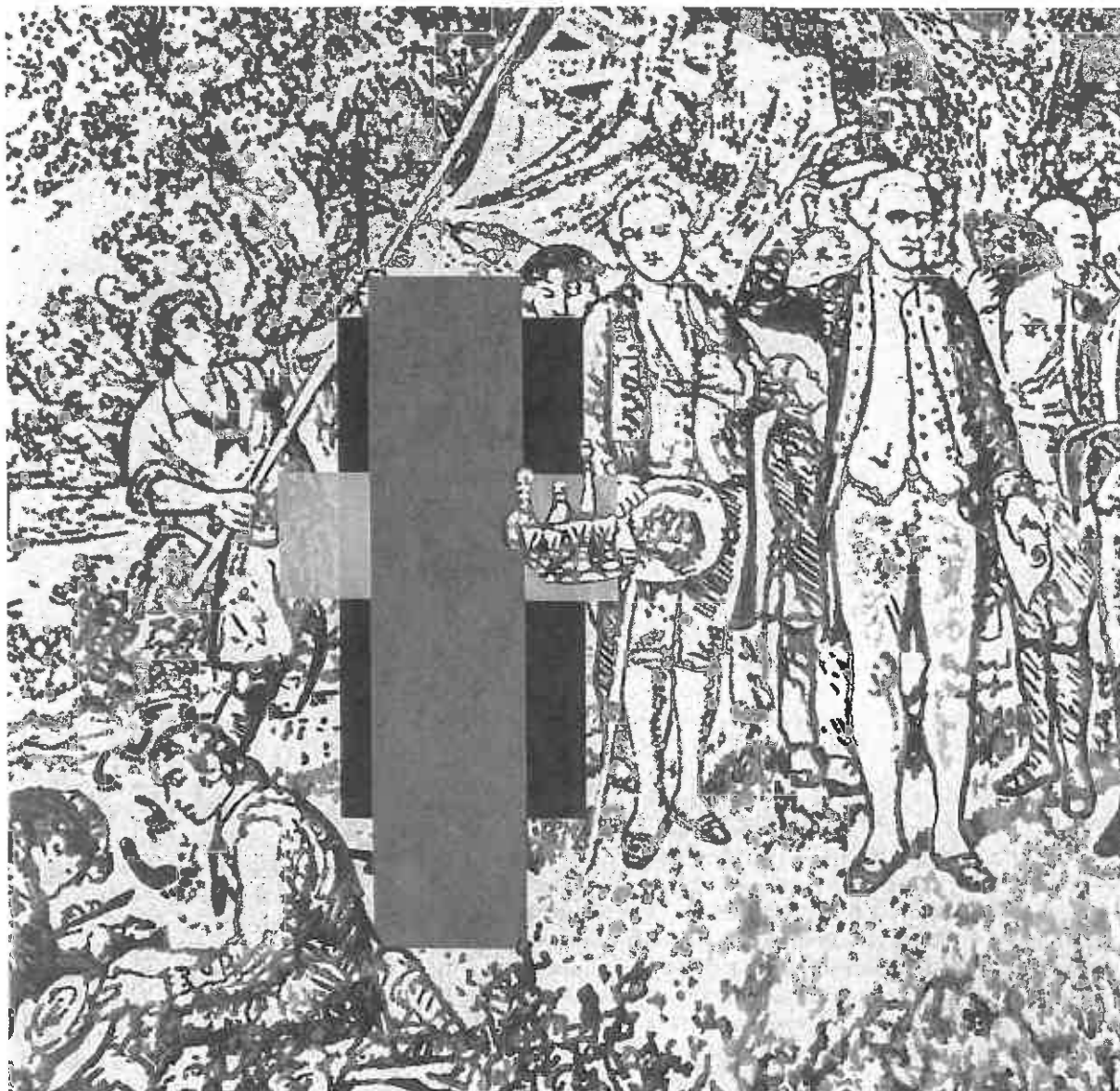
ARTS AND CULTURE

←←

the Art of Gordon
Bennett

by Bob Lingard

Bob Lingard is a
Professorial
Research Fellow in
the School of
Education at the
University of
Queensland. He
wrote the first
published paper on
Bennett's work, 'A
Kind of History
Painting', in 1989.



Possession Island 2 (n.d.), acrylic on canvas, 185 x 185 cm

art challenged the implicit teleology and destructive constructions of progress in Western epistemologies. In this way, his work was an important visual component of the broader interrogation of the Western canon and related critiques of the multiple modes of colonisation, yet in an archetypically post-colonial way he used this canon and these epistemologies against themselves.

