



Members of Aboriginal
and Torres Strait
Islander communities
are respectfully advised
that a number of people
mentioned in writing or
depicted in photographs in
the following pages have
passed away.



FREEDOM RIDERS

ART AND ACTIVISM 1960s TO NOW

CURATED BY MATT POLL AND KATIE YUILL

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY MATT POLL AND KATIE YUILL,
AND ANN CURTHOYS

UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY
THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

Front cover:
Robert Campbell Jnr
Charlie Perkins 1986 (detail)
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
120.5 x 91 cm
University of Sydney Union collection,
purchased 1991 © the artist's estate,
courtesy the artist's estate and Roslyn
Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney
Photograph: © Michael Myers 2010

Title page: photo © and courtesy of
Wendy Watson-Ekstein, nee Golding,
1965.

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Editors: Luke Parker and Ann Stephen

Exhibition intern, public and school programs coordinator: Melinda Peat

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

INTRODUCTION

MATT POLL AND KATIE YUILL

THE EXHIBITION *FREEDOM RIDERS: Art and activism 1960s to now* takes the portrait of Dr Charles Perkins by Aboriginal artist Robert Campbell Jnr as its starting point. Today both the artist and his subject are acknowledged as pioneers in exposing the harsh social and political realities of 1960s NSW.

Perkins' remarkable life – he was an international soccer player, one of the first Aboriginal university graduates and the first Aboriginal person to lead a government department – remains an inspiration for Indigenous people today. Similarly, Campbell's art, with its powerful colour and design, projects an uncompromising message. In the artist's words:

"I am painting to show people – Aboriginal people, and even the whites – what truths took place in my lifetime: for example, being fenced off at the pictures; the dog tag system.

*I am telling the stories, the struggle of Aboriginal people, tribal and others, through my life."*¹

The exhibition includes key works by Campbell that deal with the colour bar and segregation, and provide a stark picture of race relations during the artist's lifetime.

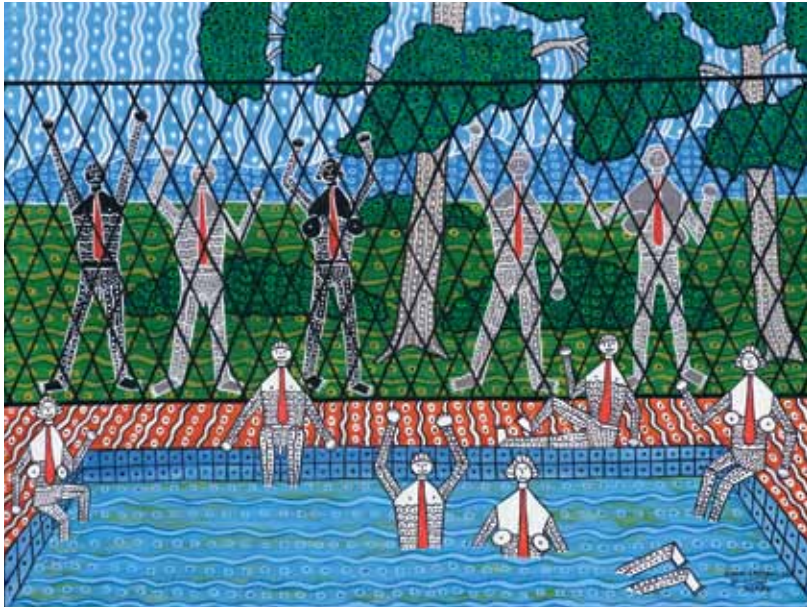
Like the self-taught Campbell, Elaine Russell uses quick drying acrylic paint to make vivid her experiences of living under conditions of social exclusion. She studied as a mature-age student at the Eora college of TAFE in Redfern, NSW and Tranby Aboriginal College in Glebe, NSW. Russell's *Inspection day* exposes the controls exercised over Aboriginal people living on missions. The artist explains:

*"The manager's wife was a nursing sister and once a week she would inspect the houses on the mission to make sure that our homes were clean and tidy, which they were. She wanted to know how mum's floors were so white, seeing they had no electricity to use an electric floor scrubber. That's when Mum showed her a piece of sandstone, by which she was very surprised!"*²

In the 1970s and 1980s the Tin Sheds Art Workshop at the University of Sydney was a major centre for cultural activism. Both Campbell and Michael Riley worked at the Sheds during the 1980s. Around 1982 Riley took a course under photographer Bruce Hart, who became a lifelong mentor and friend. Campbell became artist in residence in 1987, the year after he painted his portrait of Perkins.

