

Rite of Passage

by Shannon Brett

Culture exists. It is a recognition of knowledge and an assertion of power. It romances its way into our souls and it consumes us all who live and breathe it. For Aboriginal people like me, it's a strength and a force that runs through our veins; it checks my internal agency and confirms my devoted responsibility to this land.

This country's legacy will always be unique to those who are bound to it—those who know that their sovereignty should not be questioned nor debated by colonial structures of race politics—and also to those who are conscious of the unfortunate greed that is whiteness. We assert our profound commitment to this place because we know that the land seeks no compromise and will not reconcile itself to the pain of genocide in the guise of cosmopolitanism.

During a time not so long ago, the Aboriginal population of this country transitioned from a free civilisation to a nation conquered. In the process, thousands of years of ecological and spiritual power and cultural knowledge were diminished, and many customs and traditions of our original people were lacerated—with many lost forever.

This pain exists. Our ancestors are not forgotten: they live in us, dance in us and sing in us. It is our right to continue their stories—which are our stories—that are central to this vast and beautiful country. Unfortunately, it is also a land which continues to persevere in its failure to acknowledge the sophisticated rites and rituals skillfully practiced by the oldest living and surviving culture on the planet. Our proud people were dispossessed from their homes, their state-of-the-art architectural constructions, and their sophisticated farming techniques, only to be murdered upon the very land on which they were born, for the sake of *terra nullius*.

In 1768, poster boy Lieutenant James Cook embarked on a brief voyage in the Endeavour throughout the Pacific. Upon this particular journey travelled the young yet revered botanist Joseph Banks, who would ultimately *collect* hundreds of species of plants and deliver a positive report and recommendation (unlike Cook) about a place called Botany Bay, located on the east coast of New Holland (Australia). Cook and Banks were docked at Botany Bay for no longer than eight days: they arrived on 29 April and left on 6 May 1770. Contrary to popular belief, they were not the first Englishmen to reach Australia. The British vessel *Cygnets* captained by William Dampier landed in 1688, just over 80 years before Cook and Banks. Between 1421 and 1788, our country was recorded to have been visited by over 50 European and Asian ships (along with their people).

On 6 May 1770, Cook, Banks and their crew travelled north from Botany Bay along the east coast. After their ship was disastrously damaged while passing through the Great Barrier Reef, they were forced to set up camp for a few months. During this time, Cook named and claimed places with English names, even though they already had names. He departed and did not return to our country after this express survey. Interestingly, Cook was killed in 1779 by Hawaiian people while *travelling* through their country. He was accustomed to stealing people's belongings (including their dignity) and breaking them beyond enunciation. To honour such an individual is a reflection of one's lorelessness. This status is an easy one for Aboriginal people to identify, as its manifestation is a disease rampant within this uniquely racist country. This uninformed infection has propagated itself within other nations throughout time and has schooled a specific

incarnation of discrimination. It has practised the division of human beings, exercising the audacious proclamation that any Indigenous people are without elaboration: subhuman.

Fast forward 16 years (pre-invasion), and the English aristocracy was suffering, so discussions began for a plot to choose a country that would free Britain from its chaos of immense delinquency by sending large groups of criminals to a faraway land. War was ongoing with America (which refused to be colonised by the Brits), while England failed to function—the rich got richer and the poor were desperate.

This continent (Australia) was chosen as the only hope for the British to liberate themselves from the disfunction within their communities. The strategy emerged as a deportation of convicts from overcrowded jails, which endured appalling conditions, to an obscurely distant location where they would serve their time with a promise to return. In reality, the promise of death was the only certainty for these people and the *establishment* knew this from the moment that they made the definitive decision to create a new colony—to take the land that was our home. The convicts were never to return to Britain. But which of the Brits in power *did* provide authorisation for the journey to commence? Was it King George III, who was rumoured to have gone senile in 1788 (the year of the invasion)? Or was it 24-year-old William Pitt, the young Prime Minister, who neither had the maturity nor experience to understand a culture such as ours, let alone deal with the enduring American politic of the time?

In fact, it was the secretary to the young Prime Minister, Thomas Townshend, who decided to domineer his superior and to create a convict colony via recommendation to the King. It was also Townshend who suggested that Arthur Phillip lead the expedition and to *fix* upon Botany Bay. This particular detail reveals a mismanaged scenario, bordering on lunacy, and it only emphasises the fact that countless massacres occurred because of this utterly catastrophic series of events.

