



Christian Thompson
Constellations

Studio 12 / Emerging Writers Program

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Constellations
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This catalogue has been produced as a part of Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces' and Express Media's Emerging Writers Program, and is the fifth in the series. The Emerging Writers Program pairs four young writers each with an experienced mentor, and culminates in the production of a catalogue essay for Gertrude's Studio 12 exhibition program, and an independent exhibition review for *Artlink* magazine.

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GERTRUDE contemporary art spaces e(x)_m



Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces would like to advise viewers of this exhibition that for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities seeing images of deceased persons in photographs, film and books or hearing them in recordings etc may cause sadness or distress and in some cases, offend against strongly held cultural prohibitions.

Photographs in this collection contain images of people who are now deceased. We apologise for any distress this may cause and welcome suggestions regarding the distribution and managemnet of this material.





As a young girl one of my favourite things to do was to rummage through the contents of my mother's wardrobe, jewellery box, and makeup. I would emerge slightly disheveled in a baggy dress with tennis balls down the front, with a painted face, and laden with all of my mother's bangles and necklaces. I felt very glamorous. Clomping as elegantly as I could in her high heels down our wooden corkscrew stairwell, it was not until I entered the living room that I'd discover that she had guests over for afternoon tea. Shyly I'd slip into the room, careful not to trip up on the tail of the dress, and do a little twirl, before scampering back to her room as fast as I could. After a number of these impromptu performances my mother would make me linger a little longer while she hunted for her camera. At this stage of my life, femininity existed for me in a world of dress-ups and photographs.

In *Constellations*, Christian Thompson similarly plays dress-ups for the camera, mimicking the style and dress of his great grandfather from a family photograph. In doing so, Thompson looks at the influence of family history on the formation of his identity. Thompson's *Constellations* comprises a group of four self-portraits in which the artist dresses up as his Bidjara forebear. Clad in a Burberry suit and fedora, the image of the artist mirrors that of his great grandfather. Hanging on opposite walls of the gallery, the two men are positioned face to face, each reflecting the other. With a shared history of four generations between them, Thompson describes the work as a kind of "living and evolving archive" that "identifies private, intimate rituals and expresses a more subtle and softer understanding of [his] masculinity as a Bidjara man."

Constellations is part of a sustained investigation by the artist into the relationship between the subjects and objects of representation. These investigations have been driven by Thompson's interest in the fluidity of identity, and the way in which images and artists are never entirely considered on their own merits, but also against personal histories and the frameworks of the dominant culture. Previously, Thompson has achieved this by taking on and re-presenting the identity of famous artists such as Andy Warhol and Tracey Moffatt (*The Gates of Tambo* series 2004), and by challenging history's traditionally western and generally racist gaze (*Emotional Striptease*, 2003). *Constellations* continues Thompson's move from overtly political and confrontational work towards a more intimate and personal questioning of his sense of self. In this series Thompson draws on family portraiture in terms of genealogy and family rather than 'the politics of race', to explore how we can renegotiate inherited representations and identities.

In his self-portrait the artist is adorned with magnificent corsages of native Australian flowers, which he describes 'as a kind of appendage or extension of the body ... as sculptures'. The mauve backdrop alludes to the colour of the desert flowers of the Kunja Nation in South-west Queensland, where Thompson spent his childhood. While his face is somewhat masked by the flowers, we are still able to recognize his affiliations as a great-grandson and descendant.

When looking at portraits, it is always tempting to compare oneself against images of others. Such comparisons are more resonant when we are confronted with pictures of relatives from the past, as we place resemblances from previous generations onto family members in the present. As a metaphor for family, *Constellations* assigns history to people and people to place. By undermining inherited notions of fixed identity and opening up a space for reconceptualizing how we exist in the world, this work is simultaneously a personal document of Bidjara masculinity and a critique of gender and identity.

Andrea Bell 2007

IMAGE CAPTIONS: Front Cover: David Andrew Thompson at Lake Dolly, Barcaldine circa 1929 Above left: Christian Thompson, *Desert Flowers*, Barcaldine, 1968 Above Middle: Christian Thompson, *Constellations* production still, 2007