Riley helped set up the influential Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Ko-operative (later Co-operative) in 1987, and Russell became a regular exhibitor. In fact, an Aboriginal artistic resurgence

Robert Campbell Jnr *Barred from the baths* 1986
synthetic polymer paint on canvas 91.5 x 121 cm
Collection Suzanne Davies and Richard Dunn
© the artist's estate, courtesy the artist's estate and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney
Photograph: © Michael Myers 2011



occurred in Sydney during the 1980s in reaction to the looming bicentenary and inspired by the earlier activism of the Freedom Rides, the 1967 Australian referendum and the 1972 tent embassy activists. This included exhibitions *Koori art '84* (1984), *Urban Koories* and *NADOC '86 Exhibition of Aboriginal and Islander photographers* (both 1986), and the establishment of Bangarra Dance Theatre, Black Books, Indigenous Screen Australia and Redfern Radio.

Michael Riley's portraits, documentaries and films were made first and foremost for an Aboriginal audience, to celebrate a new generation of young Aboriginal people in the arts and public life. His circle of Sydney-based Aboriginal artist friends and community members was the basis of his photographic

portraits, including *Tracey [Moffatt]* (1986), which is displayed in the exhibition, and *Hetti* from the series *Portraits by a window* (1990). Hetti Perkins, Charles Perkins' daughter, is currently Senior Curator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Riley grew up in Dubbo (his father's country) and regularly visited Moree (his mother's country). Both towns were notorious for racial tension and discrimination in 1965. His maternal grandfather was in charge of the Moree Aboriginal Reserve swimming pool and it was the prohibition of the Aboriginal people from the town's artesian baths and adjacent swimming pool that led to violent clashes in 1965. The footage of Perkins swimming in the town pool with local Aboriginal children has symbolised the end of segregation since that day.

Moree women from the series *A common place: Portraits of Moree Murries* (1991), was taken when Riley returned to Moree to photograph his community. His cousin Lynette Riley-Mundine recalls the impact of his work:

*"He transformed our history into films and photos. Michael made all the family feel involved and feel that we also owned all those portrayals."*³

This example of Aboriginal people participating in their own representation marked a turning point. Photography – a medium used by anthropologists and journalists to observe the other – was transformed by Aboriginal people into a vehicle of self-representation and recognition.

Karla Dickens, Adam Hill, Jonathan Jones, and Christian Thompson represent a younger generation of contemporary artists who are tackling the issue of being Aboriginal in Australia today.

Karla Dickens' installation reflects on her own experience as a mother, and on memories of her grandmother's history as part of the Stolen Generations. In Dickens' words:

*"As I hold my daughter in my arms I think of my great grandmother, Mary, who was taken away at one month old, spent many long hard years at Cootamundra Girls Home, and died at Callan Park blind and haunted by the past. The pain and loss did not stop with Mary..."*⁴

Adam Hill creates bold and witty works, such as his painting of Cathy Freeman winning the gold medal in the 400m at the Sydney Olympics; *Despite her race she was a champion* (2005). In the *Freedom Riders* exhibition his work depicts the Northern Territory intervention as a police dog on steroids rampaging through the outback – a direct comment on the greater government and police scrutiny of these communities than other sections of Australian society.

Jonathan Jones' *domestic lean-to* (2008) is a cool and minimal work consisting of internally lit repetitive bands of white light encased in two plank-like forms, which casually rest against the wall. The work alludes, through the material presence of tarpaulin, to the most common form of Aboriginal housing in Australia for thousands of years: the gundaymarra, a makeshift temporary shelter. The mesmerising light bands suggest abstractions of Aboriginal-incised decorations.

Christian Thompson was one of two recipients of the inaugural Charlie Perkins Scholarship (2010) to study at Oxford University. In the exhibition, Thompson's video *Heat* (2010) works as a counterpart to the earlier portrait of Charles Perkins in depicting Perkins' granddaughters Madeleine, Thea and Lille. Both artworks share a similar structure, concentrating on the face and upper torso of their subjects. While Perkins is portrayed as an activist, microphone in hand at a demonstration, his granddaughters are presented against an ochre backdrop, their hair blowing to a harp melody.

