

# DEAD CENTRE

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Spectrum Project Space

24 Sept - 1 Oct 2016



## DEAD CENTRE

*I'm not on the outside looking in, I'm not on the inside looking out  
I'm in the dead f\*\*\*\*\*g centre, looking around.*

- Kendrick Lamar

I've often heard the question – Why is it that we only see work about identity from people of colour, LGBTIQ, Aboriginal peoples or some other minority, why don't the rest of us have a voice in this area?

The rest of us. Who is that mysterious rest of us?

There is an irony in the question that needs to be addressed and I can only speak for myself, but there are clear parallels for everyone who is not the rest of us. Because some people never had that magic mirror to tell them who they are. Wait... what?! It's called a television, a big screen, a little screen and every single bit of media in between that has given me an example of every different role, character and aspiration available here in Australia. I've seen every single possibility looking back from cis white faces, every combination of anybody real or imagined has been presented to me as that mysterious rest of us. That's a very loud voice.

I've seen me too – I've seen me in angry crowds of bearded men. I've seen me dirty, poor, stupid and threatening. Fiction becomes irrelevant when the voice is that loud. This is just one of the reasons why people of colour, LGBTIQ, Aboriginal peoples and other minorities need to tell you who they are, because nobody else will. I'm fully aware that the constant barrage of media is not an accurate reflection of society. Television should never determine how we see ourselves, but it sure plays a dominant role in how we see others - it's everywhere and it's all the time. This exhibition is about listening to different voices from actual people. That's one of the beauties of art, an artist is not an agenda and the voice you'll hear is their own.

*Dead Centre* is the inverse of the rest of us. It takes you into ten different worlds in which the artists' own experiences occupy centre stage. Anna and I have brought together a group of people from around Australia whose artistic practices draw on the physicality of the human body to explore the intersection of individuality and the broader constructs of social and cultural expectations. Exploiting the documentary nature of photography and the moving image, each of these artists has foregrounded the body as protagonist in a personal drama that defines shared experiences of marginalisation, inseparable from them as artists and human beings. *Dead Centre* discusses the problematic expectations of the individual in finding their place in a social landscape characterised by simplistic and divisive assumptions.

Decolonising the liminal spaces of gender, ethnicity, as well as sexual and cultural identity demands access to individual stories that reclaim the power for individuals to define themselves by their own standards. Through acts of obfuscation, resistance, vulnerability, iconoclasm and

absurdity, each of these artists reveals a very real, physical stake in claiming visibility against a prescribed idea of who or what is considered Australian, that vast entity that is the rest of us. While the body remains the root vehicle, it is the layering decisions of skin, masking, vestments and actions that take the works in nuanced and specific directions.

There is a level of anticipation that binds these works together, an expectation that who they are will determine boundaries and assumptions outside of their control. As artists they have found the agency to move between different worlds, to belong where they choose and decide their own direction starting from the dead centre.

Liam Colgan's *Straight On From Here* (2015) is built on pure anticipation, the artist lies in stark profile endlessly throwing and catching an exit sign. The sign in its ubiquity is an emblem of escape, a handy navigation tool that guides us between spaces. In Colgan's work the sign stands in for the idea of 'coming out', an expected rite of passage in the life of a gender queer individual that can be as small as words and as large as life. This is the nexus of private and public space, the point at which a young person's identity is about to challenge the ingrained baggage of a society that will deny them. The link between spaces becomes evident in Léuli Eshraghi's *Tino Manaia* (2016), produced during a recent residency at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity in Canada. Exposing and painting his hips, thighs, crotch and buttocks in luminescent gold inverses the sense of privacy and shame dictated on the exoticised male body. This act of exposure references the pe'a, customary Sāmoan men's tattoo marking responsibility and family honour, enacting a call to collectively consider the Indigenous body rather than cover it up. This has public health implications in diasporic Indigenous communities where evangelised attitudes constrict approaches to genders, bodies, sexual health and spiritual practices. Both Colgan and Eshraghi question expectations of gendered roles, embracing vulnerability as an act of defiance.

