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Features /

## Dale Harding's Narratives of Displacement



BY HENDRIK FOLKERTS

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In Harding's paintings and sculpture, the past and the present merge in a potent reflection on contemporary Australia



Ancestry is a spiritual bond set in the body. Dale Harding – a descendant of the Bidjara, Ghungalu and Garingbal peoples of Central Queensland – builds on the artistic traditions and iconographies of his communities to discuss issues around race, power and agency in contemporary Australia. Yet, his articulation of ancestry does not stop there. Harding's work aligns with the legacy of a generation of artists who emerged in the 1980s and '90s and who gave voice and form to the experience of First Nations people. These include the late Gordon Bennett, who employed the visual vocabulary of pop art and appropriation to critique structural racism in Australia; Destiny Deacon, whose multi-layered photographs scrutinize representation and race with a complex sense of humour; Gordon Hookey, who, before embarking on his multi-year painting project that records the history of Australia from an Indigenous perspective, put a dot on a painting accompanied with the words: 'This is not a dot painting' (*Dot Painting*, 2006); and Richard Bell, whose roving Aboriginal *Embassy* (2013–ongoing) protests the displacement of Indigenous people while offering a space for togetherness and collectivity. While Harding builds on these foundational practices, he also engages with recent art histories of performance and postminimalism, exploring the relationship between the sculptural object and his own body.



Dale Harding, *Digging Stick*, 2019, shovel, blue pigment, 23 × 97 cm. Unless otherwise stated, all images courtesy: the artist, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, and Milani Gallery, Brisbane; photograph: Carl Warner

Harding's installation *Body of Objects* (2017) – which premiered at Milani Gallery in Brisbane and was featured at documenta 14 in Athens – is characterized by a disquieting sense of loss. It comprises numerous white museum plinths of different sizes and heights, on which boomerangs, spears, clubs and whips are displayed. Yet, these weapons are not made of wood or iron; reproduced in silicone, they are soft objects, drooping over the edges of the plinths. In the act of reproduction, Harding renders important ancestral objects of power and pride as commodities, stripped of their function. The silicone has a seductive, even fetishistic, appeal. By making copies of objects associated with men, Harding scrutinizes the ways in which Aboriginal masculinity is sexualized and objectified. The plinths allude both to the historical display of Aboriginal artworks and artefacts as ethnographic objects, and to the broader art-historical (and market) context in Australia that exclusively considers Aboriginal art in these terms – a hierarchy between anthropology and art history that Harding and his predecessors challenge and complicate.



Dale Harding, *Blackboy* (detail), 2017, xanthorrhoea resin on glass on timber plinth, 18 x 201 x 6 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

The act of reclaiming objects, spaces and languages to highlight mechanisms of exclusion and continued colonial violence is embodied in Harding's *Blackboy* (2017). This sculptural installation comprises a glass rectangle, two metres in length, on a white timber plinth that can be either freestanding or attached to the wall. The plinth is slightly too short for the sculpture, which is the length of the artist's body. As a result, it doesn't quite fit – much akin to Harding's own sense of not belonging. The surface is sprayed with the brown, slightly translucent resin of *xanthorrhoea australis*, a plant indigenous to Australia that was, for many years, referred to as a 'black boy' – a moniker that was adopted by British settlers who mistook the tall plant, which often grows at the edge of rivers, for an Aboriginal person. The resin is tacky, which results in the sculpture absorbing everything from natural light to dust particles. In this sense, *Blackboy* could be seen as a stand-in for the artist himself, as the work traverses agency and loss in language, materiality and physicality. Similar to *Body of Objects*, the plinth of *Blackboy* alludes to the history of



museum display – in particular, the exhibition of human remains in 19th-century colonial world fairs and ethnographic institutions.



Dale Harding, *Wall Composition in Bimbird and Reckitt's Blue*, 2018, installation view, Liverpool Biennial, Tate Liverpool. Courtesy: the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane; photograph: Thierry Bal

The relationship between sculpture and the body is a key theme in Harding's practice. Yet, painting is equally important to him as a lens through which to consider the politics of land and landscape. In both wall-based pieces and sculptures, he frequently merges the strategies of colour field painting with the stencilling processes of rock art and cave painting. Many of these works are references to Carnarvon Gorge in central Queensland: a sacred ancestral site that has been used for thousands of years by the Bidjara and the Karingbal peoples to record their histories through stencilled images of ceremonial and domestic objects, weaponry and the human body. For his wall-based works *Ngaya boonda yinda nayi yoolgoogoo / I carry you in my heart* (2016), *Composite Wall Panel: Reckitt's Blue* (2017) and *Wall Composition in Bimbird and Reckitt's Blue* (2018) – which were included in the 11th Gwangju Biennale, documenta 14 in Kassel and the Liverpool Biennial in 2018 – Harding used stencils to copy objects and body parts directly onto the wall. Images of spears, sticks and boomerangs are interspersed with silhouettes of hands, fingers or a full-body stencil of the artist himself. Harding employs a technique used by his ancestors: he sprays the pigments onto the object with his mouth to create a silhouetted image

on the wall – quite literally interfacing between his body, the object and the wall-as-canvas. He uses ochres from culturally significant locations, including Carnarvon Gorge, as signifiers of land imbued with ancestral presence but also narratives of displacement.

The ultramarine pigment Reckitt's Blue – which Harding's mother used in her job as a domestic worker – often returns in these pieces. Originally produced in the UK as a whitening detergent, Reckitt's Blue was first advertised in Australia in 1869. Although similar in colour to naturally occurring ochres traditionally used by Aboriginal people, Reckitt's Blue was used as a pigment with binder on Indigenous artefacts shortly after its introduction to the country. In these works, each gesture, technique, form and colour produces a mode of abstraction that combines Indigenous and non-Indigenous art histories with individual memories.

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Dale Harding, *Body of Objects*, 2017, installation view, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane

'Current Iterations', Harding's major exhibition held earlier this year at the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane, featured two works that connect the artist's archaeological and iconographic approaches to his studio. *Digging Stick* (2019), a commercially produced shovel sprayed with Reckitt's Blue, was used to create an in-situ iteration of his studio wall emblazoned with a stencil of the shovel (*Studio Wall*, 2019). With these interdependent pieces, Harding inserts his contemporary practice into the lineage of artists that came before him, suggesting the studio as a spatial metaphor and actual site of artistic production that continues into the present. Yet, he also proposes an excavation of that space to question what this inheritance signifies. At the bottom of *Composite Wall Panel: Reckitt's Blue* in Kassel, Harding wrote:

What is theirs is ours now  
I do not claim to own  
Yet I inherit this sense of self  
We did not inherit shame or fear or suffering  
Mediocrity is not their legacy  
This is our time.

Harding articulates a bond that moves beyond mere iconography and creates a continuum in space and time. Through these words, a complex genealogy emerges that aligns his practice with those who came before him but who live on in the present.

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*Main image: Dale Harding, Studio Wall (detail), 2019, charcoal, nails, pigment, wood, 1.8 × 2.5 m. Courtesy: the artist, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane and Milani Gallery, Brisbane; photograph: Carl Warner*

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DALE HARDING

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