All of Bennett's work saw the 'post' in post-colonial as a chimera. At the same time, as critic Ian McLean has persuasively argued, Bennett is Australia's first post-colonial artist. Post-colonial writers such as geographer Derek Gregory and theorist Ellie Shohat have written at some length about the meaning of the precocious and ambivalent prefix 'post' when attached to 'colonial'. Even whether to use the hyphen or not is indicative of the somewhat attenuated relationship between the two terms, which might be usefully seen as the projects of each other. Does 'post' here mean after, building out of, in tension with, an aspiration or indeed all of these? The post-colonial writer Robert Young has argued

that aspiration is the most apposite meaning here, particularly given the ongoing struggles by developing nations for authentic independence and the Sisyphean struggles of Indigenous peoples around the globe for first-world living standards, life expectancies, epistemological inclusion and so on.

It is the meaning of the precocious prefix 'post' that Gordon Bennett's art works with, plays on and represents. This is the power of the work. Initially, this significant oeuvre was situated in a critical representation of the 'colonial present' of Australia, set against a critical deconstruction of the nation's ignominious colonial history. He saw his work as history paintings. Following September 11, his gaze and work turned to the post-colonial on a global stage in recognition of the inter-connected and digitised global world in which we now live. In this way Bennett's oeuvre acknowledged the topological imbrications of the national and the global: there is no Australian art today outside of global effects. His work early on



Notes to Basquiat (*Death of Irony*) (2003), acrylic on canvas, 2 parts, 150 x 150 cm each

recognised that the post-colonial struggle is a global one and that today we live in new geometries of power and politics.

Bennett acknowledged both his Aboriginality and his Anglo-Celtic heritage. As with many post-colonial theorists, displacement was a central contributing element to his identity and his work. He was sensitive to cultural hybridity and creolisation but understood implicitly that hybridities are constituted through unequal power relations. There is acknowledgement in his artwork and writing of Homi Bhabha's notion of 'in-betweenness': we are not simply this or that identity but this *and* that—and, importantly, in-between this and that.

Bennett's preferred self-representation was as an artist rather than as an Aboriginal artist or indeed a post-colonial artist. Here he was concerned with what has been called the 'burden of representation' in terms of his categorisation as an Aboriginal artist and all that means. I heard him say on a number of occasions, quite ironically, that he was a 'suburban Aboriginal painter'. He was also mindful of his success and its relationship to the renaissance of Aboriginal art in Australia from the 1970s, which gathered space in the 1980s. Bennett interrogated the burden of representation. He was thus wary of his work always being hung in the Aboriginal collections in our major galleries, say in Yiribana at the Art Gallery of New South Wales rather than in the contemporary Australian art section. He understood the complexities here and was ambivalent about them. He was wary of a curatorial practice that divided works solely according to identity, but he also understood how curatorial practices articulated and constituted art history. He actually refused permission for the National Gallery of Australia to hang his work in its Aboriginal gallery. For the 2008 Sydney Biennale, *Revolution: Forms that Turn*, Bennett proffered a proposal to reposition works from Yiribana in the Colonial Gallery on the ground floor near the entrance and to relocate the colonial paintings held there to Yiribana. All relocated works were to be hung upside down. The proposal intended to disrupt the separations and established curatorial order at the gallery. It was rejected.

Paradoxically, Bennett's important 1993 painting *Myth of the*

Western Man (White Man's Burden) was displayed in the main hallway with contemporary Australian art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales after his death: a border crossing and a hang he would have been very pleased with. This work was originally included in the Yiribana collection at the gallery and indeed it was included in the original Yiribana catalogue. *Myth of Western Man* plays off Pollock's drip paintings, particularly *Blue Poles* in the National Gallery of Australia. And, of course, Pollock appropriated this approach from Native American ground painting. Bennett's painting also includes dates of major historical massacres of Aboriginal Australians. Clinging to a pole in the centre of the painting is a 'pioneer', appropriated from a social-studies textbook representation of the explorers Burke and Wills. This is a powerful history painting, an important post-colonial artwork.

Ian McLean in his obituary for Gordon Bennett suggested that he was one of Australia's great painters, achieving things no others had in demonstrating how post-colonial art could be made in this country. I concur fully with this assessment. McLean notes how Bennett's work forced a revisionist account of our colonial history into our consciousness. In my view, it also speaks to post-colonial aspirations globally and as such continues to participate in that global conversation. Recent international recognition acknowledges that achievement. While Gordon Bennett's work was very much of its time, it will endure. This is so because of its visual language, which is being furthered by contemporary artists such as Daniel Boyd. It is so because of the works' concern with the deep existential aspirations of most human beings for a genuinely post-colonial world, but one built upon protest against anodyne representations of our collective pasts. **a**