Barbara Cleveland Institute tackle the expectations imposed on the idea of the female protagonist, indulging the absurd logic in which feminine narratives are consistently framed. *Run, runaway-eyay-eyay-eyay-eyay-eyay-eyay-eyeah!* (2008) focuses on the dramatic trope of a woman fleeing from the scene of her justifiable crime in Aerosmith's music video *Janies got a gun* (1994). The narrative exposes a well-worn assumption that a woman's agency must be defined by male intervention at enormous personal cost. This sense of personal cost carries through Tony Albert's *Brother (Our Present)* (2013), the second in a three part series of photographic works created in collaboration with Kirinari Hostel, Sydney. The target painted on the defiant young man's chest acts as a succinct recognition of the violence, discrimination and mistrust aimed at Aboriginal peoples by a system that routinely regards and treats them as lesser human beings. While Barbara Cleveland Institute expose the absurd patriarchal reduction of agency, Albert defines the bitter cost of such negation on individual human beings.

Megan Cope explores the necessity of proving Aboriginality as a fair-skinned Aboriginal person to the ever-present settler colony-derived cultural authorities of Australia. *The Blaktism* (2014) subverts the idea of supposedly progressive values and the right to self-determination in a country that still clings to problematic modes of racial classification as the basis of cultural identity. The act of proving oneself becomes one of ritualised assimilation, removing the capacity to define identity by a deep-rooted, personal relationship with culture. In *Walking The Wall* (2013), Angela Tiatia explores the problematic relationship between her own unmitigated connection with Indigenous Sāmoan culture while existing in diaspora within a consumer oriented, sexualised Western society. The absurdity of the act, an awkward repetition of walking up the wall in high heels reflects the innate tension of balancing opposing expectations of femininity. Tiatia also confronts a cultural taboo, exposing her sacred tatau tattoos, malu, in defiance of accepted masculine and feminine roles in traditional Sāmoan society. Experienced together, Cope and Tiatia pose the question – How does an individual rationalise a sense of identity that cannot fit neatly into the broader definitions of homogeneous culture?

Thea Costantino's *Ancestors III* and *Ancestors IV* - two works from the four part series *Ancestors* (2012) - look to the past, re-casting and satirising signifiers of European colonialism and the advancement of empire. Linking the pageantry of military and religious regalia to the grotesque, Costantino questions the perception of history as a shared Eurocentric obsession with monumental archetypes. Masked in anonymity, these works unpack ideas of history that are as fabricated as they are pervasive. We are blood and bone and We are sweat and tears pair two works from Abdul Abdullah's ten-part photographic series *Siege* (2014), exploring negative perceptions of Muslims as portrayed by the media. Abdullah uses his own body and that of a female counterpart wearing a prosthetic ape mask from the 2001 film *Planet of the Apes* to make a direct link to the dehumanising nature of portraying the 'other' as something monstrous and uncivilised. While Costantino draws on elements of masking and costume to reconsider archaic notions of history, Abdullah uses the mask to reveal the body of the 'other' as a living costume that is still besieged by the advancement of empire.

Nathan Beard explores an unmediated connection with personal history, focusing on the figure of his mother as a site of exchange between anonymity and individual agency. In *Suburban Eden* (2014) Beard's mother stands naked in the backyard of his childhood home, while *Retirement* (2014) sees her fully clothed in her home town of Nakhon Nayok, Thailand. The pink tracksuit reflects a global reduction of human attire to a fleecy median while her defiant nakedness demands an individual engagement beyond the expectations of acquiescence commonly imposed on older Asian women in Australia. Olga Cironis's *Home Run* (2013) confronts the idea of acquiescence head on, casting herself in the role of a migrant housewife with her lips sewn shut in an act of brutal defiance. Cironis demands a voice in silencing her own, subverting ideas

of formal portraiture as well as traditionally hierarchical domestic roles to reveal the potency of a woman who refuses to be diminished by her surroundings. There is a harsh honesty in the way that Beard and Cironis declare the home and it's environs as a maternal space that may confine, as much as define, the voice of the individual.

There is nothing magical in the mirrors being held up by this group of artists. There is an overarching sense of pragmatism in how they anticipate the different ways they will be perceived by the world around them. In articulating an awareness of the inevitable boundaries and expectations that will be encountered there is a resilience that cannot be defined from the outside. These are some of the most potent and necessary voices in the country working to reveal the depth of culture available to those of us who choose to switch off the television, and listen to what actual people have to say.

ABDUL-RAHMAN ABDULLAH, 2016.

## ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

### Tony Albert

Tony Albert's (b.1981) art practice interrogates contemporary legacies of colonialism in a way that prompts the audience to contemplate elemental aspects of the human condition. Mining imagery and source material from across the globe and drawing upon personal and collective histories, Albert questions how we understand, imagine and construct difference. Certain political themes and visual motifs resurface across his oeuvre, including thematic representations of the 'outsider' and the target motif of concentric circles.

Tony Albert is represented by Sullivan and Strumpf (NSW).

