



**DAMIEN SHEN:
ON THE FABRIC OF THE NGARRINDJERI BODY**

BEING NGARRINDJERI: THE ARTISTIC MACHINATIONS OF DAMIEN SHEN

by **FRANCESCA CUBILLO**

Aboriginal masculinity has been heavily scrutinized and come under attack since the continent was invaded in 1788. The frontier colonial engagement and subsequent discourse sought to systematically undermine the significant role that Aboriginal men played in the broader Indigenous society. The invading force first needed to state that the continent was “terra nullius” – “nobody’s land,” so they could settle without going through the process of recognizing Australian Indigenous sovereignty or engaging in the negotiation of a treaty. It was in the best interest of the colonizer to then promote the idea that Aboriginal men were no longer capable of providing for their families. Government officials justified placing families into reserves and missions on this basis, while their true intentions were to control, monitor and restrict the movement of Aboriginal people across the continent, particularly in areas where the natural resources were rich. Because their movements were confined, men and women could no longer traverse and care for their country and families. Permission from the “Protector of Aborigines” was required if an individual wanted to travel beyond the boundary of such facilities. These heavily monitored and controlled places created a situation whereby Aboriginal people became dependent on the government to provide food rations and to make formal decisions on their behalf.

Prior to invasion, Aboriginal men and women negotiated complex political and economic alliances, including access to natural resources, by promising their daughters in marriage to senior men of high ceremonial standing. Once placed in reserves and missions under the authority of the “Protector,” Indigenous people had to seek formal permission to marry. The removal of this powerful negotiating structure from Indigenous control undermined complex kinship and family structures, disenfranchising both men and women.

Another sinister scenario presented itself during this period. Removed from their communities, Aboriginal women and young girls were subsequently exploited and sexually abused by non-Indigenous men. The women were traumatized and the Indigenous men were powerless to intervene and prevent these occurrences.

his Ngarrindjeri heritage. It is also a reference to the significant way lore and culture is handed down from one generation to the next. For Shen, this was the penultimate opportunity to be formally introduced to his Ngarrindjeri ancestry by his Uncle Moogy, whom he admires and respects. The individual photographic images provide a visual storyboard, a narrative of sorts, and the viewer is provided a behind-the-scenes glimpse of ritual in practice, a modern-day, urban-based male ceremony whereby body design, ancestral stories, and most importantly, the Ngarrindjeri cultural mantel, are being handed from one generation to the next, in this instance from uncle to nephew.

