

Creating the Cultural Interface through Encounter in Contemporary Indigenous Australian Art Practices: Engaging with Invisible Histories

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Abstract: Notions of an alternative present an interface for reimagining historical encounters. Such an interface coincides with opportunities offered by Australian contemporary art practices that speak to local experiences of place and how this might challenge understandings of national narratives, as well as offer spaces to explore intersections of compounded entanglement across cultures. In this paper, I argue that contemporary Indigenous art practices in Australia play a significant role in engaging with complex historical, cultural and political issues through two key concepts, the first being an encounter and the second a cultural interface, both of which are centred around recalibrating historical perspectives and providing opportunities to explore national tensions, complexities and ambiguities. The paper takes a case study of selected contemporary Australian artworks by Indigenous artists in the 2017 exhibition titled *Defying Empire* to examine how artistic practices help to unleash dialogue and previously undisclosed knowledge by addressing issues such as invisible histories.

Keywords: Contemporary Australian Indigenous art practices; encounter; cultural interface; invisible histories

In one of the rooms located in the Australian National Gallery in Canberra, hangs the painting titled *Captain No Beard* (2005) by Daniel Boyd, a Kudjla/Gangalu artist.¹ This work is a visual pun on the concept of *terra nullius* in Australia and re-defines British colonisation as an act of piracy. In this painting, Captain James Cook is portrayed not as an explorer but as a pirate with a parrot on his shoulder and a patch over his eye. Boyd's painting is a response to the iconic 1782 *Portrait of Captain James Cook* by John Webber¹ exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery and challenges Australia's collective history while questioning how land was claimed in the 18th century and what impact this has had on Indigenous communities. The curatorial hanging of this contemporary painting in the colonial art collection of the National Gallery of Australia, alongside paintings of early Australian pastoralists and new settlers to the country, disrupts the meaning of landscape from one of new discovery, to one of illegitimate land ownership. This example highlights how contemporary Indigenous Australian art practices play a significant role in the way dominant narratives might be challenged and reimagined in present day Australia. It also reveals the entanglement of Indigenous and non-Indigenous references and the intent to invite the public to re-examine Australia's history.

This paper argues that contemporary Indigenous art practices in Australia play a key pedagogical role, engaging the public with complex historical, cultural and political issues centred around recalibrating historical perspectives that are often omitted in Australian political and national discourses involving First Nations peoples. To this end, this article presents a case study of selected contemporary Australian artworks by Indigenous artists in an exhibition titled *Defying Empire* that constituted the 3rd National Indigenous Art Triennial in 2017 at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra. It examines these works through a framework drawing on encounter and cultural interface in order to illustrate the pedagogical potential of

¹ Available at <https://www.portrait.gov.au/portraits/2000.25/portrait-of-captain-james-cook-rn>

specific Indigenous-led artworks as a result of the capacity offered by artistic practices to challenge historical perspectives and notions of truth.

The inspiration for this study stems from the practical dilemmas that arise for Australian educators when they consider and plan to teach Indigenous perspectives. Numerous government policies have given shape to the Australian education system with respect to “closing the gap” between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian education outcomes and providing Indigenous Australians with professional opportunities (see Bradley et al.; Behrendt et al.).² It is the Australian Government’s intention that all primary and secondary teachers will have, as a minimum, a proficient level of demonstrable professional expertise in Indigenous Studies. In more recent discussions, tertiary institutions are examining ways of integrating Indigenous perspectives and/or knowledges in their courses. This is Australia’s attempt to address the effects of colonial dispossession on Indigenous Australians.

