



BIANCA BEETSON
BEING HUMAN

LIKE PORTRAIT

WRITTEN BY PAT HOFFIE

The dark branches of two trees catch hold of the ragged leftovers of evening clouds. Look again - the branches are those of Bunya pines and the tatters caught in their branches coalesce to form the features of a face – a portrait. Look longer and we recognize particular details – a woman looks back at us – fixedly, unwaveringly, even though the details of her face have become enmeshed by the forms of the trees. The image – *Bunya Me* – makes the differentiation between portrait and trees difficult.

The features are those of the artist Bianca Beetson. She talks about how the two trees are the first view she sees every morning from her kitchen window; she refers to them as landmarks that signal her sense of home.

Bianca Beetson is a Kabi Kabi woman whose ancestral land lies in what is currently referred to as the Sunshine Coast of Queensland, an area better known for its surfing beaches and holiday lifestyles than for its rich Indigenous heritage. Her own family's ancestral land lies behind the coastal area, in what is referred to as Buderim. To most non-Indigenous Australians, this beautiful area of country is known as a prime area for high-income retirees. It's a green landscape with rolling hills where copses of mighty Bunya pines still stand. These pines were highly prized by the Indigenous peoples of the eastern coastline and interior of Australia. Their massive sectioned nuts are rich in protein; at the time of their fruition every three years Indigenous people from 125 different clans would gather together to share the bumper crop in an event where ideas, songs, dances, objects, women and stories were swapped and traded.

The presence of the Bunya pines brought great wealth to the Kabi Kabi people –their magnificent stature symbolized their connection to the environment, to each other and to the peoples around them. Their presence offered a structure of governance that determined family lines, extended relationships, kinship ties and trade agreements. As such they operated as environmental markers of an understanding of identity based on connection – to place, to time (through seasons), to people, to land – rather than identity as something based on differentiation and individuality.¹

Given the deep heritage of this understanding it may seem strange that this historically informed, politically conscious and critically responsive urban-based artist initiated her *Selfie Series* in 2014. It may seem strange that an artist whose previous practice had relentlessly critiqued reductive white notions of Indigenous identity should turn her focus onto herself in a way that might seem, at first glance, to be a passive adoption of non-Indigenous stereotypes; stereotypes that elevated the importance of the individual over and above that of the community and connectedness.



Bunya Me, 2014.

Prior to this 2014 *Selfie Series* the artist had already begun experimentations with the conflicting notions that hover around the idea of the Indigenous self-portrait. The fact that she is, by her own admission, camera-shy by nature and that she makes no claims to be a photographer as such, may make it seem even more strange that her initial portraits grew from an exploration of images of herself as 'Other' in the *Blak Majick Woman* group of images in 2010. However nothing about this artist's work should be taken at face value – beneath each image, underpinning each reference, is a wealth of personal details that add a rich depth to each work. The spelling of this title was drawn from her grandmother's name – Annie Majick, a Brewarrina woman from New South Wales. The series was created at a time when the artist's life seemed to swell with her growing awareness of the presence of her ancestors – a time when she was deeply embroiled in researching the lives of her close forebears, both white and black. The research led in turn to a process of self-reflection, where she began to question what personality traits and influences she might have inherited from her grandparents. She had begun a series of letters to her dead grandmothers, letters that were traced not only with questions but also with admissions of gratitude for what they had bequeathed her. The *Blak Majick Woman* self-portrait series, therefore, offered the artist a means through which she could channel some of what she describes as the intangible metaphysical spirit of the people that in turn has given her a sense of connection to the importance of her own role as an Indigenous woman.

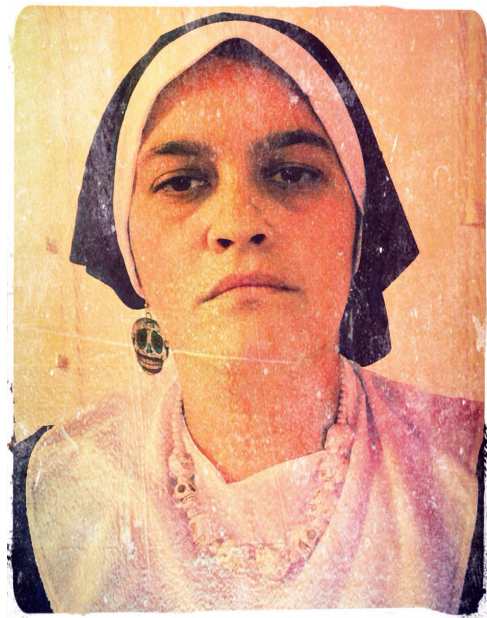
Although the original *Blak Majick Woman* series was shot on camera, in 2014 Beetson decided to extend the series by using an iPhone, a tool that enabled a much more fluid, lightweight and immediate response while also enabling her to extend her critique to contemporary social media references including those of marketing, news media and celebrity consciousness. It was, therefore, a tool, which through its very nature offered an ironic position from which to draw new understandings about current and past interpretations of the representations of Aboriginal people.

Beetson stresses that the control she has over these representations of herself and herself-as-Other and herself as touchtone-for-Others stands in sharp contrast to the early images of Australian Aboriginal people taken by anthropologist Norman Tindale in the late 1960s. In these black and white photographs, individuals were posed in frontal or profile positions while holding a number issued to them as a means of identification by the non-Indigenous mission officials who saw their role as 'protectors' of the original owners of the land. Although these images are aesthetically beautiful, and although their value as rare visual evidence of people who have passed remains, they are also evidence of how Indigenous people were all-too-often recognized as objectified curiosities recorded for scientific inquiry rather than as humans with soul and spirit.

