

# *Boundary Lines*

20 November 2018 - 23 February  
2019

Exhibition  
Labels

# Boundary Lines

Carol McGregor, Daniel Boyd,  
Rosângela Rennó, Vernon Ah Kee, et al.

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*Boundary Lines* brings together Australian and international artists whose works explore encounters and contact between cultures, through literal and imaginative approaches across a variety of contexts. Borders and boundaries for the enclosure of bodies and objects are central motifs that emphasise the control and domination of individuals by institutions, procedures, and laws.

The artists identify gaps of understanding that define the traversal across borders and pay special attention to the potency of absence and redaction.

Archives have provided rich source material for artists to explore the legacies and losses brought about by colonisation. Authors Genevieve Grieves and Odette Kelada have recently described this process as “bleeding the archive” for “artistic affective and political currency”.

In *Boundary Lines*, several works negotiate complex histories of collecting practices, contemporary modes of museum display, issues of cultural ownership and repatriation, as well as the role of the artist as a new kind of researcher and interpreter of archives and cultural heritage.

Elsewhere, the implications of the movement of people across borders and the ways in which bodies and objects are enclosed and detained by institutions are examined. Historical and contemporary fictions are exposed, but also revealed are the ways those narratives continue to shape mainstream understandings of history and future encounters.

An acknowledgement of loss is palpable in these works. Some are laments. But, in the face of brutal tragedy and the background of colonial history, the artworks demonstrate a search for connection.



Exhibition Partners:



This project has been supported by The Elam School of Fine Arts PBRF fund

# Rosângela Rennó

b. 1962, Belo Horizonte, Brazil. Lives and works in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

## *Vera Cruz* 2000

Single-channel video, 4:3, color, stereo sound

44 minutes

Conceptualization and direction: Rosângela Rennó; Assistant director: Marilá Dardot; Editing: Fernanda Bastos; Sound: Ivan Capeller; Original version in Portuguese, Original format: Betacam NTSC

Courtesy of the artist

The knight Pêro Vaz de Caminha, under the command of Pedro Álvares Cabral, accompanied the Portuguese armada of thirteen ships on a journey to India in 1500, and wrote a letter containing a detailed official report to the King of Portugal of the first encounter with the landmass of Brazil and the indigenous Tupi people. Cabral and his fleet at first thought they had found an island and named it Ilha de Vera Cruz (Island of the True Cross).

Based on the content of Caminha's letter, *Vera Cruz* is a video work of an '[im]possible and/or [in]existant film' that oscillates between fiction and documentary. Images have been subtracted, leaving only marks that suggest that this is what is left of a film scratched and abraded after 500 years of existence and excessive use. The sound of the communication attempts between Portuguese and indigenous Brazilians has always been absent because actual dialogue between the discoverer and the native never happened. The contents of Caminha's account is preserved, though transformed, in sub-titles. Only the sound of the sea and wind remain as witnesses to the very moment of Brazil's 'discovery'.

# Carol McGregor

b.1961, Hastings, New Zealand. Lives and works in Brisbane.  
Wathaurung people (VIC)

## *Cornerstone* 2011–18

Cast silver

Courtesy of the artist

Carol McGregor visited the British Museum in 2011 with the intention of seeing its extensive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collections. Despite several attempts to make the necessary appointments and contacts in the months preceding her visit, McGregor was unable to gain access to the museum's collections not on display. At the time of her visit, the only item of Indigenous Australian origin on display was the Gweagal shield taken from the warrior Cooman, who was shot in the leg during first contact with Captain Cook's party on 29 April 1770 at Botany Bay.

In her frustration, McGregor paced along the stairs, colonnade and pediment of the Museum's grand south entrance. She settled on a small gesture to mark her visit. She patted a handful of Silpression™, a fast-drying putty designed for taking dental impressions, to the corner of one of the Ionic limestone stylobates, or column bases. As she described in her diary:

“The Silpression was made up of two putties that had to be kneaded together and I was aware it looked like plastic explosive. I mixed the putties inside my backpack then quickly took the mould and images of the mould on the corner.”

Upon returning to Australia, McGregor made castings in silver from the moulding. This could be seen as an expression of resistance, and of a longing for connection in the face of the impenetrable monumentality of the British Museum. Her capture of the impression of the corner is a small act of asserting ownership, a taking back something of the contents within. To then cast this object in silver gives the audience a sense of the significance of this action, while also evocative of the richness and value of the items held within the building.

# Daniel Boyd

b.1982, Cairns. Lives and works in Sydney and Cairns.

