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Vivid Memories: A History of Aboriginal Art. Musée d'Aquitaine, Bordeaux, February 2014

Exhibition Review

Mémoires vives: une histoire de l'art aborigène. Musée d'Aquitaine, Bordeaux, February 2014

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Vivid memories of Bordeaux

- 1 The following response to the exhibition *Mémoires vives: une histoire de l'art aborigène*, some time after its closure, writes through memory and photographs of the exhibition, and the catalogue. The lived experience of the exhibition is supplemented by slow thinking, away from the museum and far from the origins of the artworks. My work is framed within Australian Studies and uses methods of ficto-critical writing and ego-histoire to write through the body in response to Australian Aboriginal art displayed in Europe, away from home and out of country.¹ In this review I think about the themes of juxtaposition and intercultural connections proposed by the exhibition in Bordeaux.
- 2 The Musée d'Aquitaine was founded on the disciplines of archaeology, history and ethnography, in the former University of Bordeaux Faculty of Science and Letters, once home to the 'father of sociology', Émile Durkheim. Within this setting of cultural exchange and intellectual enquiry curator Arnaud Morvan, Anthropologist, Laboratoire d'Anthropologie sociale (Paris), with co-curator Paul Matharan, Curator of Non-European Collections (Musée d'Aquitaine), introduced visitors to a history of Australian Aboriginal art in the exhibition *Mémoires vives: une histoire de l'art aborigène* (October 2013-March 2014).²
- 3 The exhibition introduced a history of Aboriginal art from pre-British colonisation to current day. It showed an artworld that blends innovation with continuity while

adapting technologies to express the variety of worldviews of artists from many Aboriginal nations. The curators proposed a history of art through exhibiting connections between artworks across time, and beyond national and international boundaries. Through the selection and display of *Mémoires vives* Australian Aboriginal art was presented as a 'fully contemporary practice mixing both ancient and modern components in dynamic ways' (Morvan 2013: 229). The strategy of juxtaposition was employed to examine issues that have continued to arise when looking at Indigenous art about authenticity, and notions of ancient and modern.

Wooden object with photograph



Left: Artist unknown, Spear thrower. Right: Tony Albert, *No Place 2* (2009). Installation photo of *Mémoires vives*, Musée d'Aquitaine, Bordeaux

Photo by Helen Idle

Who is looking at who?

- 4 The entrance to the exhibition featured Tony Albert's photo-portrait (*No Place 2*, 2009) and a spear thrower to introduce the visitor to Aboriginal art. The photograph shows someone in a Mexican *lucha libre* wrestler's mask decorated with a red spiral line that spins clockwise outwards until the face area is covered. This, a visitor may assume, is the first portrait of an Aboriginal person in the exhibition; masked, unrecognizable – who is he or she? A similar height spear thrower with the same spiral pattern painted one above the other is next to the photograph. Albert dressed his relatives as *luchadores* with masks he had brought home from Mexico to make the *No Place* series of photographs in his hometown of Cardwell in far north Queensland (McLean 2010). This playful positioning of two works invited me to think about the fluidity of identity, and challenged fixed ideas about how we construct our own identities and make assumptions about others. Looking through the mask and the pattern from Mexico to Australia, in Bordeaux, connects the artists, the work and the viewers in an intercultural exchange.
- 5 The *longue durée* of Aboriginal art was explained visually by linking the spiral marks on the spear thrower with those on the mask, and time collapsed. This sense of

contemporaneity was dominant throughout *Mémoires vives: une histoire de l'art aborigène*. A later part of the exhibition further displayed the vibrant circulation and exchange of visual languages both within Australia and beyond its physical borders, before and since colonisation by the British in 1788. Links were made between France, Germany and Aboriginal Australia through the placement of the painting *Luku* (footprint), by Ramingining (Northern Territory) artist elder David Malangi, alongside a print *Handprint from Charlotte Wolff* (Marcel Duchamp) by German artist Hans-Peter Feldmann. Through the representations of a human foot and human hand, recognisable beyond national and cultural boundaries, we were put in relation to each other. The handprint of Duchamp, the artist who broke with the western artworld to privilege ideas over art conventions, reminded the viewers that there are many art histories, of which Aboriginal art is one.

Two images side by side



Far Left: part view of Reko Rennie, *Black Magic* (2011). Left: Hans-Peter Feldmann *Handprint from Charlotte Wolff* (Marcel Duchamp) and Right: David Malangi's *Luku* (footprint) (1995). Installation photo of *Mémoires vives*, Musée d'Aquitaine, Bordeaux. February 2014

Photo by Helen Idle

- 6 The proximity of objects and artworks continued through the following rooms: photographs of rock art and graffiti; video, photography, and song; a huge blow-up plastic clown. Works from Arnhem Land, Central and Western Desert, the Kimberley, and Australian cities were represented in rarrk on bark, acrylic and ochre on canvas – each major genre was covered to show the diversity of Aboriginal art.

Juxtaposition

- 7 The artist-intervention in the museum by Brook Andrew challenged notions of time and history through collocation of materials from the museum collection and archives: photographs, marble busts, glass hand-axes, illustrated comic books and, what I interpreted as an art-history object, a Duchamp-a-like ready-made *portes-bouteilles* (*Sechoirs a bouteilles* (Bottle Drier) 1914/64) were displayed in glass vitrines in the entrance

to the museum and part way through the exhibition. The unexpected juxtaposition of objects in *Trophés oubliés* exposed the artifice of traditional museum narratives, and displayed multiple temporalities and realities in one transparent space.

Trophés oubliés



Installation photo of Brook Andrew, *Trophés oubliés* in Musée d'Aquitaine Bordeaux. February 2014

Photo by Helen Idle

- 8 Andrew placed objects from different cultures in proximity to each other and we were encouraged to 'see something that allows us to think for ourselves and not be told how to think' (Morvan 2013: 246). *Trophés oubliés* invited the visitor to think more carefully about narratives of race, history, memory, and power. The comic book, *Les Passagers Du Vent 3: Le comptoir du Juda* by François Bourgeon, from a series about the 18th century Atlantic slave trade, is placed beside the upper part of a skull on the shelf above the representations of women. I connected Andrew's display to the role of Bordeaux in the slave trade, narrated through objects in the permanent collection upstairs.

Personal connections

- 9 What is missing in my review is any mention of beautiful artworks that thrilled the eye and soul, and were brought together to show the depth of Aboriginal art histories. Rather I have selected three displays that showed the complexity of the exhibition. My personal experience can be read in the photograph above where I am slightly reflected in the glass, taking the photograph, and so I am implicated in the display as an uncanny object; as a settler-colonial observer juxtaposed with museum objects I extend the intercultural connection from Africa and Europe to Australia, and then through the skull to connect all of humanity.

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NOTES

1. I refer to Rose's definition of country: '... country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life.' (Rose 1996: 7)

2. Hereafter referred to as *Mémoires vives*.

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