Madeleine was recently involved in a national media campaign, organised in 2010 by independent lobby group Generation One, which asked Australians questions about equality. Let us hope the next generation doesn't have to ask the same questions.

Freedom Riders: Art and activism 1960s to now explores Sydney-based activism through key artists and includes footage from the 1965 Freedom Ride.

Footnotes

- 1 Robert Campbell Jnr quoted in Foley, Fiona and Mundine, Djon, *Tyerabarrbowaryaou: I shall never become a white man*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney 1992, p14
- 2 Elaine Russell quoted in Brenda L. Croft, *Culture Warriors : National Indigenous Art Triennial 2007*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra 2007, p155
- 3 Lynette Riley-Mundine quoted in Croft, Brenda L., *Michael Riley: sights unseen*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra 2006, pp82-83
- 4 Karla Dickens' website, <http://karladickens.com.au/artwork/never-forgotten/>



Freedom Ride, 1965 Photo © and courtesy Louise Higham

REMEMBERING THE 1965 FREEDOM RIDE

ANN CURTHOYS

THE ORIGINAL FREEDOM RIDE was a two-week bus trip by students from the University of Sydney. It took place in February 1965, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King's examples of non-violent direct action. The students travelled to country towns around NSW, to protest discrimination against Aboriginal people, particularly their exclusion from facilities such as swimming pools, clubs and cinemas, and from housing in town.¹

At the time, the government was promoting policies of assimilation, which meant social inclusion. Habits of racism and segregation were, however, deeply entrenched, especially in country towns, where most whites thought of the Aboriginal people who lived on the outskirts as intruders who had to be kept out, severely circumscribed and controlled.

By the mid-1960s, many Aboriginal people were demanding a change. They wanted recognition, respect and genuinely equal treatment, with full access to decent housing, jobs, education and community facilities. They also wanted to retain their identity as Aboriginal people, with a strong system of kinship and connection to their own country. During the 1960s the Aboriginal rights movement grew, acquiring strong leaders and attracting support from many non-Aboriginal people.

STUDENT RADICALISM EMERGES

One of these leaders was Charles Perkins, who had enrolled at the University of Sydney in 1963, along with Gary Williams, a Gumbaynggir man. The men helped to unite two emerging forces that were beginning to change Australian society: the Aboriginal rights movement and student radicalism. I witnessed this change when starting my Arts degree at the University that year.

During 1964 there was increasing student activity on issues of racial equality, such as a massive demonstration in support of African-American civil rights. Stung by an observer's query about why they were focusing their attention on this cause when there was similar prejudice at home, the students discussed how best to support Aboriginal people and oppose racism. They decided to hold a Freedom Ride, modelled on the successful 1961 Freedom Rides in the United States, to visit country towns known as hotspots of discriminatory behaviour.

When the Freedom Ride bus left Sydney on 12 February 1965, there were 29 students on board, including Charles Perkins. Gary Williams and several others joined later. Altogether, 33 students were involved, 11 of them women. The average age was just 19.

CONFRONTATION IN WALGETT

The Freedom Ride travelled to Orange, Wellington and Dubbo without incident, gathering information but staging no protests. In Walgett the students decided to target the local RSL

club, as it was known to exclude Aboriginal ex-servicemen, sometimes even on Anzac Day.

Charles Perkins recognised the symbolic significance of this exclusion. It was important not just to Aboriginal people that their war service be acknowledged, but also to non-Indigenous Australians, who would more easily recognise discrimination when it applied to ex-servicemen.

The line of students holding up placards outside the Walgett RSL Club attracted huge crowds, leading to much public argument and speech-making. When the students left town, the son of a local grazier attempted to run their bus off the road. Unfortunately for the disgruntled townsfolk, a cadet journalist from the Sydney Morning Herald had just joined the bus, and as a result the incident was given full coverage in the city newspapers.

EXCLUSION IN MOREE

After Walgett, several more journalists joined the bus, resulting in massive media coverage. They had plenty to cover at the next town, Moree, where Aboriginal people, except for schoolchildren during school hours, were being excluded from the council-owned swimming pool. To draw attention to this inequity, they took a group of Aboriginal children to the pool. The party was admitted in order to avoid a confrontation, and later left town, believing that council management had agreed to desegregate the pool. When they learned this was not the case, they returned a few days later. This time, they were surrounded by a hostile crowd and subjected to considerable verbal abuse and some physical violence.