## *Decommissioned skull boxes, Natural History Museum, London 2017*

Cardboard

Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney and Station Gallery, Melbourne

Daniel Boyd's varied works interrogate the perspectives from which we view the past, and suggest that the lenses through which we understand, contextualise and frame knowledge are multiple and conditioned. Boyd often uses archival photographic images of Australian and Pacific First Nations people in his paintings, in conjunction with veiling elements in the form of shimmering surfaces of raised dots made with archival glue. During Boyd's 2011 residency at the Natural History Museum in London, he worked with items in its collection, particularly those collected by the First Fleet, which arrived on the coast of Australia eighteen years after Captain James Cook first landed at Botany Bay on 29 April 1770.

During Boyd's residency, the museum's conservation unit was rehousing its collection of human remains, including several hundred items from Australia—just some of the thousands of Aboriginal remains still scattered in museums around the world. Boyd became interested in the cardboard boxes containing these items collected in the name of science. Their display labels, item codes and diagrams, with some information redacted with thick black lines, convey a pragmatic, administrative approach to the sensitive contents they once housed.

Boyd made a series of new boxes, using the lid and the tray as framing devices for paintings and also displayed the old boxes intact in an installation titled *Up in Smoke Tour*, 2011. Occupying two of the Museum's large old display cabinets, the work both subverted and reclaimed the aesthetic of the institution's display and storage practices.

In its modest scale and ordinariness, *Decommissioned Skull Boxes, Natural History Museum, London, 2017*, introduces elements of the material past, allowing the viewer a direct physical encounter with mortality and confronted with the evidence of bodies being reduced to categorisations.

# et al.

New Zealand

## *No Good Common* 2018

Mixed media installation

Courtesy of the artists, Yuill | Crowley, Sydney and Starkwhite, Auckland

The New Zealand-based artists' collective et al. recognises the potential of absurdity and paradoxical nonsense in processes of cultural documentation and classification. Its works peer through procedural systems, calling attention to a specific aesthetic and logic of control and domination in corporate activities and institutional languages.

The collective avoids personal subjectivity and authorship, instead presenting questions of historical

or objective truth as endlessly compromised. Its techniques of presentation are drawn from ideological systems, and the logics of detainment and enclosure. In *No Good Common*, 2018, we encounter a configuration of repurposed steel plan-drawers spread across the floor, containing maps, documents and drawings, as well as folded blankets. Oblique references are made to current issues, such as refugee crises and inadequate government-provided Indigenous housing. The techniques of procedure and presentation et al. employs are familiar from other ideological systems—political and revolutionary—but direct references and concepts are always elusive.

A tabloid newspaper has been produced to accompany the iteration of this work in *Boundary Lines*. It includes signs and signals to underlying meanings, but never gives more than a multitude of contradictory clues as to what, if any, idea is most important. The viewer tumbles between the chaotic poles of an overdetermined admixture and redaction of signs. There is no space left where a holistic singular signifier or concept, or indeed cause, could be fixed.

# Vernon Ah Kee

Born 1967, Innisfail. Lives and works in Brisbane.

## *The Island* 2018

Video installation, three-channel HD video and vinyl on painted wall, 16:9, colour, stereo sound, dialogue, 9:57 minutes

Director: Vernon Ah Kee; Editor: Alex Barnes; Director of Photography: Faramarz K-Rahber; Producers: Alex Barnes and Faramarz K-Rahber; Cameras: Jared Bazley, Alex Barnes, Faramarz K-Rahber, Rob Norton and Christian Hagward; Transcription: Chris Saudral; With thanks to Griffith Film School.

Commissioned by Griffith University Art Museum, 2018  
Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Commissioned by Griffith University Art Museum for *Boundary Lines*, Vernon Ah Kee's three-channel video installation *The Island*, 2018, explores a specific space of institutionalisation—that of penitentiary islands—across different contexts of incarceration and confinement.

The introduction of *The Queensland Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* in 1897 saw the forced removal of Aboriginal people to missions and reserves across Queensland. Chief Protector J.W. Bleakley designated Palm Island a specific role, as “a penitentiary for troublesome cases”. The main streets of the township were segregated. The tree-lined Mango Avenue, is where white, administrative staff were housed. Apartheid-like arrangements of space and design extended to the schools, with a school for the children of the officials and a ‘native’ school on the opposite side of the road. Children were separated from parents, and men from women.

In *The Island*, Ah Kee obliquely draws parallels between the brutalisation and dehumanisation of Aboriginal people and the current situation on islands where asylum seekers have been detained by the Australian Federal Government. In the video, the interviewees tell of their experiences in escaping the conflict of their home in Afghanistan, their journey through India and Indonesia and incarceration on Christmas Island, and their arrival in Australia—where still they live in limbo, on temporary protection visas.

Ah Kee recognises the brutality and elimination of dignity that these individuals have been subjected to. It is familiar to him, as it is closely aligned to the experiences of his own family detained on Palm Island. In *The Island* Ah Kee focuses on the shorelines and beaches of these islands—images of constantly moving tidal zones and liminal spaces of encounter, translation and communication.