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# Artlink

## INDIGENOUS

Contemporary art of Australia and the Asia-Pacific

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# BLACKGROUND



lived experience

cultural apartheid

kinship

fair exchange

alternative blackfellas

Richard Bell

return of the boomerang

Yhonnie Scarce

Brian Robinson

James Tylor

Yinamala Gumana



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James Tylor *Deleted scenes (from an untouched landscape) #6* 2013, inkjet print on Hahnemühle paper, velvet, edition of 5, 50 X 50 cm. Courtesy and © the artist.

# Moments of **INTERSECTION**

■ Eleanor Scicchitano

## James Tylor

If you spend more than a few hours with Adelaide-based photographer James Tylor, conversation will inevitably turn to culture: its meanings, definitions and the way in which our heritage tends to define our perception of self and others' understanding of us. As a man of Aboriginal, Māori and British descent, these issues have been central to many of Tylor's experiences growing up in the Kimberley region of Western Australia and the far west of New South Wales. The points at which these bloodlines intersect lie at the heart of Tylor's practice as he explores his hybrid identity, attempting to find a balance between these three cultures and both his contemporary experience and personal understandings of them. Tylor joins an increasing number of artists working in this area, such as Julie Gough, Lorraine Connelly-Northey and Jason Wing. Each of these

practitioners acknowledges their diverse backgrounds and examines the ways in which their multi-racial heritage affects their individual identity.

Exhibited in his first solo exhibition, at Marshall Arts, Adelaide, in November 2013, *Past the Measuring Stick* (2012) was a series of small ambrotypes,<sup>1</sup> developed on black glass, each depicting what appears to be a turn of the century Indigenous artefact. The plates could be part of a museum collection; their appearance is suggestive of documentation created by early colonial explorers. These objects and glass plates however are not from another time. Each one is a hybrid work, an Aboriginal tool created using Māori materials or vice versa, captured with one of the earliest photographic processes, commonly used by British explorers to document their



James Tylor *Un-resettling (dwellings)* 2013, hand-coloured archival inkjet print, 42 x 42 cm. Courtesy and © the artist. FROM TOP LEFT ANTI-CLOCKWISE TO TOP RIGHT (A-frame hut); (lean-to hut); (dome hut in a field); (half dome hut on a cliff face); (half dome hut on a desert plain); (stone footing for dome hut).



James Tylor *Kauri Clap Sticks* 2012, from *Past the measuring stick* series, ambrotype on black glass with clear glass face mounting, 10.2 X 12.7 cm. Courtesy and © the artist.

discoveries. From construction to documentation, Tylor has created these objects from both sides of his 'lens', telling both the Indigenous and colonial stories simultaneously.

The artist aims to find a peaceful balance between these three histories, utilising 18th century tools and processes to re-imagine a moment of their intersection and bring it into a contemporary setting. These photographic plates challenge the lens through which we view museum pieces. If this work, so closely resembling an 'authentic' artefact was created by a contemporary artist, what of those 'timeless' pieces on show in museums? Are they objects from a dead culture or rather, working tools and artworks of a culture that is living and continuing to this day? And how do we separate the art from the ethnographic object? Whether or not Tylor achieves his goal, these pieces provoke thought and discussion both in the gallery and beyond.

Tylor's work is not only conceptually challenging but often aesthetically 'beautiful' – a characteristic that works to draw viewers into his complex exploration of culture. His series *hopes, dreams and nightmares* (2013), consists of exquisite, small daguerreotypes depicting picturesque farmland scenes. Their scale encourages the viewer to lean in close, to see the tiny images of trees standing alone in paddocks, an outcrop of introduced species on a horizon. Each image is created *in-situ* and developed onto highly polished pieces of silver so that the face of the viewer is reflected back to them. The effect is one in which we become part of the image, implicit in the scene by inclusion of our likeness. But the beauty of these plates is deceiving, the history of these sites only hinted at by their title and, once discovered, the truth is jarring. These are scenes shot around Tylor's father's farm in Victoria. As he describes "my father would tell me stories as a child of our old farm, battles between the first European family who farmed there and places that have never been farmed on because of what lay beneath". Tylor exposes an alternate history of Australia and its colonisation, and through these works acknowledges the fate of his people enacted by the other side of his cultural

heritage. Each work is tied intimately to his present through a connection with this land and his childhood.

*Voyage of the Waka and, the Origin of the Dreaming* (2013) created as part of his postgraduate study, began with extensive research into Charles Darwin and his journal *Voyage of the Beagle*, written on his second voyage of discovery from 1831-1836. It was at this time that Darwin was developing his theories of evolution, and visited both Australia and New Zealand. On this journey he encountered and documented not only Māori and Indigenous Australians, but also instances of mixed race relationships. There is another link to be made between these journals and Tylor's own practice: it was at this time that the daguerreotype was developed and employed to capture these travels. Armed with this knowledge, the artist has re-imagined the journey, producing a series of fractured close-ups; the fierce eyes of a warrior, the palm of a hand bearing the words 'English Nunga Māori', a woman's chin bearing a Tā Moko, a traditional Māori face tattoo. Many of these works are self-portraits, Tylor again placing himself on both sides of the camera. These images are representative of the way in which the artist understands his own identity, how these three cultures have merged and interacted, and how this merging can now be represented, utilising one of the mediums through which Indigenous peoples were originally documented rather than understood.

In his next solo exhibition at Constance ARI in Tasmania in April 2014, Tylor will revisit a photographic series he created while studying on the island in 2012 and showed at Tandanya in 2013. Following his on-going interest in Indigenous architecture, he built a number of Aboriginal traditional shelters. He then photographed each one, handcolouring the hut against a black and white background. At Tandanya he also built a shelter in the gallery. The images highlight the absence of these structures from our landscape, mirroring the erasure of Indigenous cultures from our historical record. When he shows this work in Hobart, Tylor will also re-visit the sites on which he built these huts. Two years on many of them have all but disappeared back into the bush while others remain strong. Tylor will return to these sites to enact an almost archaeological study, researching and documenting his own recent history.

Much of the strength of Tylor's work is derived from the way in which he begins with intimate moments, quiet times of reflection and personal stories, and reimagines these experiences. He is then able to tie wider histories into his understanding of his own multi-racial identity. Tylor lives these lives, through research, creating artefacts and taking part in an intimate and tactile photographic process: often, chemicals can still be smelt on his skin after a long day in the darkroom. There is little judgement in these images, they do not harshly accuse but rather offer an invitation to reflect. He understands that to ignore part of his heritage would be at the detriment of those other histories, and would be a betrayal that would leave him understanding only part of who he is. Through a practice that brings these cultures and experiences together, Tylor is able to explore both his own identity and contribute to a contemporary understanding of culture. ■

<sup>1</sup> The ambrotype is a photograph that creates a positive image on a sheet of glass using the wet plate collodion process. It first came into use in the early 1850s.