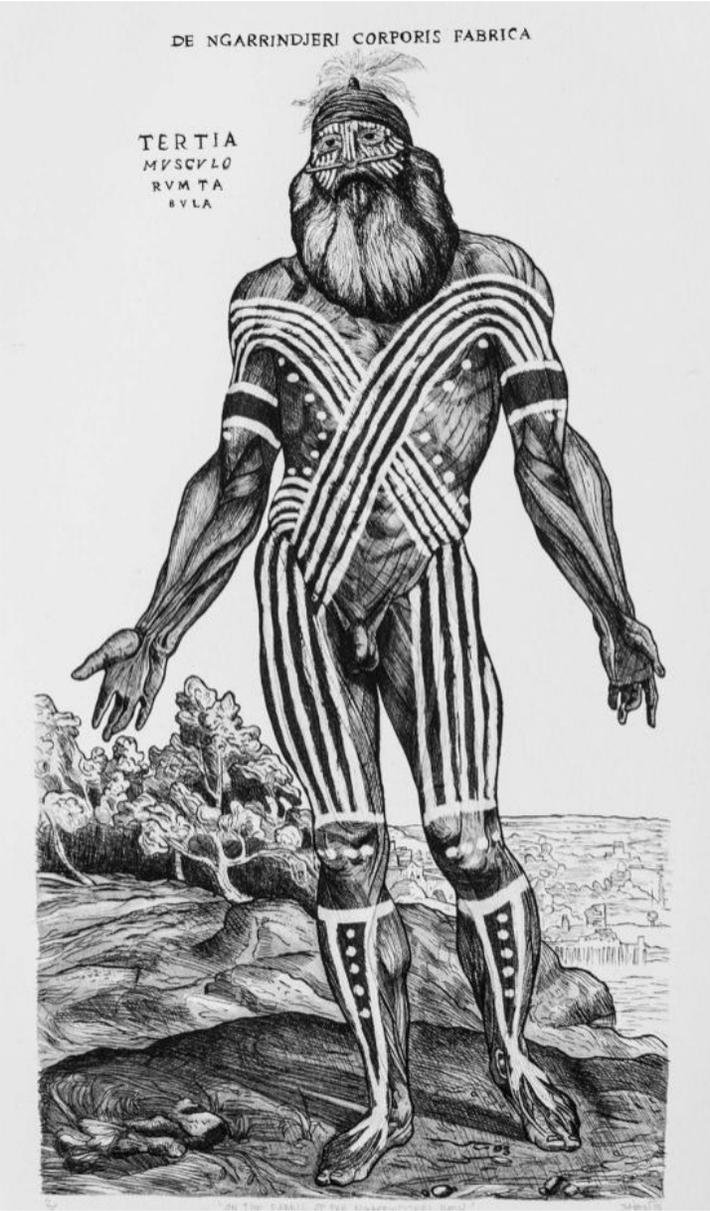


On the Fabric of the Ngarrindjeri Body Volume II, 2014,
photograph by Richard Lyons on German etching paper.

This small retrospective of Damien Shen's art practice over the last three years is conceptually complex, historically reflective and intensely personal. Shen is at the start of a remarkable art career that has already captured the attention of the contemporary Indigenous art community in Australia. He grapples with many issues surrounding his identity and family heritage and is not afraid to articulate his perspective through a diverse range of media. If Shen continues on this current path with the same degree of zeal and commitment, then the next few years promise to reveal the emergence of a distinct artistic style that will challenge and provoke our understanding of Australian contemporary art.



Polly (Mum), 2013, charcoal and Panpastel on paper.



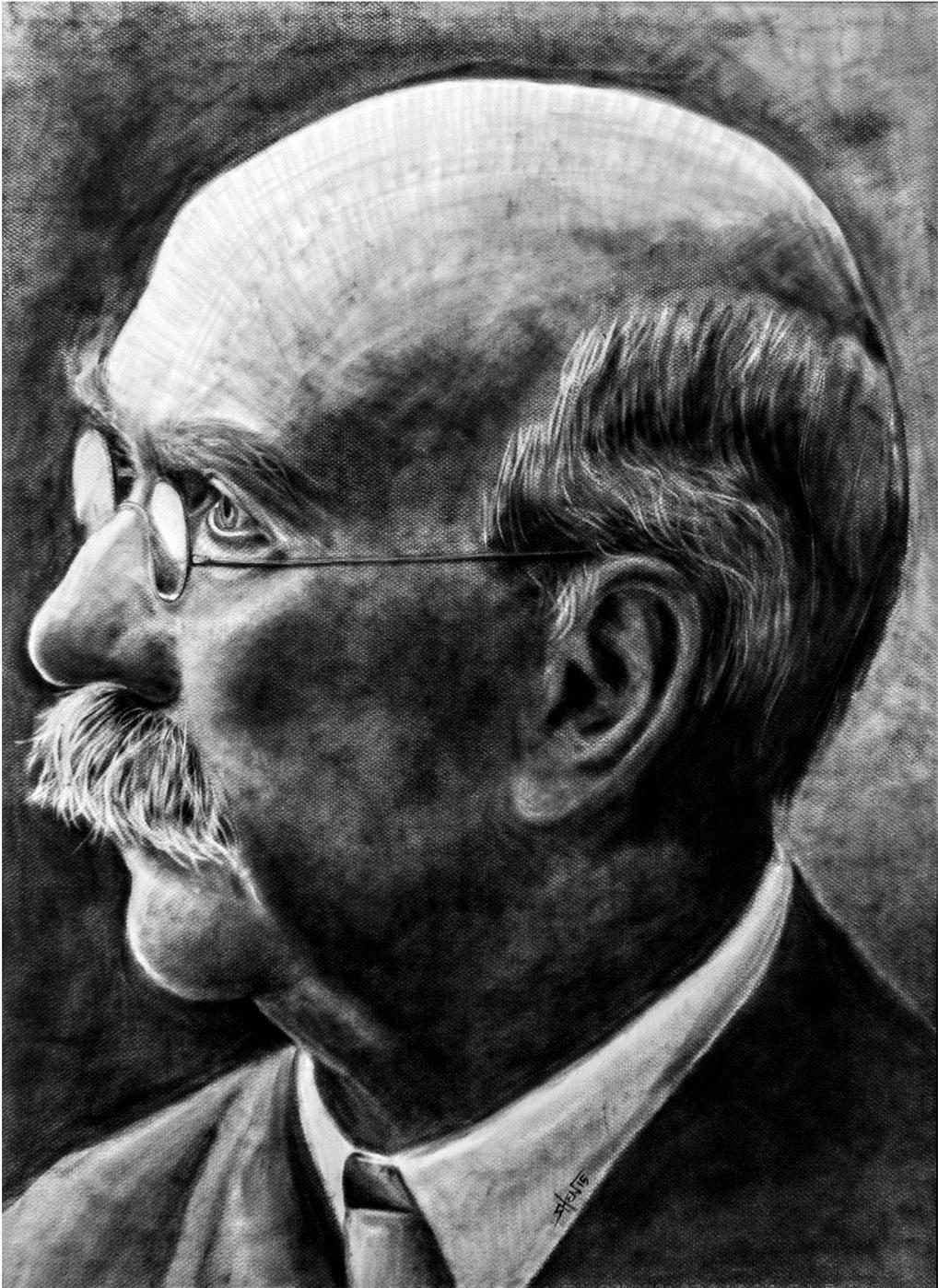
On the Fabric of the Ngarrindjeri Body, 2015, etching.