### Léuli Eshraghi

Léuli Eshraghi (b.1986) is a Sāmoan and Persian artist and curator whose work centres on indigeneity, language, the body, and queer futures. A PhD candidate at Monash University Art Design and Architecture, Eshraghi holds qualifications in Cultural Studies and Indigenous Arts Management. He is part of duo Orangias+Eshraghi, and board member of the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective | Collectif des commissaires autochtones (Canada), Melbourne Museum Pacific Reference Group, and the First Nations Curatorial + Arts Management Front (Australia).

### Angela Tiatia

Angela Tiatia (b.1973) is of Samoan and Australian heritage. Tiatia has a multi-disciplinary art practice working in the mediums of painting, sculpture, photography, video installation and performance. Her personal experiences inform her art practice as she engages with the shift in identity encountered by the Pacific Diaspora. Tiatia's practice explores global contemporary cultures, drawing attention to their relationship to the construction of cultural and sexual identity, the commodification of the body and place, representation, gender and neo-colonialism. Her video works explore the significant themes of cultural displacement and disturbance due to the effects of economic and social globalisation.

Angela Tiatia is represented by Alcaston Gallery (VIC).

### Thea Costantino

Thea Costantino's (b.1980) practice includes drawing, sculpture, video, photography, written works, musical libretti, and performance. Broadly, Costantino's work investigates the representation and memorialisation of the past: the use and abuse of history, the continuing influence of the past on the present, and the ways in which repressed or forgotten material can resurface. Histories of modernity and colonialism are of particular interest to the artist, and she frequently employs Gothic and grotesque aesthetics as a means of exploring uncomfortable or marginalized aspects of these narratives.

### Abdul Abdullah

Abdul Abdullah (b.1986) is an artist from Perth, currently based in Sydney, who works across painting, photography, video, installation and performance. As a self described 'outsider amongst outsiders', his practice is primarily concerned with the experience of the 'other' in society. Abdullah's projects have engaged with different marginalised minority groups and he is particularly interested in the experience of young Muslims in the contemporary multicultural Australian context. Through these processes and explorations Abdullah extrapolates this outlook to an examination of universal aspects of human nature.

Abdul Abdullah is represented by Fehily Contemporary (VIC).

### Olga Cironis

Olga Cironis (b.1963) is a multidisciplinary artist who explores the murky undertones and impact that history and memory have on personal and shared identity. She examines the notions of belonging in today's cultural globalisation — in particular, appropriated histories and accepted attitudes on belonging in the Australian cultural and social landscape. By engaging viewers to become part of her work, Olga questions the meaning of public and private space, gender and social norms that permeate our accepted actions. Her artistic investigations are founded upon her Greek, Czech and Australian heritage. These aspects are used to engage people beyond the familiar.

### Nathan Beard

Nathan Beard (b.1987) is a West Australian-based interdisciplinary artist whose work is primarily engaged with exploring the myriad influences of his Thai-Australian cultural background. Syncretism is a process which best describes Beard's approach to his Asian-Australian heritage, as it implies that there are no fixed elements in culture but a contingent affiliation of disparate terms capable of shifting positions or altering relations depending on circumstances and permeable boundaries. The implicit tensions and realignments between binaries of East/West, highbrow/lowbrow, and centre/periphery are critically deconstructed and playfully explored for their creative potential in Beard's practice.

### Barbara Cleveland Institute

Barbara Cleveland Institute is a collaboration between four artists: Frances Barrett (b.1983), Kate Blackmore (b.1982), Kelly Doley (b.1984) and Diana Smith (b.1981). Together they make videos and performance works that deliberately blur the distinction between stage and gallery, high and low culture, 'liveness' and its traces. Ranging in tone from biting political satire to slapstick farce, Barbara Cleveland Institute's practice often engages with endurance and spectacle, seeking to dissolve the boundaries between artist and audience in the process.

### Megan Cope

Megan Cope (b.1982) is an exciting young artist with a quickly growing profile, attracting attention for her paintings, video work, sculptural installations and site-specific commissions. A Quandamooka woman from North Stradbroke Island, Queensland, her work explores the intricate relationship between environment, geography and identity. Maps feature prominently in Cope's work; she draws on toponymy (the study of place names) to probe myths and methodologies around colonisation.

Megan Cope is a member of Aboriginal art collective proppaNOW, she is represented by This Is No Fantasy + Dianne Tanzer Gallery (VIC).

### *Dead Centre* is curated by

Anna Louise Richardson and Abdul-Rahman Abdullah.

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