Despite these initiatives, as recent reports on teaching Indigenous perspectives in education suggest, “postcolonial democracies such as Australia are struggling to employ new frameworks in which to undertake teacher professional development in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander domain” (Ma Rhea 11). Juliana McLaughlin notes in a study on educating culturally competent professionals that the success of these initiatives depends on understanding Indigenous perspectives and knowledges (253). Meanwhile, little discussion exists about non-Indigenous staff who make up the bulk of teachers in Australian universities, and how these initiatives should be approached, or how they impact the professional practice of educators other than to suggest a decolonising approach to teaching practice (McLaughlin 251). Furthermore, some studies argue that the frameworks that exist “lack a guiding commitment to a rights and strengths perspective” (Ma Rhea 11). Other works reveal that the “uncritical transfer of Western knowledge systems through colonizing processes” require a “rethinking of how we educate future global cultural competency within the Australian context” and invite educators to “accept social and ethical responsibility to critique existing knowledge of Indigenous Australia” (McLaughlin 249). This invites a theoretical investigation of the complexities of learning contexts around two distinct knowledge systems: Indigenous and Western. Williamson and Dalal, writing from the perspective of university personnel who have been involved with what they call “Indigenizing” the curriculum outline the dilemma of running the “risk of implying the application of an ‘impoverished’ version of ‘Aboriginal Pedagogy’ and the promotion of corrupted understandings of Indigenous knowledge” (51).

In a broader social context, practical dilemmas arise in the way Australian history is understood and disseminated. Currently, Australian national narratives are largely based around events such as early British settlement, European explorers, allegiance to the British monarchy, ANZAC story and the tales of migrant arrivals (Browning, “Statues”). In recent times, scholars have argued for the need to “talk about accuracy in the depiction of Australia’s past” (Browning, “Statues”), referring to Australia’s history and its perception of Indigenous people as one based on lies, deception inaccuracies and dishonesty (see Bottom; Gunstone; Kelly and Stanner). Indeed, Australian Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton Robinson argues that “the

² According to the report by Behrendt et al., “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are significantly underrepresented in the higher education system, contributing to the high levels of social and economic disadvantage they often experience” (Behrendt et al. ix). This same report refers to the Closing the Gap agenda defined as “a commitment by all Australian governments to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across six areas relating to health, early childhood development, education and economic participation” (Behrendt et al. 3).

origins of sovereignty in Australia are predicated on a myth of *Terra Nullius* (the imagination of an un-possessed continent), which functioned as a truth within a race war of coercion, murder and appropriation carried out by white men in the service of the British Crown” (“Imagining” 64). Likewise, numerous other examples of contested national events have hit the media headlines: calls to change the date of Australia’s national day; pleas to recognise the existence of frontier violence during European settlement; unresolved responses to the referendum on Indigenous recognition in the Constitution (Browning, “With Secrecy;” Daly; Mundine). According to radio presenter Daniel Browning, Australia is currently in a “truth telling phase” with debates on Australian history centring on “accuracy over inaccuracy and the precise use of language” challenging the “myths” that exist about the past and the “stories people want to tell about themselves” (“Statues”). Indeed, truth telling has emerged as one of the key aspects in the process of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. It is a theme identified in many key Indigenous movements such as the 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart or the 2019 theme of the National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee where the title “Voice, Treaty, Truth” are key elements to national reform in the area of Indigenous rights (NAIDOC).

What is less straightforward about the dialogue on truth telling and reframing national stories is how to map new knowledges and perspectives without unleashing the many defences that occur when challenging ways of understanding historical events. Such defences often manifest as “white fragility” (DiAngelo, “White Fragility” and “White People”). Australian Indigenous author Scott Trindall suggests that “White fragility can describe the collective emotions of angst, denial, fear and outrage that are present when those from the dominant culture engage with critical race awareness. In a recent article, Robin DiAngelo argues that these “conversations are critical because, by virtually every measure, racial inequality persists, and institutions continue to be overwhelmingly controlled by white people. While most of us see ourselves as ‘not racist,’ we continue to reproduce racist outcomes and live segregated lives” (DiAngelo, “White People”).

