

AN INCOMPLETE REGISTER

ASHLEY PERRY

22.05.20 – 24.05.20

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WORDS BY SOPHIA SAMBONO

...words that were spoken by hundreds of generations of people before being consigned to a silent archive for decades, are re-awoken, sung into existence by a generation of descendants far removed from the audiences of the past.

Matt Poll, Curator of Indigenous Heritage collections and Repatriation Project at the University of Sydney¹

The work of interdisciplinary Goenpul artist from Quandamooka country, Ashley Perry, calls into question institutional collections that inherited First Nation's material culture. What purpose do they hold in contemporary society? Especially for Indigenous peoples.

Colonial expansion in Australia executed the invasion of ancestral lands that brought with it not only loss of land, but disconnection to language, cultural practices, and the decimation of complex societies and systems. Active participants in this destruction, colonial collectors – cultural scavengers – sought to possess First Nation's culture through artefacts – hoarding them in systems of classification and control, divorced from the stories and language that formed the fabric of these complex societal/cultural/spiritual systems the objects represent.

These Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums (GLAM) institutions – store houses of treasures, knowledge (and trauma) – are an important cultural and political resource for First Nations peoples. As an Aboriginal curator in the sector for over decade it has been my mission to ensure First Nations access, advocate for cultural, spiritual and emotional care of collections, and facilitate the interrogation of dominant Australian historical narratives at the core of these collections. I have been privileged to witness first-hand the powerful impact Indigenous led access and agency over collections can have for cultural maintenance and reclamation; as well as contemporary cultural and artistic responses that address the deafening silence of Indigenous voices and cultural authority to offer new interpretive dimensions to historical records.

Through the process of creating a personal archive of 100s of objects with connection to Quandamooka country in institutional collections throughout the world Perry has revealed glaring absences in the historical record and encountered a plethora of obstacles and gatekeeping practices. Perry's experience has elicited potent responses, to not only the collections but the systems that govern them.

Perry's *An Incomplete Register* explores "the accessibility of Information, the recording of time, and potentialities" through works that "fit between spaces, between the future and the past, fiction and fact, Institution and independence."²

He offers us biting commentary on institutional systems through a satirical look at who should be funded to care for material culture in international collections in *A letter, about the remuneration for...* 2017 and his critique on the deployment of physical methods of control of information in *enlighten illumination* 2020 signifying frameworks of information holding and withholding.

Via his works, Perry takes his response further to imagine alternate histories and potential futures. *A Fiction, about the repatriation of bags once owned by the Last Woman of the Tarampa Tribe...* 2017 imagines a new speculative fiction that empowers Indigenous descendants as “rightful owners” in an alternative reality that posits an even playing field for the repatriation or return of cultural heritage.

Sinker 2017 and *Weather Stones* 2017 pay homage to an idealised future of repatriation, through digital and 3D imaging. These images are conceptualised models – digital stone mapping if you will – of ancestral objects, a yungan (dugong) net sinker and weather portents, that have been detailed both in archival records and oral history but have no surviving illustration.

Perry's essential work researching and paring collections with stories and future objects repositions Indigenous voice and agency over historical collections; it creates a space in which the GLAM sector could embrace – and facilitate – a future imagined by artists, honouring ancestral stories and knowledge, embedded in continuing living culture.

Sophia Sambono is a descendant of the Jingili people of the central northern desert. She is currently Acting Assistant Curator, Indigenous Australian Art, Queensland Art Gallery |Gallery of Modern Art.

¹Matt Poll, 2018, *Archives as instruments*, Australian Society of Archivists VIC Branch Newsletter, July 2018, p13

²Correspondence with the artist, 13 March 2020

Outer Space acknowledges the traditional custodians of Meanjin, where this project is carried out, and we pay our respects to Elders - past, present and emerging.

OUTER SPACE

1/170 Montague Road,
South Brisbane QLD 4101

May gallery hours:
4-8pm Friday-Sunday
(during exhibition periods)

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