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Guest edited by Judy Annear:

'Everything is interesting – photomedia now'

Susan Best on Sianne Ngai; Patrick Pound on photobooks

Artist pages by Tony Albert, Hayley Millar-Baker, Marian Tubbs and James Tylor

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# Returning the gaze

## Hayley Millar-Baker and James Tylor in conversation

Gunditjmara artist Hayley Millar-Baker and Nunga Kurna, Māori and European artist James Tylor discuss their photographic work in the context of photographic and Aboriginal history. Given that Australian Indigenous people have been continuously practising culture for 65,000 years through song, dance, stories, language, food, ritual, carving, weaving and painting, photography is a latecomer and less than 180 years old. What does the medium have to offer?

**James Tylor (JT):** Photography was invented in the same decade that the first British town of Portland was established in the colony of Victoria. Some of the earliest photography in Victoria was taken of Gunditjmara people by Thomas Hannay in the Portland Bay area in 1859. Hayley, you are a Gunditjmara photographer and your family comes from Lake Condah near Portland. Given that photography has been used as a recording device to document Aboriginal people, how have you subverted this medium to recontextualise the way you tell Gunditjmara Aboriginal history?

**Hayley Millar-Baker (HMB):** I come from a training in painting. Before I took on photography as a medium, I would often photograph my subjects for reference prior to painting them. When you view a photograph, you assume it is telling you a truth, that it is a tool for documentation.

When I started working with cameras more seriously, I knew that the stories I wanted to tell were not going to be captured within one single frame. I wanted to tell the stories of past, present and future, stories of intergenerational experiences, our dreamings, our culture, layered into one image. Photography was built for the white man to document the world. I wanted to flip that, to tell multiple stories all at once. I had to reconsider the way I was constructing my images. I began to shoot singular items such as a tree, a bird, a house, and construct scenes from scratch, building up layer by layer, item by item, into photographic assemblages.

**JT:** Hayley, in your photographic series 'I'm The Captain Now' (2016), you have taken images of everyday Anglo-Australian suburban houses and included Gunditjmara objects and animals in the settings. How have you used photomontage?

**HMB:** Three years ago, I inherited my (non-Indigenous) grandfather's photographic slides and negatives. He was a budding photographer until he had some eye issues and put down the camera for good. My nan called me and asked if I would like to have his test rolls from his photographic schooling. Obviously I said yes. I loved my grandfather and I was devastated when he passed away in 2001. The slides and negatives were from the late

1960s: images of planes from his time in the air force, of suburban neighbourhoods, and of his wife and three children. The images were incredibly well staged – my nan and her children dressed impeccably – but no sign of culture.

There were many reasons for this (due to when the photographs were taken), but still it made me sad, and I wanted to give new life to them and to my young mother and her two sisters, to my nan. I decided to manipulate the images to include small gestures of culture. A red-tailed black cockatoo feather (our family totem) here, clapping sticks there, animals native to our Country, Bunjil's shadow. 'I'm The Captain Now' changes my mother's whole childhood history.

James, throughout your series 'Past the Measuring Stick' (2012) and 'Te Moana Nui: Navigating Time & Space' (2017), you have been 're' learning ancient cultural practices and knowledges from both 'Australia' and the Pacific region. Is there a commitment to follow through your investigation of centuries-old cultural practices with outcomes using historical photographic processes such as the ambrotype and daguerreotype?

**JT:** When I began 'Past the Measuring Stick', 'Te Moana Nui' and 'Voyage of the Waka and the origin of the Dreaming' (2013), I was interested in representing the historical relationships between my heritage of Kurna, Māori and British-Australian. I wanted to use traditional and historical cultural processes from around the time of the British colonisation of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. I recreated Māori and Aboriginal scenes based on British documentation and represented them through the daguerreotype process. I chose the daguerreotype because it was invented around the same time as the colonisation of Te Ika-a-Māui, New Zealand's North Island, and Nunga land. The daguerreotype acted like a historical window into the past and allowed me to visually discuss the colonial point of contact between British, Kurna and Māori people.

Hayley, you are a Gunditjmara traditional owner of the Budj Bim (Mount Eccles) eel aquaculture systems. These are now on their way to being registered as the world's oldest stone-walled fish-trap constructions from around 7000 years ago. How do you use the medium of photography to tell this story of the heritage Budj Bim site in your series 'Toongkateeyt (Tomorrow)' (2017)?

**HMB:** I did not grow up on Country, unfortunately, but a four-hour drive away and we did not visit often. Now that I am older and have the luxury of driving myself, my relationship to Country is stronger. I am able to visit whenever I want.