Theoretical Underpinnings: Encounter and Cultural Interface

In order to map new knowledges and viewpoints while examining contested national stories and Indigenous perspectives, the major challenge is to develop theoretical approaches that privilege learners, problematise practices, and incorporate localised knowledges by dynamically including different parts of the community and different points of view. In Nikos Papastergiadis and Daniella Trimble’s scheme of things, the concept of encounter in artistic practices is a key lens through which to examine new cultural flows. For these cultural theorists, a framework centred on encounter provides spaces for ideas that are “forged in contexts that are distant from each other” to find “new points of intersection” through the notion of learning encounters (Papastergiadis and Trimble 394). The notion of encounter problematises the possibility of representing complex social, historical and cultural issues. Similarly, Martin Nakata’s work on the cultural interface theorises a way of embedding Indigenous perspectives in educational spaces. As an Indigenous Australian scholar, Nakata provides an Indigenous standpoint on decolonising knowledge in the disciplines as a method for emancipating colonised peoples and reinstating Indigenous worldviews. Both these frameworks play a critical role in engaging with complex historical, cultural and political issues centred around identity. They are useful lenses for the pedagogical potential of art practices because they allow for the interactions and contradictions of different perspectives. On the one hand, the notion of encounter speaks to local experiences of place and time in artistic practices, and how these might challenge understandings of national identity. On the other hand, the cultural interface presents an Indigenous perspective with a theoretical standpoint through which to examine

these encounters.

With regard to encounter, Papastergiadis and Trimboli articulate the difficulty in capturing the “fragmentary and fluctuating translations involved in … encounters” (397) identifying artistic interventions as a way “to overcome this difficulty by providing us pathways to horizontal rather than vertical articulations of knowledge” (398). These scholars refer to encounter and the notion of “the fold” with regard to diasporic art and imagination. The idea of the fold can be extended to cultural exchange in contemporary Australian Indigenous art practices as the “folding of past, present and future” in the search for new forms of “cultural intimacies” (Papastergiadis and Trimboli 393). As art practices fold together different times and spaces “in the sphere of the imagination,” they also create new knowledge that present aspects of “contradiction and unease” as well as “reinvention” and “new life” (401). Papastergiadis and Trimboli refer to the “bending and splicing of time and space” so that “distant elements and different signs are meshed together to produce hybrid subjectivities” (394). According to Papastergiadis and Trimboli, the consequences of imaginative folding are “new perspectives, subjectivities, and symbolic and material entities” (394) with encounters between elements offering possibilities to initiate “a process of change” (Papastergiadis 170). Indeed, the opportunities of encounter open up an interface for reimagining historical encounters meshed into contemporary issues of entanglement.

Similarly, for Nakata the cultural interface shifts the focus to Indigenous experiences within contested spaces and recognises “all the disruptions, discontinuities, continuities and convergences of knowledge in this space and appreciations of the complexities that exist there” (“Pathways” 5). The conditions of this space require appreciation and acknowledgement of the presence of Indigenous and non-Indigenous standpoints. The interface, therefore, assumes complexity as a condition of the space, but does not see the solution to be the endless separation of Indigenous from non-Indigenous (“Pathways” 5). What Nakata suggests is that we “normalise the presence of Indigenous content” so that it is not “an oddity, a novelty, a token or an add-on” (“Pathways” 6). In other words, Indigenous perspectives should not be equated with the inclusion of Indigenous content, but should rather be regarded as an inherent part of the diversity in the nation while still recognising Indigenous people as representing the first culture of the land. In a similar vein to Papastergiadis and Trimboli, Nakata’s cultural interface is a space of “dynamic relations constituted by the intersections of time, place, distance, different systems of thought, competing and contesting discourses within and between different knowledge traditions” (*Disciplining the Savages* 199).

For societies like Australia, which are perceived by Indigenous people as “postcolonizing” (Moreton-Robinson, “I Still Call” 37), this focus on encounter and cultural interface allows us to consider how different perspectives come together (Indigenous/non-Indigenous and variances within). It also allows us to consider how the past is still deeply ingrained in the present and finally it allows us to see the limits of communication—perhaps we will never find a common ground but at least we can raise awareness and talk about it, whilst uncovering a way to articulate and unearth difficult stories of cultural dispossession. Subsequently, the pedagogical content of art practices is itself an emergent space of encounter embedded within a cultural interface. Indeed, like the mythologies and national narratives in Australia about “first contact” that often play out using pictorial and written descriptions of Captain Cook’s “encounters” with Indigenous people on the shores of Botany Bay, artistic interventions enable spaces of knowledge building, conceived as learning encounters, to layer and fold, intertwine and enfold contemporary and historical points of interpretation and difference within a space that acknowledges their complexities and ambiguities. The imaginative folding and layering of

diverse perspectives across time and space will be used now for the examination of the exhibition titled *Defying Empire*.