this glamorous and romanticized imagery, Jungarai's life was tragic. Many of his relatives were murdered in the Coniston Massacre of 1928 and he lived at a time when Aboriginal people were marginalized and disenfranchised. Tony Albert (b. 1981) is a Girramay man and a highly acclaimed contemporary artist. Albert's recent body of work, *Brothers*, references police targeting and marginalizing young Aboriginal men today. Shen's portrait of Albert as "One Pound Tony" reminds the viewer that little has changed and young Aboriginal men are vulnerable to the same fate as Gwoya Jungarai.

Shen's dark, brooding portraits of Poltpalingada Boorboorowie (c. 1830-1901), Sir William Turner (1832-1916) and Dr. William Ramsay Smith (1859-1937), reference a traumatic part of Australian history. They bring to the fore the inappropriate and disrespectful treatment of Aboriginal people by the broader Western scientific community. Senior government officials, ethnographers, physical anthropologists and medical practitioners felt they had an academic, imperialist right to collect and study (without permission) the human remains of deceased Aboriginal people. Skeletal remains were collected by desecrating Aboriginal gravesites and cemeteries. In the case of South Australian Ngarrindjeri man Poltpalingada Boorboorowie, at the time of his

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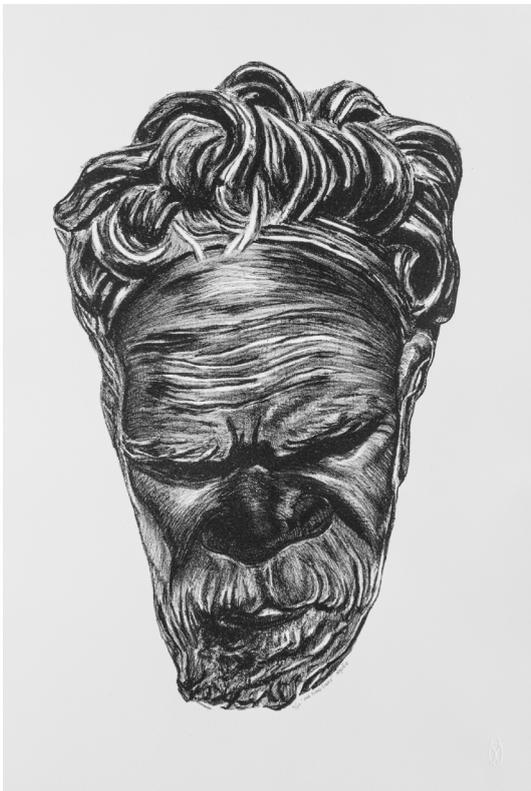
death his body was cut into pieces and preserved, and subsequently studied and traded with museums and anatomy departments around the world. Shen “names and shames” some of the perpetrators of this macabre behavior in *The Anatomist* (2014) and *The Coroner* (2014). The anatomist, William Turner, received Ngarrindjeri ancestral remains from the Adelaide based coroner Ramsay Smith, who established and facilitated an industry in collecting and trading Aboriginal human remains. Shen brings to light the extreme ways in which Aboriginal people, and specifically Ngarrindjeri people, have been treated in the past. He also acknowledges through this process, that thousands



