



AUSTRALIAN PREMIERE
EXCLUSIVE TO ADELAIDE

Adelaide Bank 2004 Festival of Arts
ADELAIDE FESTIVAL

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Holy, Holy, Holy

Flinders University City Gallery at the State Library of South Australia, North Terrace, Adelaide

Holy, Holy, Holy, an exhibition at the **Flinders University City Gallery** as part of the **Adelaide Bank 2004 Festival of Arts**, will explore the enduring influence of Christianity on Aboriginal people through an exhibition and a publication.

In this project thirteen contemporary artists explore the interaction between Christianity and Aboriginal culture.

The highly regarded artists exhibiting in this project are: Ian W Abdulla (SA), James Cochran (SA), Nici Cumpston (SA), Julie Dowling (WA), Christine McCormack (SA), Trevor Nickolls (SA), Michael Riley (NSW), Darren Siwes (SA), Linda Syddick (SA), Irene Entata (NT), Alan Tucker (SA), Harry Wedge (NSW) and Jarinyanu David Downs.

The new contemporary works in the exhibition are set against items in key historical collections in SA such as the Lutheran Archives, the Albrecht-Burns Collection at the SA Museum and the major Indigenous collection at Flinders University Art Museum, drawing out some of the themes in the contemporary works.

The first sustained contact Aboriginal people had with white people was with missionaries. Often from Europe and from a variety of religions, crusading missionaries, such as Teichelmann, Schurmann, Meyer and Wilhelmi immersed themselves in the languages, customs and beliefs of Aboriginal people. The missionaries ventured into the 'wilderness' to convert Aboriginal people from what they regarded as their heathen, primitive state to the way of the Lord. In retrospect, there is no doubt that such activities were part of the colonising process of dispossession. And it's not surprising to find Christianity cast in this light in much recent Aboriginal art such as in the powerful work of Michael Riley. Sometimes, as in the case of Linda Syddick, artists have been able to combine Christianity and Aboriginal spirituality into a unique worldview. In many cases missionaries had a genuine feeling of care for Aboriginal communities, at a time when there was very little sympathetic support for them in other areas of white society. Historically missions provided something of a refuge as tribal lands were claimed for the pastoral industry - not to mention offering educational opportunities, health care and so on. It was in this atmosphere that artists such as Namatjira were able to begin to work on paper and other surfaces. The missionaries produced vocabularies, grammars, ethnographic descriptions and religious texts as a result of their contact with Aborigines in the 1800's.

Christian and Indigenous traditions first intersected at Hermannsburg - between the missionaries of the Lutheran faith and the Aranda people. Hermannsburg also has a vital role in the development of Aboriginal self-expression, as it was here in the 1930s that Albert Namatjira learnt to paint. His rapid success quickly led to the formation of the Hermannsburg school of watercolour painting - the first popular and visible Aboriginal art movement, and until the birth of western desert dot painting at Papunya in 1970, the most successful.

FEBRUARY 27 - MARCH 14

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The Holy, Holy, Holy catalogue will also feature commissioned essays by Professor Marcia Langton, Bill Edwards, Varga Hosseini, Mary Eagle and Dr Rob Amery. Dr Chrstine Nicholls provides interviews each artist.

By using historical works from museum and social history collections, and through the essays in the catalogue, **Holy, Holy, Holy** creates a frame through which to view the contemporary works. This is the exhibition's primary aim - to understand the range of responses Aboriginal people have had to their experiences of Christianity, whether they have been historical or personal.

**Flinders University City Gallery, State Library of
South Australia
North Terrace, Adelaide
Tel 08 82077055
Fax 08 82077056**

20 February to 18 April 2004
Monday to Friday 11 to 4pm, Sat-Sun 1-4pm
Extended hours during Adelaide Bank 2004
Festival of Arts 27 Feb to 14 March, Mon-Fri 10 to
5pm, Sat-Sun 12-5pm

www.adelaidefestival.com.au

Further information:

Holy, Holy, Holy Artists

Both of the senior Indigenous artists in the exhibition grew up in a traditional way in their own country. **Jarinyanu David Downs** was already a lawman at the time of his conversion to Baptist style Christianity in his forties. Thereafter he denounced the contemporary practice of traditional law, while continuing to paint the epic events or story-cycles still celebrated in ceremonies - but with the inclusion of biblical figures. He felt that as God was the originating power behind the Genesis - the creation of everything - so it was perfectly acceptable to reverence His powers in whatever forms they were locally manifested.

Tjangika Wukula (Linda Syddick) Napaltjarri's tribal group, the Pintupi people from Lake Mackay in WA, were one of the last to leave their homeland. Her painting *Leaving home* 1996, is a poignant expression "of this modern day 'Exodus to the promised land'. Instead of a land of milk and honey what they found was billy can tea, refined white flour and Christianity". But later Syddick became an avowed Christian, and her art incorporates key biblical figures and events into her traditional cultural practice. This spiritual inclusiveness even extends to fictional creations such as ET, the Extra Terrestrial, whom she sees as embodying another form of God.