Defying Empire

The exhibition titled *Defying Empire* opened in 2017 at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra as part of the National Indigenous Art Triennial (see Figure 1). The Triennial is seen as a carefully considered survey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contemporary arts practice in Australia. *Defying Empire* in 2017 featured thirty established, mid-career and emerging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists from each Australian state and territory and coincided with the 50th anniversary of the 1967 Referendum to include Aboriginal people in the national census. The exhibition *Defying Empire* provides a vital example of the relation between the “folds” in time and space of historical events that reverberate in the contemporary period. Specifically, it is a space of dynamic and complex intersections between different histories and experiences with elements cohering together to inform what can be seen or not seen.

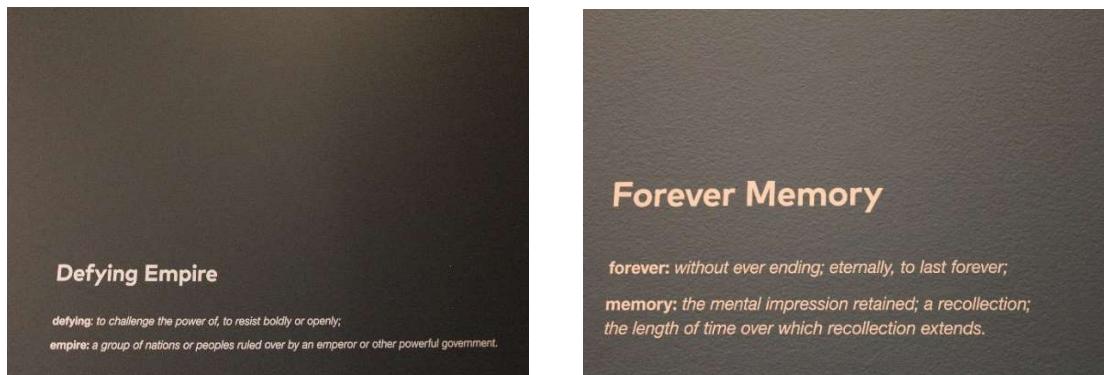
According to the introduction of the exhibition catalogue, *Defying Empire* marks “the ongoing resistance and defiance by Indigenous people against colonisation and the British Empire from first contact until today” (Baum 11). The catalogue also reveals that showing this exhibition in Canberra is significant because it is in the nation’s capital and consequently “the focal point of all Commonwealth Government decisions; rulings that dictated” the lives of past and present Indigenous Australians (Baum 11).



Figure 1. Entrance to the *Defying Empire* exhibition.

While this description underscores the present-day challenges in the way we currently understand Australia’s history, the word Empire highlights what Morton-Robinson refers to as the “postcolonizing space” (“I Still Call Australia Home” 37). Moreton-Robinson purposefully attributes action and ongoing process to the postcolonial in Australia through the term postcolonising, “to signify the active, the current and the continuing nature of the colonising relationship” that positions Indigenous people as “belonging but not belonging” (“I Still Call” 38). Moreton-Robinson highlights the pathological cycle created by British colonisation which she refers to as “unfinished business” (“Imagining” 77). Her work identifies how the “pathological behaviour of patriarchal white sovereignty has been produced by the contradictions and imbalances in its fundamental constitution originating in Australia through theft and violence” (Moreton-Robinson, “Imagining” 77). For Moreton-Robinson, the “premise of colonization that Australia *belonged to no one* informed the relationship between Indigenous people and the nation state from its very inception and continues to do so” (“I Still Call Australia Home” 33). Likewise, the use of the term “Empire” in the title of the exhibition

underscores how British colonisation has had an ongoing effect in defining Indigenous Australians and subsequently the relation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The exhibition explores the continuing impact of this complex colonial history along with issues relating to memory, identity, culture and politics. Each space in the exhibition is delineated by the following key concept: Forever Memory; Recounting and Revival; Resistance and Refusal; Disrupting Invisibility; Asserting Presence; Rising Passion; and Bearing Witness. Consequently, these titles have the effect of grouping together art works that present varying viewpoints on concepts that challenge invisible histories and call for the recognition of Indigenous narratives.