In an increasingly tense atmosphere, the students met with council representatives to find a solution. The council members agreed to abolish the regulation excluding Aboriginal people from the pool, if the students promised to leave town immediately. The Freedom Ride continued to Lismore, Bowraville and Kempsey, holding several demonstrations. In Bowraville the focus was the cinema, which the proprietor later closed rather than desegregate. In Kempsey the target was

another council-owned pool that excluded Aboriginal people. All the while the public was bombarded with media stories about the poor conditions under which Aboriginal people lived. Across the country, some serious soul-searching was taking place.

FAR-REACHING RESULTS

The Moree and Kempsey pools were desegregated, and so too (eventually) was the Walgett RSL Club. Charles Perkins became a well-known Aboriginal leader, and student support for Indigenous rights continued to grow. Many other campaigns followed, such as 'Vote Yes' during the 1967 Referendum, wage equality for pastoral workers and campaigns for land rights. The aftershocks continue to this day.

There are many forms of commemoration: plaques at the Moree Pool and the Bowraville picture theatre, Rachel Perkins and Ned Landers' film, *Blood Brothers – Freedom Ride*, the film *Freedom Rides – 40 Years On*,² Charles Perkins' autobiography, Peter Read's biography of him, and my own book, *Freedom Ride: A Freedom Rider Remembers*.

The Freedom Ride was retraced in 2005 by university students, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and again in February 2011 by year 10–12 students, who were mostly Indigenous – proof of its enduring legacy.³ The meaning of this event changes all the time – as historical events do whenever people seek to connect past to present. Our memories of the Freedom Ride will continue to change, along with Australian society and the aspirations of Indigenous people.

Footnotes

- 1 I have used the term Aboriginal when dealing with the past and Indigenous when dealing with the present.
- 2 Produced by Oliver Lawrance and Reconciliation. To obtain a copy see http://www.antar.org.au/freedom_rides_40_years_on
- 3 For information on the 2011 Freedom Ride see <http://www.youthconnections.com.au/freedomride>

Ann Curthoys is an ARC Professorial Fellow in History at the University of Sydney, and the author of *Freedom Ride: A Freedom Rider Remembers* (Allen and Unwin, 2002). Some of her Freedom Ride materials, including her diary, can be read at www1.aiatsis.gov.au/exhibitions/freedomride/start.htm

ROBERT CAMPBELL JNR
KARLA DICKENS
ADAM HILL
JONATHAN JONES
MICHAEL RILEY
ELAINE RUSSELL
CHRISTIAN THOMPSON

ROBERT CAMPBELL JNR

Ngaku



I AM PAINTING TO SHOW PEOPLE – ABORIGINAL PEOPLE, AND EVEN THE WHITES
– WHAT TRUTHS TOOK PLACE IN MY LIFETIME: FOR EXAMPLE, BEING FENCED OFF
AT THE PICTURES; THE DOG TAG SYSTEM.

I AM TELLING THE STORIES, THE STRUGGLE OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE, TRIBAL AND
OTHERS, THROUGH MY LIFE.

Robert Campbell Jnr

Robert Campbell Jnr (1944–93) was born in Kempsey, NSW. A descendant of the Ngaku people, Campbell first learnt to draw on his father's boomerangs in pencil while still at primary school on Burnt Bridge mission. Despite having had no Western art-school training, Campbell is acknowledged today as a pioneer in urban Aboriginal art.

Robert Campbell Jnr
[Roped off at the picture show] 1986
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
92 x 121 cm
Collection P. Coleing
© the artist's estate, courtesy the artist's
estate and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney
Photograph: © Michael Myers 2011

KARLA DICKENS

Wiradjuri

Karla Dickens
Never forgotten 2010
wicker, acrylic and lace
65 x 90 x 65cm
© and courtesy the artist



THE WICKER CRADLE IS A BLACK EMPTY TOMB, COVERED BY A BLACK VEIL; IT SYMBOLIZES THE LOSS, THE GRIEF, AND THE HEARTACHE THAT IS NEVER FORGOTTEN.

MY FIVE YEAR OLD DAUGHTER GINGER SLEPT IN THIS CRADLE AS A BABY, NEXT TO MY BED, SAFE AND UNTOUCHED, NOW IT HONOURS THE PAIN OF THE MOTHERS AND CHILDREN THAT WERE SEPARATED, THE FAMILIES AND LIVES DESTROYED.