Since I was a little kid, I would listen to my nan tell stories of our ancestors and the histories of south-western Victoria. That



Top:  
Hayley Millar-Baker, *Untitled 9 (I'm the Captain Now)*, 2016, inkjet print on paper, 20 x 20cm; image courtesy the artist and Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne

Bottom:  
Hayley Millar-Baker, *Untitled 5 (I'm the Captain Now)*, 2016, inkjet print on paper, 20 x 20cm; image courtesy the artist and Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne



Left:  
Hayley Millar-Baker, *Even if the race is fated to disappear 2 (Peeneeyt Meerreeng / Before, Now, Tomorrow)*, 2017, inkjet on cotton rag, 150 x 80cm;  
image courtesy the artist and Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne



Right:  
Hayley Millar-Baker, *Even if the race is fated to disappear 7 (Peeneeyt Meerreeng / Before, Now, Tomorrow)*, 2017, inkjet on cotton rag, 150 x 80cm;  
image courtesy the artist and Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne



Top:  
James Tylor, *Un-resettling (A-frame hut)*, 2013, hand-coloured digital print, 50 x 50cm; image courtesy Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne,  
and GAGPROJECTS, Adelaide and Berlin

Bottom:  
James Tylor, *Un-resettling (dome hut with stone windbreak)*, 2013, hand-coloured digital print, 50 x 50cm; image courtesy Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne,  
and GAGPROJECTS, Adelaide and Berlin

is our super-special bond. I love to listen to our stories, and nan loves to tell them.

In 'Toongkateeyt (Tomorrow)', I wanted to tell the stories of the landscape experiences over multiple generations. I am telling my story through what I see on Country today, my nan's stories, our grandmothers' stories from the mission days, what Country looked like then, and what it looks like now. 'Toongkateeyt (Tomorrow)' tells stories of cultural triumphs and traumas, generations of struggle, and a new generation emerging stronger than ever. The areas surrounding Budj Bim housed my ancestors for a seriously long time; the land continues to tell our stories.

James, your series 'Whalers, Sealers and Land Stealers' (2014) acknowledges the frontier wars that occurred between Gunditjmarra people and European colonists through the act of shooting the daguerreotypes. What importance does the inclusion of physical traces of activity play throughout your photographic work?

JT: The daguerreotypes in 'Whalers, Sealers and Land Stealers' were taken around my family's farm in Narrawong in south-western Victoria. My father's family descended from some of the first European colonists who were whalers and farmers in Victoria. The violent history of Europeans against Gunditjmarra people, and the British dispossession of Gunditjmarra land was not publicly acknowledged. I wanted to represent the violence that was used by shooting my daguerreotypes with a 12-gauge shotgun. As a descendant of the European colonists, I personally feel it is important to acknowledge that my ancestors committed horrible acts towards Aboriginal people. I think as an Australian we have a lot to learn from these stories, and we have a responsibility to be aware of such events so that we do not allow them to happen again.

HMB: James, before the photographic phase of your artmaking, you spend a lot of time performing the construction of objects, particularly in your series 'Un-resettling (Dwellings)' (2013). How did you arrive at the decision to make the photographic segment of this project the exhibited object?

JT: I was a carpenter before I became a photographer, and I did an Indigenous carpentry apprenticeship in Derby, Western Australia. I worked on an Indigenous health clinic and the regional Derby Hospital. The Indigenous carpentry apprenticeship only employed Indigenous people, and all the construction methods we learnt during the apprenticeship were European building techniques. We were not taught anything about traditional Indigenous building or construction methods. When I started the 'Un-resettling' series, there was not much information

on traditional Aboriginal houses. I decided to research and learn, and as a result I decided to construct such dwellings on public reserves and national parks. Once I had built a traditional house, I decided to document the outcome by photographing the construction. The photographs of the houses allowed me to bring the documentation into the western-style gallery space.

HMB: James, your exhibiting practices are quite an experience. The way you conduct a gallery space during an exhibition allows you to breathe new life into the works through extra context – for instance, painting the walls with Aboriginal symbols. What influenced you to ditch the museum standard of display for photographs, and how do you hope these choices enhance the audience's experience of viewing your work?

JT: As an Indigenous person, I practise culture not art. Culture is the experience of everything from knowledge, philosophy, food, music, dance, song, ceremony, performance, language, history, landscape, architecture, art, and so on. I think the western framework of the art museum/gallery has limitations when practising culture because culture has no boundaries. I find the museum restrictive because I want people to experience my art as a cultural experience. My practice has been mostly photography, and I have tried to create a window that people look into and see culture. As my practice developed, I wanted the cultural experience to move out of the photograph and into the gallery space. I aim to decolonise and indigenise the Australian experience of the museum and gallery platform. For example, in 'Un-resettling' I like people to view Kurna culture through the window of my photographs. As the 'Un-resettling' project developed over time, I wanted people to be physically immersed in the experience of Kurna culture, so I included sculptural elements to give a more holistic experience.

Aboriginal people have been the subject of photography for over a century in Australia, and Aboriginal people have used photography within art now for the last 50-plus years. Hayley, do you think Indigenous artists have created a unique Indigenous style of photography in Australia?

HMB: Yes, I think the ways in which we view, handle and take photographs to tell our stories are so thick and deep in narrative. Our histories shine through in our photographs; it would be impossible for them not to. We've returned the gaze.

'James Tylor and Hayley Millar-Baker: Dark Country' was exhibited at Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne, from 25 July until 1 September 2018.



Left:  
James Tylor, *Vanished Scenes From an Untouched Landscape #5*, 2018, inkjet print on Hahnemühle paper with hole removed to a black velvet void, 25 x 25cm;  
image courtesy Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne, and GAGPROJECTS, Adelaide and Berlin

Right:  
James Tylor, *Vanished Scenes From an Untouched Landscape #12*, 2018, inkjet print on Hahnemühle paper with hole removed to a black velvet void, 25 x 25cm;  
image courtesy Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne, and GAGPROJECTS, Adelaide and Berlin