Figures 2 & 3. Information panels placed at the entry of each section of the *Defying Empire* exhibition

Rewriting History and Unveiling Hidden Histories

Knowledge production is a key feature in *Defying Empire*. Information panels at the entrance of each section of the exhibition bear a title. Under each title, entry words are followed by dictionary-like definitions addressing key issues that interrupt a linear presentation of time and present the overlaps of the past, present and future through notions such as “memory,” “revival” and “rising passions” (Figures 2 and 3). Consequently, the historical is brought into the contemporary, akin to what historian Kate Gregory refers to as a “frisson between the past and the present” (4). The identification and definition of the words selected to go on these panels underline the exhibition’s intent to focus and draw attention to concepts that have impacted the way we view and understand social and historical trajectories referring to notions such as “invisibility” and “refusal” which in the everyday do not usually need an explanation but in the exhibition space take on a didactic role and challenge the way history is articulated.

At the back of the exhibition catalogue, a map of Australia indicates the ancestral origins of each artist participating in the exhibition while also indicating their current location, often different to that of their ancestors. For instance, the catalogue informs the reader that the artist Tony Albert is from the Girramay/Yidinji/Kuku-Yalanji peoples and lives and works in Sydney. This reference to ancestral origins highlights an Indigenous sense of belonging which is, according to Moreton-Robinson, “derived from an ontological relationship to country derived from the Dreaming” (“I Still Call Australia Home” 31). It also engages with a dislocation, meaning that “Indigenous people can be out of place in another’s country but through cultural protocols and the commonality of [their] ontological relationship to country [they] can be in place but away from [their] home country. This is a different experience of migrancy to that of the postcolonial subject” (Moreton-Robinson 33). Consequently, the title of the exhibition *Defying Empire* represents the disruptions and connections created by

colonisation as a continuous process and it encapsulates imaginative foldings of time and space to create possibilities for the exploration of troublesome knowledges. These possibilities also provide the cultural interface that Nakata suggests could be included as discussion points to tackle difficult and complex questions in Australia's history.

The exhibition engages with commemoration and the remembering of events that reveal contradictions to the way history is understood in Australia and presents the potential for intersections of time and place in order to present different systems of thought and invisible stories. In many of the artworks in *Defying Empire*, the overlapping folds between past and present is palpable. An example of this folding is evident in the work of Julie Gough, a Trawlwoolway artist. Her video projection titled *Hunting Ground (Pastoral) Van Diemen's Land* (2016-2017) runs for approximately thirteen minutes and plays on a continuous loop.³ The work highlights the massacres of Aboriginal people following the arrival of colonists. Gough highlights the marked absence of this history in current national discourse. In an artist's statement Gough relates that this work is the result of trying to find "some of the places that match the few written accounts of violent attacks on Aboriginal people in Van Diemen's Land (present day Tasmania) by colonists in the first thirty five years post invasion" (*With Secrecy and Despatch*).

In this work, Gough reworks historic pastoral landscapes painted by 18th century European artists who came to Australia, landscapes that are now located in art galleries around Australia. She counters the idyllic narratives of early colonial paintings, which are often portrayed as stories of peaceful settlement. In her video, Gough corrects the visual record. She takes these idyllic pastoral scenes of paintings and films them. As the video progresses, each print is slowly inscribed with quotations from historical documents detailing a massacre that occurred at the same site. Markings such as red arrows, crosses or circles appear beneath the superimposed words. Words referencing time and space (e.g. '1829', 'Launceston') appear over the landscape and disrupt the idyllic scenes with words from local media written in the 1800s to hold the land for the colonists' sheep (e.g. 'pursuit', 'Black's', 'NATIVES', 'killed'). Each image is then slowly covered by soil until it is completely buried.