AS I HOLD MY DAUGHTER IN MY ARMS I THINK OF MY GREAT GRANDMOTHER, MARY, WHO WAS TAKEN AWAY AT ONE MONTH OLD, SPENT MANY LONG HARD YEARS AT COOTAMUNDRA GIRLS HOME, AND DIED AT CALLAN PARK BLIND AND HAUNTED BY THE PAST.

THE PAIN AND LOSS DID NOT STOP WITH MARY, AND EVERY TIME THE TRUTH IS TOLD THERE IS MORE HEALING.

Karla Dickens

Karla Dickens is a Wiradjuri artist, born in Sydney in 1967. Raised in Redfern, Dickens studied at the National Art School in Sydney and she attributes the 'stronger Indigenous feel' of her work to the move she made later to Wollombi in the Hunter Valley. In 2003 she exhibited at the Tin Sheds Gallery, University of Sydney.

ADAM HILL

Dhungutti

Adam Hill
K9 vs bloodline on the breadline 2008
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
150 x 260.5 cm
© the artist, courtesy the artist and
The Keeping Place Collection
Photograph: © Michael Myers 2011

Adam Hill is a Dhungutti man and was born in Blacktown, Western Sydney in 1970. He originally studied Graphic Design but later took up painting without further formal training. Hill uses acrylic paint to produce what he describes as “vast colourful landscapes with reminders of colonial impositions”. His work references the history of Aboriginal resistance in Australia.

THIS IMAGE IS AN URBAN PAYBACK.

THIS IS FROM THE HEART – MINE AND FROM THE HEART OF REDFERN, AN ODE TO TJ AND ALL LOCAL MOB WHO IN THE COURSE OF REDFERN HISTORY HAVE GONE UNRECOGNISED OFFICIALLY WHILE THE OFFICIALS BECOME MORE OFFICIAL.

REDFERN IS THE POLICE PUNCHING BAG OF NSW, OVER EQUIPPED, UNDEREDUCATED, MONO-CULTURED YOUNG GUNS ASSERTING THEIR AUTHORITY EN MASSE.

DRUG CONTROLLED KIDS PATROLLED ADULTS PAROLED AND STORIES UNTOLD

IN THE WORDS OF WIRE MC “IN THE EYES OF MY PEOPLE I SEE A LEGACY OF PAIN, A REFLECTION OF YESTERDAY”.

Adam Hill



JONATHAN JONES

Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi

THROUGHOUT OUR HISTORY THERE HAVE BEEN MOMENTS BETWEEN ABORIGINAL AND NON-ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS, MEETINGS BASED ON GREAT INSIGHT, HUMILITY AND UNDERSTANDING. THESE ENCOUNTERS OFTEN CHALLENGE THE STEREOTYPICAL RELATIONS... PEOPLE LIKE WILLIAM BARAK, VINCENT LINGIARI AND CHARLES PERKINS BECAME PILLARS OF SUPPORT – A POSITION AND FORM RECREATED IN *LEAN-TO*. TWO INDEPENDENT FORMS, GENTLY LEANING TOWARDS EACH OTHER, JUST TOUCHING AND SUPPORTING EACH OTHER, CREATE A MOMENT...

Jonathan Jones

Jonathan Jones is of Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi descent, born in Sydney in 1978. He is a widely exhibited installation artist renowned for the use of light in his art practice, and cites Michael Riley as an inspiration for his work.

Jonathan Jones *domestic lean-to* 2008
aluminium, fluorescent tubes and fittings, tarpaulin
2 parts, each 230 x 30 x 60 cm
© the artist, courtesy the artist and Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney



MICHAEL RILEY

Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi



FOR THE FIRST TIME WE SAW OUR FAMILY, OUR PEOPLE, NOT BEING PORTRAYED AS SAVAGES, AS THE MISSING LINKS, BUT AS PEOPLE WITH REAL PRIDE AND HISTORY.

WHEN THE PHOTOS OF OUR NAN (MAUDE WRIGHT) AND AUNTS AND UNCLES AND COUSINS FROM MOREE AND THEN DUBBO, TALBRAGAR RESERVE, WERE PRODUCED, WE GASPED. MICHAEL GAVE US OUR PUBLIC PRIDE BACK...