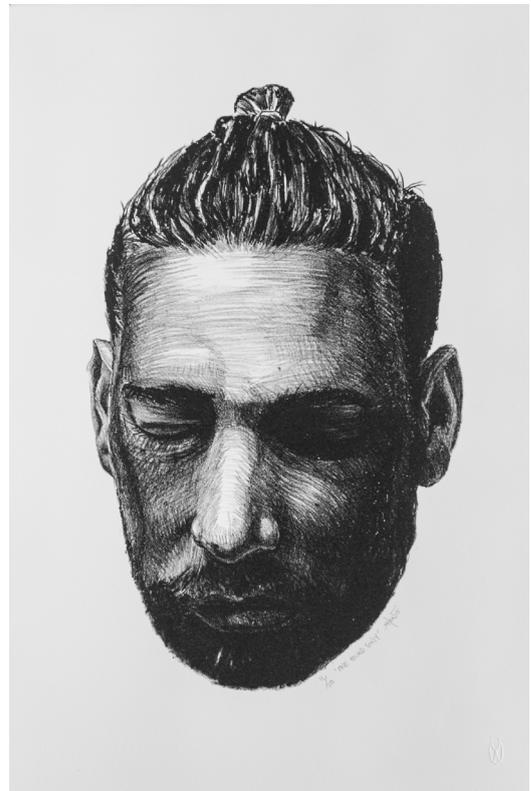
The Coroner - Portrait of Dr. William Ramsay Smith, (1859-1937), 2015, charcoal and Panpastel on paper.

purposely captured intimacy and humanity in his own charcoal and pastel family portraits. He harnesses this Western art genre and uses it to his advantage in depicting *Polly (Mum)* (2013) and *Grandma* (2014) as strong, confident and happy Aboriginal women who are in complete control of their identity. The very essence of drawing an image of a person is intimate. The hand moves the pencil and pastel in a careful and considered fashion across the blank surface, and the viewer can sense what the artist feels, sees, and knows. We can recognize and admire this quality in Shen's portraits of his family.

One Pound Jimmy (2015) and *One Pound Tony* (2015) tell a different story, one of subjugation and misrepresentation. In their portraits, both men gaze downward and do not engage with the viewer or the discourse. Gwoya Jungarai (1895-1965), also known as "One Pound Jimmy," was an Anmatyerr man whose portrait was reproduced in many magazines and tourist items (ash trays, postcards, tea towels), and on the Australian stamp, from the 1930s onwards. Despite



One Pound Jimmy, 2015, lithograph.



One Pound Tony, 2015, lithograph.

of Aboriginal remains are still in many museums and anatomy departments in Australia and throughout the world.

The practice of scientific anatomical study forms the basis for Shen's etching *On the fabric of the Ngarrindjeri Body* (2015), which takes its title from a publication by sixteenth century anatomist Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564). It was Vesalius who publically legitimized the dissection of the human body for the greater good of science. While beautifully and accurately illustrated, his depictions of the human body objectified it, presenting it as devoid of humanity and spirit. Shen's use of this title is a potent reminder of the extreme way that scientists and anatomists have engaged in the dissection and anatomical study of human bodies. He and many others argue that these scientific endeavors created an industry that had a devastating impact on Aboriginal communities across Australia.