This work underscores how colonial paintings have painted out history as well as how the viewer understands words. The title *Hunting Ground* folds and overlaps historical and spatial references. Before colonisation, the areas portrayed in the landscapes were known to be good hunting grounds for Aboriginal people who hunted wallaby and kangaroos (*With Secrecy and Despatch*). Since the arrival of colonists, these hunting grounds became the site where Aboriginal families themselves were hunted and murdered. This work evokes multiple layers within the past, illustrating how these landscapes are remembered today as popular tourist destinations. Through Gough's work further encounters are created in the way the present space is remembered as sites of massacres. Gough refers to the film as a "demonstration of our island as a crime scene" while taking on the role of "reconnection with these places" through remembrance of these sites (*With Secrecy and Despatch*). The repetition of the film offers a covering and uncovering of the past and the different ways in which time and space are conceived. The encounter of the pastoral landscape, the way we understand the title "*Hunting Ground*" and the use of words and markings invite the viewer to bear witness to how the past is invested with multiple meanings.

³ Julie Gough, *Hunting Ground (Pastoral) Van Dieman's Land* (2016-2017), viewed online on 15 November 2019 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXqoaeRqSjo>.

Another example of encounter in *Defying Empire* is in the work by Jason Wing titled *Captain James Crook* (2013) that is in dialogue with another piece titled *House Wigger* (2014).⁴ Wing is an Australian artist of Chinese and Indigenous heritage (Biripi). *Captain James Crook* features a bronze bust of Captain James Cook in historical clothing with a balaclava placed over his head. The balaclava, often associated with violent crimes, transforms the image of Cook the explorer to one of Cook the thief, an idea also underscored in the title of the work referring to the British explorer's surname as Crook. "When I attended high school I was taught that Australia was discovered by Captain James Cook," Wing writes in the exhibition catalogue. He adds that "This colonial lie is further reinforced by a huge bronze sculpture in Hyde Park, Sydney, which is situated on a massacre site" (qtd. in Baum 129). Here Wing overlaps and connects multiple historical references: Cook the discoverer; the current Australian high school curriculum; Sydney Hyde Park's commemorative Cook statue; and the massacre site.

Indeed, Wing's sculpture foreshadows highly mediatised debates on the misrepresentation of Australian historical events. In 2017, a prominent Australian journalist Stan Grant (Wiradjuri) stated that the inscription on a statue of the British explorer Captain James Cook located in Sydney's Hyde Park was a "damaging lie" (Grant). In an opinion piece, Grant argues for historical accuracy. He contests the inscription on the statue, which states that Australia was discovered by Cook in 1770, a description that, for him, aligns with the national narrative of Australia's discovery by the British and omits the recognition of the country's Indigenous inhabitants. Intense debate followed this article with some politicians sounding the alarm over the rewriting of history. This example, similarly to Wing's bronze bust, highlights how national imagery in Australia has been undergoing a phase of contestation and enquiry with regard to the meaning and connectedness of national narratives and the unveiling of Indigenous perspectives.

Subsequently, in the aftermath of exhibiting the Captain Cook bust, Wing received many critical comments from the public on social media, in what he describes as acts of "cyber bullying" (qtd. in Baum 129). These comments fuelled Wing's artwork titled *House Wigger* which presents the public's online responses to the Cook bust. The work is composed of a series of 9 debossings (indents on surface) on white velin (21cm x 29cm) that have been framed and placed alongside *Captain James Crook*. Each velin sheet repeats a comment that Wing received through social media. The information accompanying *House Wigger* is narrated by the artist and informs the viewer about the social media abuse. It states that the comments received by the artist "included ... their disgust at my disrespectful and inaccurate version of Australia's history and my alleged defamation of Captain Cook's great name." Indeed, *House Wigger* takes the artist's real-world abuse into the gallery space. The debossed words, only a few millimetres in size also draw in the viewer. It is not easy to make out each word and the viewer has to work hard to read each letter. It is the artist's intention to represent the tension created by the social media abuse. For instance, one panel reads:

Imagine if any Asian country had moved in first, we cannot undo what happened hundreds of years ago, go get over it and move on.

