

## Gertrude Contemporary and Art & Australia Emerging Writers Program: Harriet Morgan



UNITY, STRENGTH AND PRIDE run through the work and ideologies of the Brisbane-based proppaNOW collective. In their recent drawing exhibition, 'Jus' Drawn', Vernon Ah Kee, Tony Albert, Bianca Beetson, Richard Bell, Andrea Fisher, Jennifer Herd, Gordon Hookey and Laurie Nilsen continued the urgent discussion of what it means to be an urban Aboriginal artist. When exhibiting individually, these artists have their own established methods, styles and positions within the Australian art world. But as proppaNOW, they collaborate and work with different materials to characterise a challenging new Aboriginal voice within contemporary art.

In 'Jus' Drawn' as with any group show, especially one focused on a specific medium, the levels of success were bound to vary. This, however, didn't appear to be proppaNOW's greatest concern. The central ideas in 'Jus' Drawn' were communicated with an inherent ease. Even if the immediate look of the show appeared ordered, linear and consistent, any seriousness was undercut by the comedic and playful elements of the group – most notably with Hookey's 2010 'Animals' series, and Bell's colourful and collaborative wall piece which connected two of the Victorian rooms at Melbourne's Linden – a location not usually associated with Indigenous heritage.

The closeness and positive values of the collective shone through. As well as showing a stimulating shared practice employing materials such as paper, graphite, ink and charcoal, even the exhibition's title echoed the natural communication between the artists. Explained Ah Kee in an artist's statement: 'As Aboriginal people, as Blackfellas, drawing is something we all do ...'

Intuition and spontaneity were evident in the artists' mark-making, though some marks seemed to have been rehearsed more than others. In her 2010 suite of work 'On Dying', Herd transformed unimaginable grief into calming and natural forms. The drawings were made with an underlying but powerful sense of what it is like to experience death. In so doing the work propelled

a purely 'cultural' dialect into a broader language – one of a mother, an artist and a human being.

Hookey's work operated on the other end of the emotional spectrum, depicting typically un-Australian animals such as the beaver or donkey by using thick and heavy cross-hatching, playfully reinstating the animals' distance from any sort of typical Indigenous iconography. From this room the mood rapidly changed again, the strokes lightening, as Ah Kee's precision stood out. This artist's considered and confident markings were comparatively cooler and less humorous. A skilled draughtsman, Ah Kee's drawings transcended race, with method as much as meaning determining the final outcome.

As well as togetherness, 'Jus' Drawn' suggested an ongoing identity crisis. Connecting the group was a strong sense of double displacement – as artists and as Aboriginal people – which was where the show became paradoxical. Yes, this was a collective show of practising contemporary artists, but it was also about their individual Aboriginality. This paradox was of course part of proppaNOW's quest: to create a more accurate view of how complicated contemporary Aboriginal art has actually become.

Through a base exercise in drawing, proppaNOW reflected on what it is to be of Aboriginal heritage, but by eschewing a singular approach, the group brought mixed feelings about their people's displacement to the surface. Choosing contrary ideas of location, medium and subject, the collective managed to dispute any absolute definition of Aboriginality within contemporary art.

*Harriet Morgan was mentored by Dr Christopher McAuliffe, Director of the Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne; Jus' Drawn by proppaNOW, Linden, Melbourne, 7 August – 12 September 2010.*

Richard Bell with proppaNOW, *me me Dreaming (with a little help from my friends)*, 2010, pastel on wall, dimensions variable  
Courtesy the artists and Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts, Melbourne