South Australian archival collections have referenced the traumatic practice of the trade in Aboriginal human remains, but they have also been important sources of historical Indigenous cultural information and imagery. This documentation has been accessed by many Aboriginal individuals and communities and incorporated back into community cultural practice. The iconic Ngarrindjeri body designs depicted eloquently by George French Angus (1822-1886) in his series *South Australia Illustrated* (1847) provide a case in point. This distinct, ancient pattern painted on the bodies of ritual participants, and the associated paraphernalia used in mid-nineteenth century ceremonies, have been skillfully reclaimed by Major Sumner (Shen's Uncle Moogy) and introduced into his dance troupe's cultural performances. These designs have now become the recognizable cultural symbols of Ngarrindjeri masculinity and are integrated into many ceremonial practices today. It is therefore no surprise that Damien Shen's photographic series, *On the fabric of the Ngarrindjeri Body – Volume II* (2014), which was initiated and orchestrated by Shen, and photographed by Shen and Richard Lyons, is both a public declaration and celebration of

“These designs have now become the recognizable cultural symbols of Ngarrindjeri masculinity and are integrated into many ceremonial practices today.”

The children born from unions with non-Indigenous men included “half-caste” and “quarter-caste” children who were deemed more intelligent and, therefore, more capable of assimilating into Western society. This justified their “need” to be removed from their families “for their own good.” These combined mechanisms destroyed Aboriginal families and communities across Australia and many Indigenous economic, social and political structures and alliances never recovered.

So what does this mean for second and third generation Aboriginal men whose parents and grandparents grew up suffering intergenerational trauma and historical grief under a colonial regime? Emerging from this restrictive framework of genocide, segregation, dispossession, marginalization and assimilation, members of this new generation of young Aboriginal men have taken a defiant stance as they engage in reckoning with the past. For many of them, including Shen, identity becomes both a point of focus and something to defend and celebrate publicly.

As a conceptual artist, Damien Shen’s work is about his identity. His family history is both unique and similar to many young Aboriginal men growing up in urban landscapes and informs much of his art practice. His ancestry and heritage are both Chinese and Aboriginal. Raised by his Chinese grandparents, Shen was immersed in his Asian heritage in his youth. He began exploring his Aboriginal ancestry as a young adult. This personal exploration and revelation is visually illustrated in his practice, which he has pursued since 2013. Shen was inspired by Vernon Ah Kee’s portraits of family members, which were included in the exhibition *My Country, I Still Call Australia Home: Contemporary Art from Black Australia* at the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art. Because of this, Shen went back to college, refined his skills and went on to challenge himself in various media, including drawing, photography and printmaking.

Shen recognizes the power of portraiture, and acknowledges its use in reinforcing negative stereotypes that define and confine his people. His drawings of family members reference Ah Kee’s transformative portraits of his grandparents - *Annie Ah Sam (A)* (2008), and *neither pride nor courage* (2006). These drawings were based on scientific photographs taken by anthropologist Norman Tindale to document the racial features of Aboriginal people living on Palm Island in 1938. Tindale’s original images appear scientifically objective but they also convey the despondency of individuals who had no control over the way they were treated and the destiny that was unfolding before them.

Just as Ah Kee’s drawings have restored humanity back into the images of his family, Shen has



about DAMIEN SHEN

Damien Shen is a South Australian man of Ngarrindjeri and Chinese bloodlines. He grew up in Adelaide and holds a Bachelor's of Visual Communication (Illustration) from the University of South Australia and a Graduate Certificate in Management from the Australian Institute of Business. After working as a graphic designer, art director and running his own business for eight years, Damien left the creative industry to work in Aboriginal health and education. In 2013 he began his fine art practice, and since then his work has been acquired by the National Gallery of Australia and featured in over thirty exhibitions around Australia. He has also won multiple accolades: the South Australian NAIDOC Artist of the Year Award (2014), the Prospect Portraiture Prize (2015) and the 64th Blake Prize, Emerging category (2016) as well as been a finalist in a number of other prestigious art awards.



about FRANCESCA CUBILLO

Franchesca Cubillo is a Larrakia, Bardi, Wardaman and Yanuwa woman, originally from northern Australia. Until recently, she was the Senior Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at the National Gallery of Australia. She has worked directly with many Aboriginal communities across Australia and in 2006 she undertook a Churchill Fellowship to investigate international responses to the repatriation of ancestral Indigenous remains around the world. She holds a BA in Aboriginal Affairs and an Honors in Anthropology from the University of Adelaide, and is currently undertaking a PhD at the Australian National University in Canberra.

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