Consequently, in 1787, Captain Arthur Phillip, his crew, families, livestock, supplies, and 750 convicts set sail in 11 small ships on a quest to colonise our beautiful land.

The trespass on 26 January 1788 was clumsy. Over the treacherous eight-month journey, many had died at sea and more were sick, dying and unprepared for extreme change. What they lacked upon their arrival, also, was the consciousness to aptly observe what magnificence lay before them; they were entirely consumed with the idea that they were superior, and therefore wasted the opportunity to learn from the dynamic peoples here who had finetuned an ancient place. Our ancestors had created an extremely successful ecosystem of all living things from beneath the soil, to the seas, to the skies. The ultimate conservationists, they combined their kinship to the land, its waterways and the constellations with sacred stories, beliefs and traditions. Aboriginality in this country is a truly harmonious philosophy with a profound knowledge of life itself, with each child connected to a name, a place and a role from birth, creating a magical connection of family and country.

The *white problem* of Australia began with contempt for our purest people and the denial of our existence... the problem was and is that they hurt us.

These dismal memories surround us, they are in our schools and in our workplaces, they are advertised as 'celebrations' within every source of media, and they prove to us every day that racism in this country is wholly systemic. A commemoration to rejoice this bleak history of death is a purely oppressive action. We are mindful that there are millions of

people living in this country who do not know its history, let alone have met any of its remaining leaders.

This year, 2020, will be yet another year that many Aboriginal people will be left asking *why* when the celebrations commence. The 2020 'celebrations' begin with the public holiday called Australia Day, which is commemorated on a date (26 January) that symbolises a suffering and a demoralisation for many and as a result continues to create further divisions among the national community. It's a day when Aboriginal people observe their fellow citizens (co-workers/peers/school mates/teachers/students) waving flags of dominance and taking a day off to barbeque. But what about saying sorry? Surely this stands for something? An apology means change, yet the change never comes—there's a lot of noise, but ultimately those who manipulate, dominate and govern continue to honour the precursor. They stick to the plan, they turn their back on us and they obsess on the undeniable unequivocal seizure of our land: a monumental, gargantuan subjugation of all that is aboriginal in this transcendent place. The 250-year-celebrations of the anniversary of Lieutenant James Cook's brief journey to this country are an unadulterated display of totalitarianism; they are extremely unethical, overly funded, and outrageously insensitive.

Like me, many oppose the realities of whiteness. Most are shrewd leaders who seek validation for Aboriginal rights; these observant changemakers affirm the benevolence that our sanctum deserves. They acknowledge their sovereignty and their responsibilities to and upon this land. Among them are the artists of *Rite of Passage*: Glennys Briggs, Megan Cope, Nici Cumpston, Karla Dickens, Julie Gough, Lola Greeno, Leah King-Smith, Jenna Lee, Carol McGregor, Mandy Quadrio, and Judy Watson. These honest artists are creative storytellers, people who know our history and who understand those melancholy yesterdays and our acrimonious now. They are contemplative, insightful and well-informed individuals ever aware of truths to be told.

A rite of passage is an event that marks an important stage in someone's life, or death—a transition. The artists of this exhibition are people who are explicit in their actions regarding their Aboriginal rites. They carry their families' wisdom with them every second of every day that they exist. *Rite of Passage* reveals how these artists define themselves as voices of their families and their ancestors in their quest to preserve their Aboriginality. They are well aware that it's time for change for this nation, it's time to accept the shadow of death in its past, and to place this awareness within our historic timeline; it's time to insert this knowledge within our country's psyche.

We need to speak out aloud on this. We need to listen to artworks like these that actively contribute to the undeniable truths of our Aboriginal existence and, as our planet gets smaller, we need to solemnly participate in asphyxiating the damaging rhetoric that divides us.

These artists dismantle the quasi-tribal myths imposed by early white Australia and reframe the way newcomers of the past century see Aboriginality. They teach us that the time to act is now and that accountability is an expectation. These artists carry a right to traditions, to language, to the safety and preservation of this soil, to river systems and to the wellbeing of living things and their cycles.

These consummate storytellers practise their rite of passage, expressing their voice and actions in song or sound or material or surface. These are continuing practices for Aboriginal people. They share with us these poignant virtuosities, forming works that elucidate two worlds. What may be called art is in fact communication—it's education.

These leaders are teachers beyond masters and are demanding that you listen as our utopia is raging.

Above all, we need to develop a voice together and commit to one reality: that it always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

Shannon Brett
Exhibition Curator

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