MICHAEL MADE ALL THE FAMILY FEEL INVOLVED AND FEEL THAT WE ALSO OWNED THOSE PORTRAYALS.

Lynette Riley-Mundine

Michael Riley (1960-2004) was born in Dubbo, NSW. A Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi man with a long family affiliation with the Wiradjuri land, Riley spent his early childhood on the Talbragar Reserve before he and his family moved into Dubbo. Riley became interested in photography through a course at the University's Tin Sheds Art Workshop. He was involved with Indigenous political movements and artist collectives throughout his life.

Michael Riley
Moree women from the series *A common place: Portraits of Moree Murries* 1991
gelatin silver photograph, edition 3/10
printed image 30 x 58.5 cm
University of Sydney Union collection,
purchased 1991
© Michael Riley Foundation/Licensed by
Viscopy 2011

ELAINE RUSSELL

Kamilaroi



Elaine Russell
Inspection day 1994
synthetic polymer paint on cardboard
73.5 x 99.9 cm
Purchased with funds provided by
the Australian Collection Benefactors'
Program 1995
Collection: Art Gallery of New South
Wales.
© the artist

ONCE A WEEK THE MANAGER'S WIFE WOULD MAKE HER INSPECTION OF THE HOUSES ON MURRIN BRIDGE MISSION TO SEE IF OUR MOTHERS CLEANED THEM OR NOT, AND WHILE SHE WAS THERE WOULD CHECK TO SEE IF ANY CHILDREN UNDER SCHOOL AGE HAD SORES, LICE, BAD TEETH, WHICH WERE TESTED ACCORDINGLY. I REMEMBER ONCE THAT MY YOUNGER SISTER AND BROTHER AND MYSELF GOT SCABIES. THE MANAGER'S WIFE GOT THE THREE OF US AND GOT OUR MOTHER TO SOAK US IN DISINFECTANT IN A COPPER BOILER IN THE LAUNDRY... THESE WERE BITTER MEMORIES FOR ME, GROWING UP ON THE MISSION.

Elaine Russell

Elaine Russell is a Kamilaroi painter and illustrator born in Tingha, northern NSW in 1941. Russell was raised on the Murrin Bridge mission in central New South Wales. While she has lived in Sydney from the early 1980s, it is Russell's early memories of community on missions that inform her work.

CHRISTIAN THOMPSON

Bidjara

I LOVE THE MYSTICISM AND THE SEDUCTIVE CRUELTY
OF THE DESERT, MY HOME, AND HOW IT CAN BE
SO ILLUSIVE AND ALLURING AND POTENTIALLY LIFE
THREATENING...

A CELEBRATION OF FEMALE STRENGTH...

Christian Thompson



Christian Thompson was born in Gawler, South Australia in 1978, and currently lives and works in Amsterdam as an artist and curator. He is a Bidjara man of the Kunja nation from central western Queensland. In 2010 Thompson was one of two recipients of the inaugural Charlie Perkins Scholarship to study at Oxford University.

Christian Thompson, *Heat*, 2010
digital video stills
© the artist, courtesy the artist
and Chalk Horse, Sydney

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The artist statements in this catalogue have been drawn from the following sources:

Robert Campbell Jnr: Foley, Fiona and Mundine, Djon, *Tyerabarrowaryaou: I shall never become a white man*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney 1992, p14

Karla Dickens: artist's website, <http://karladickens.com.au/artwork/never-forgotten/>

Adam Hill: 25th Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Awards, 2008, Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory, audio file, <http://www.nt.gov.au/nreta/museums/exhibitions/natsiaa/25/audio.html>

Jonathon Jones email to Matt Poll, 7 June 2011

Michael Riley: Croft, Brenda L, *Michael Riley: sights unseen*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra 2006, pp82-83

Elaine Russell: 1994, Art Gallery of New South Wales website, <http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/work/19.1995/>
Christian Thompson: *The Sun Herald*, September 19, 2010, p30

All website references uploaded 15 June 2011

Public Programs

Lunchtime conversation with exhibition artists and curators

12–1pm Wednesday 24 August 2011

University Art Gallery

Being Collected series, lecture and reception

Steve Miller, Museums and Galleries NSW, 'New directions in Aboriginal art in NSW'

6pm Thursday 25 August 2011, Edgeworth David Lecture Theatre

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