Even though not intended as 'art' as such, Tindale's images are part of a longer tradition of representing Aboriginal people since the early colonial period. From the earliest years of non-Indigenous invasion, Aboriginal people were, more often than not, depicted either as 'noble savages' or as examples of a race fated to extinction. The claim that the entire continent was 'terra nullius' – not owned or managed by any prior occupancy – was a myth essential to a guilt-free non-Indigenous invasion. To make portraits of members of the race who had been custodians of the land for over 40,000 years would have introduced legal, ethical and moral complications that would have got in the way of the historical and cultural amnesia essential to the non-Indigenous invasion of the country. Portraits of Aboriginal people would have generated recognition of them as individuals with all the agency of non-Indigenous individuals, and this would have stood in sharp contradiction of the myth of 'difference'.

However, today's social-media-saturated world has spawned a type of portraiture that seems less to do with the demarcation of individual agency than it does with the urge to fit individual representations into preordained stereotypes. "Selfies" reflect a level of narcissism and predictable, socially-sanctioned identity manufacturing that seems to stand in contrast to either anthropological data collection or to the traditional portrait genre. And through this artist's work we are drawn to the ironies that emerge when these divergent approaches intersect: here are images of a contemporary Indigenous woman who utilizes her own self-scrutiny to unpick the visual clues of physiognomy, posture and costume in order to raise questions about the effects of historical and contemporary image-making on deeper understandings of the complexities of Indigenous agency today.

Although it is possible to read this series as a single continuous installation, many individual works demand a closer scrutiny in order to fully comprehend the depth and breadth of the artist's historical and cultural references. In *Mother Mary*, for example, the artist stares back at us clad in a nun's habit. The surface of the photograph seems time-worn and scratched, as if from a former era. However the necklace of skulls and the single skull earring are clues that the portrait is neither authentically clerical nor historical; there is parody at play, where the artist brings her well established sense of



Mother Mary, 2014.



Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, 2014.

between her breasts, she tilts her chin upwards defiantly, staring down at the viewer as if daring them to respond to her overtly nationalistic stance. The reading of the work is ambiguous - Beetson speaks of it as channelling the spirit of "Australians behaving badly," and while a simple reading might interpret the work as a direct critique of the Cronulla racial riots of 2005, it is also a kind of homage to the spirit of in-your-face ratbaggery that defines Australian larrikinism in general and Indigenous "blak humour" in particular.³

Other images combine the lyrical with a veiled sense of threat: in *Exposed*, the portrait image is taken from below, revealing only the artist's throat, neck and vulnerable chest-line as her eyes gaze upwards. The expanse of white flesh is cut through by a traditional necklace made from echidna quills, or perhaps it is one fashioned from a section of the barbed wire fences that have been used to divide the land since non-Indigenous invasion. The surface of the image seems to flutter with the transparent white wings of a legion of moths. This screen of milky whiteness is both beautiful and strange; the moths' soft white bodies and fluttering wings are in stark contrast to the hard, gleaming sharpness of the necklace, and suggest the possibility of either floating upwards or of suffocation.

Bianca Beetson describes how that personal view from her kitchen window was disrupted eighteen months ago when land developers felled one of the two Bunya pines. Now only one stands – individual, isolated, like a portrait. However, take a walk to look at that tree more

humor to bear on representations of piety in general. The title of the work, *Mother Mary*, refers not only to Australia's only canonized saint, Mary McKillop, but also to the Mary River, the sacred waterway that runs through the artist's Kabi Kabi country. And darker, more deeply beneath the surface detail, the image reminds us of the role the clergy played in condoning the separation of Indigenous children from their families during the series of debacles collectively defined as the Stolen Generations.²

The somber mood of so many of the works is interspersed with images that are more strident: in *Aussie Aussie Aussie* the artist wears red, white and blue warrior paint while draped in Australian flags. With a tattoo of the Southern Cross emblazoned

closely and it becomes evident that, as is the way with this species, little shoots have already started from its roots. "It's re-growing another partner" the artist says, "they always do." For these pines must live in companionship and in community to thrive.

Beetson's portraits are about linkages and continuities as much as they are about critical responses and profitable lacunae. They offer us glimpses, through the artist's representation of self, into a deeper and more informed understanding of contemporary Indigenous identity.

¹ For more on the significance of the Bunya tree see Anna Haebich's 'On the bunya trail' catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/4395806.

² *The Stolen Generations* refer to the generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were removed by the authority of church missions, government agencies and welfare bodies from their families to be brought up in institutions or fostered out to white families. It was official government policy until 1969. (see <http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/politics/a-guide-to-australias-stolen-generations#axzz3yORRVzd3>)

³ Although the interpretations of larrikinism vary, there is a general consensus that it comes from a healthy and humorous disregard for social or political conventions. For more read *Larrikins: A History*, Melissa Bellanta, 2012, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press.

PAT HOFFIE is a visual artist and writer based in Brisbane, Australia where she is also a Professor at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University.



ABOUT BIANCA BEETSON

"I am an artist, an educator, an activist and an agitator."

Bianca Beetson was born in Roma, Queensland, and is a member of the Kabi Kabi people of the Sunshine Coast. She has a Bachelor of Visual Arts from the Queensland University of Technology and she is currently undertaking a doctorate at Griffith University in Brisbane, where she lectures on Contemporary Indigenous Art. She is known for her involvement in the artist collective proppaNOW and her use of the color pink. Her work explores her experience of growing up as a fair-skinned Aboriginal woman and the legacies of the Aboriginal Protection Act.

BIANCA BEETSON: BEING HUMAN

FEBRUARY 12 - MAY 1, 2016

BIANCA BEETSON ARTIST RESIDENCY
FEBRUARY 8 - MARCH 2, 2016

OPENING RECEPTION
FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 5:30 - 7:30 PM

GALLERY TALK WITH BIANCA BEETSON
SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 10:30 AM

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