⁴ Jason Wing's *Captain James Crook* (2013) and *House Wigger* (2014). Viewed online on 12 November 2019 at <https://nga.gov.au/defyingempire/artists.cfm?artistirn=37727>. The details of *Captain James Crook* can also be viewed at <https://cs.nga.gov.au/detail.cfm?irn=249046>.

In an audio which accompanies these framed sheets, Wing recites the quotes contained in each work in a monotonous voice removing the intent of the original online abuse in what becomes a process of reinvention for the artist.

In terms of encounter, these two artworks by Wing are exhibited in dialogue with each other. They overlap and intertwine varying historical and social accounts. They also invite the audience to read and piece together the various accounts, to come up close to the work in order to understand and to reflect on the processes the artist underwent. The production of meaning in these works show how new knowledge can result from the combination of the public's experiences and the way artistic practices themselves can enhance meaningfulness.

Wing's artworks combine western imagery rooted in national discourse and Indigenous perspectives to create new ways of understanding Aboriginal history, which to him has been "erased, destroyed, hidden and lost" (Baum 129). Both Gough and Wing's works show us how traditional forms are used to reclassify and reorganise historical facts. They also illustrate the unveiling of hidden histories and show that people are increasingly engaging with these conversations through the representation and exhibition of significant art events at major national gallery spaces. Meanwhile, works such as those by Wing illustrate that there are those who believe that these new representations are themselves inaccuracies. Artworks like these refuse to offer the comforts of minority homogeneity or the triumph of an achieved collective voice, creating endless splitting and the chaos of partially achieved revolutions.

This is where art practices are key to creating dialogue about these issues because at the political, education and individual level it is still very difficult and can lead to violent responses. The art space is a space in which to explore the world and cultural dilemmas through visual and historical case-based studies. Consequently, through the process of encounter as a pedagogical tool, the learning space offers the possibilities of Nakata's vision of a cultural interface.

Conclusion

Defying Empire highlights the legacy of colonisation in Australia. The artistic practices engaged in this show are shaped by the possibilities of encounters as critical opportunities to explore invisible histories. While Australian political and national discourses currently fail to address some of the crucial moments in Australian history that involve Indigenous peoples, contemporary art practices serve as powerful tools to discuss troublesome and complicated histories. This paper argues that it is the aesthetic qualities of images, combined with prioritising contested histories of place, that are the key ingredients to actively seeking further knowledge through engagement and subsequent new encounters.

Indigenous-led art practices connect Indigenous and non-Indigenous imagery to provide pathways of multiple perspectives with the capacity to play with time and space, to create new ways of seeing ideas through artistic interventions and to subsequently create a cultural interface. This particular view of contemporary Indigenous artworks highlights the need for an ongoing dialogue in this interpretative space. What is important is the re-thinking of familiar narratives through public examples and the working towards altered beliefs, destabilised routines and consideration of how contested views can be brought to the forefront of national debates.

The result of this “imaginative folding” are alternative viewpoints and pathways that allow us to reflect, to bear witness and to coexist within different timescapes and geographies. Meanwhile, the affective impact of such work may not promise “a comforting recovery of identity through shared nostalgia” (Papastergiades and Trimboli 404), rather they take us to the “matter of the joint” and therefore to “new conduits for knowledge formation” (405). Consequently, the space of artistic interventions is not about the politicising of truths, but rather about “the workings of knowledge and how an understanding of Indigenous people is caught up and is implicated in its work” (Nakata, “The Cultural Interface” 12). Artistic practices create intersections that acknowledge “the everyday tensions, complexities and ambiguities as the very conditions that produce the possibilities in the spaces between Indigenous and non-Indigenous positions” (Nakata, *Decolonising the Savages* 217). In the case of *Defying Empire*, selected artworks offer unlimited interconnected possibilities offered by both Indigenous and Western viewpoints as a result of encounters in order to explicitly create the cultural interface in which to examine hidden histories.

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