For younger artists, Christianity has often been an enduring part of life. Usually mission-raised, they engaged with Christianity of their own accord and often still practice it. **Ian**

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Abdulla for instance shows us a world in which black preachers preach to black parishioners, in tents on the edge of country towns. But his experience of Christianity also includes personal encounters with angels and spirits, in an intriguing combination of Christianity and Indigenous spirituality. Like Abdulla, **H J Wedge** is often autobiographical and recalls in his art a childhood of unwilling trips to Sunday school and church. But Wedge is also a strident critic of all ideologies, religion included, that encourage people to accept myths unquestioningly and stop thinking for themselves.

Irene Entata lives at Hermannsburg, and grew up with the paintings of Namatjira, Otto Pareroultja and Benjamin Landara. Like her fellow potters, her work records local plants and animals, sculpted in clay on the lids of pots which are then painted with the landscape in which they are found. In *Mission days - baptism* she records on the lid a baptism at the old white painted church at Hermannsburg, with the congregation surrounding the church painted on the pot itself. It's a lovely and endearing image of a community for which the church is a central place.

Younger Indigenous artists, living in cities and trained at art schools, still have profound responses to Christianity - whether in their own lives or the history of their people. **Julie Dowling's** experience of religion was through her education at a convent school. As the text on one painting endlessly repeats like a litany, she and her sister were "female, twins, poor, Catholic, illegitimate, Aboriginal". Her work features a sophisticated reworking of renaissance traditions, including those of religious art, applied to the experiences of her extended family.

Trevor Nickolls grew up in the sixties, and his art draws on the ideas and images of the counter culture, rather than on specific personal experiences. *Mandala's day* makes the intriguing connection between the use of concentric circles in Aboriginal art, and Carl Jung's theory that the mandala is the central symbol of inclusive spirituality in all human art. The much less utopian *Postcard to the devil* explores the opposite of godliness - evil - and its enduring attraction to human beings who, since the fall, must accommodate both good and evil in their souls.

Photographers have been in the vanguard of recent Aboriginal art. **Michael Riley's** series *Flyblown* and *Clouds* explore in a more general way the role of religion in the colonial process. Each work is calm and deeply considered, a complex set of ideas distilled to a single image that carries a powerful symbolic content. **Darren Siwes** takes a more personal approach, superimposing his own standing figure over still, night images of the institutions of colonial power in Adelaide - a Lutheran church, the Proclamation Tree, even the Adelaide Festival Centre, built on a Kaurna sacred site. While the dark suit he wears declares him a contemporary urban Aboriginal, it is the calm insistence of these images that we not forget, which is their real strength.

Nici Cumpston's work draws on her upbringing in country Victoria. Although Christianity meant little to her personally, the old wooden churches that dotted the landscape were a fixture. In *Abandoned*, she reflects on the failure of the church in general to be

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meaningful in the lives of contemporary Aboriginal people. For her, the scarred old trees that also dot the landscape hold greater spiritual power, being more permanently connected to her land and culture.

The three non-Indigenous artists in **Holy, Holy, Holy** bring a necessarily different perspective, but each begins from a willingness to acknowledge a history for which they must share some responsibility. For over 10 years **Alan Tucker** has sifted through primary sources such as 19th century newspapers, reports and letters to document the early contact of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia. Among other things, his ongoing act of collective expiation reminds us that all the institutions of colonial government, even the church, were responsible for the systematic dispossession of Aboriginal people.

Christine McCormack's art charts a different kind of imperialism, a cultural one in which tokens of Aboriginality were reduced to kitsch trinkets for the amusement of a non-Indigenous audience. These objects, mostly collected from junk shops, are arranged and painted in complex tableaux that tease out the underlying power relationships in the colonising process. They make the additional point that such power relationships also operated in the field of popular culture, where they served to normalise and thus excuse such behaviour.

In his art, **James Cochran** has tried to make a place for religion in the contemporary world. His depiction of Jesus as just another haunted homeless person in the Hindley Street Mall, suggests that should the Messiah come again he would be most at home among those with nothing. More recently Cochran spent time with a group of Aboriginal people in Adelaide's parklands, getting to know them and eventually painting them in various ecstatic states. These are not easy works to categorise, but they have an undeniable power that suggests a genuine connection between artist and subject.

As this exhibition demonstrates, the role of the church and Christianity in Aboriginal history remains an enduring subject for Aboriginal artists. For some, those "who came in the name of the Lord" are far from blessed - they will forever be symbolic of the white invaders. The fact that an institution charged with spiritual welfare and pastoral care should be an agent of dispossession is a bitter irony that will never be erased. Others find inexcusable the church's refusal to acknowledge or understand the validity of Aboriginal belief systems - an attitude very much at odds with the inclusiveness of traditional Aboriginal societies when faced with their own first contact with white colonists. But other artists, demonstrating this same inclusiveness, have accommodated Christianity into their own personal spirituality in an act of personal reconciliation. Each of these responses is different, but each is equally valid. There is no final word, and there never can be.

Exhibition Curator Vivonne Thwaites 0414225846

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