



Magical Mystery: A Fragile Myth

Since the 1990s cross-cultural appropriation has become increasingly taboo within the field of contemporary Australian art. The result has been that several generations of practitioners have been unwilling to contribute to this dialogue. The reluctance may be a result of the laissez faire attitude many artists had to the recycling of images in the 1980s or as a consequence of the landmark Indigenous copyright cases of the 1990s. The effect has been to polarize cultures emphasising a proprietorial attitude towards the sharing of ideas.

In her exhibition titled *Magical Mystery* Nana Ohnesorge has developed a series of new work that visually and ethically engages with the circulation of images through art and popular culture. Her strategy has been to intercept and re-appropriate the simultaneously naïve as well as culturally insensitive representation of Indigenous cultures in Australian cinema. The subject matter for this new body of work is derived from two landmark films, *Jedda*, 1955 and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, 1975.

In contrast to a conventionally postmodern use of appropriation where artists developed an 'anything goes' attitude and where images were seen as culturally detached free flowing signs available for recycling, Ohnesorge's approach has been to recognize that the transmission of images, back and forth creates a narrative where discrete cultures are transformed through the representation of the other. By appropriating previously appropriated imagery Ohnesorge's works are authentically 'second degree' in that aim to reinstate lost images.

Rather than treating the copy as a passive facsimile Ohnesorge's paintings develop a commentary as well as a critique of the cultural limitations of appropriation. In this way her work provides a home for previously displaced imagery from Australian film history by identifying them as part of a knowledge system that is open to interpretation and translation. The version of Australian history that Ohnesorge critiques is one where Indigenous cultures are defined by the cultural stereotypes and projections of others. Through a re-examination of style, authorship and history in both Charles Chauvel's *Jedda* and Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* the representation of displaced identities is contested.

The paintings themselves have an eerie quality where presence becomes absence and absence becomes presence. Through the surface of the canvas the actors in *Jedda* take off their masks and peer through the gloom of the ben-day dots and melancholic hyper-realist fluorescent colours to reveal themselves not as stereotypes but as living beings. This is the type of portrait painting where the intense gaze of the subjects has the power and agency to follow the viewers around a room.

Where as the specter of indigenous actors, Robert Tudawali and Ngarla Kunoth are the subjects of the *Jedda* paintings, the absence of Indigenous people becomes the primary subject in the *Picnic at Hanging Rock* works. In their place is a haunted landscape consisting of sparse vegetation and an eroded rock formation once called Ngannelong and now known as Mount Diogenes or Hanging Rock.

Aside from identifying the issue of cultural displacement through imagery and text Ohnesorge's paintings include two portraits that border on caricature. These works depict two figures acting as a substitute for Indigenous people while developing a dystopic story within the narrative of the exhibition itself.

In a typically domestic Victorian cameo format, using opalescent day-glo colours these works depict Mrs. Appleyard, the headmistress of the private girls school in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* as well as a portrait of the architect of the myth, Joan Lindsay. Through the inclusion of these works the misappropriation of Indigenous culture becomes evident as theft and the cycle of terra nullius is made obvious.

Superficially these portraits represent a quaint and romantic tableaux, conversely Ohnesorge has identified Lindsay's narrative as contributing to the much larger illusion of colonial Australian history. Through these portraits the cultural projections of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is made problematic by Appleyard and Lindsay being represented as the embodiment of the living dead whose vampiric ways have sucked the life out of Indigenous culture as well as the rock itself, replacing it with a fragile myth.

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