

DESTINY

ARTWORK LABELS

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DESTINY

For more than thirty years Destiny Deacon has forged a path as an international artist with a distinct brand of artistic humour unlike any other. Descended from the Kuku and Erub/Mer peoples of Far North Queensland and the Torres Strait, Deacon has been living and working in Melbourne since she arrived here as a small child.

Deacon's work sits in the uncomfortable but compelling space between comedy and tragedy, and contrasts seemingly innocuous childhood imagery with scenes from the dark side of adulthood. She actively resists interpretation and so called 'art speak', instead choosing to let her work speak for itself. The more we look, the greater we understand that the world Deacon conjures is a complex one. Drawing from her vast collection of Aboriginalia, Deacon interrogates the way in which Aboriginal people have been, and continue to be, misrepresented within popular culture. Decapitated, amputated, pants down, tied up, trapped in a blizzard or flying through the air, the characters in Deacon's world both reflect and parody the one in which we live.

All works in this exhibition are by Destiny Deacon and are from the collection of the artist, courtesy of Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, unless otherwise stated.

Abi see da classroom

For the fiftieth anniversary of the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), Destiny Deacon and her long-time collaborator Virginia Fraser were given unrestricted access to the ABC's archive, possibly the most significant collection of film and television held in Australia. By searching for any keywords that started with 'Aborigin' they were able to uncover a large assortment of videos.

In this installation, two CRT television screens play alongside each other, creating a mashup of noise and black-and-white moving images. The television on the right shows archival footage of Aboriginal children attending school, reading and playing musical instruments, while the television on the left presents a series of short clips of people in varying degrees of blackface. Switching from uncomfortable to distasteful, to overtly racist, the two channels juxtapose extreme versions of how Aboriginal people have historically been depicted on television. The footage is problematic and offensive; though, some might say 'it was a different time'. The flashback to the 1950s prompts audiences to consider Australia's legacy of televised racism and poses the question: how far have we actually come?

Blak lik mi

Historically photography has been used as a tool to categorise and document Aboriginal people and their lives. In this work Destiny Deacon reclaims three images taken from a 1960s reproduction of a 1957 Axel Poignant photograph, from his photo essay, originally titled *Picaninny Walkabout*, later renamed *Bush Walkabout*. Deacon turns the colonial gaze back on the coloniser, photographing the photograph, and subverting her position as both subject and photographer.

The title *Blak lik mi* is a reference to John Howard Griffin's autobiographical novel, *Black Like Me*, in which Griffin took large doses of an anti-vitiligo drug and spent hours daily under an ultraviolet lamp in order to change the appearance of his skin so that he 'passed' as Black. Deacon's work offers a window into her own interrogation about what constitutes her Aboriginal identity. On this, Deacon often jokes that she 'took the c, out of black little c**t'. Rude words beginning with 'c', of which there are many, are often used as offensive slights, and Deacon recalls being taunted with these words as a child.

'Blak', unlike 'Black', was Deacon's way of self-determining her identity, and originating a version of the self that comes entirely from within. The legacy of this work has been massive. Countless Aboriginal people now self-determine their identity as Blak, so much so that a Google search of 'Blak' returns a nearly all Australian Indigenous search result.

Destiny Deacon

Kuku/Erub/Mer born 1957

Virginia Fraser

born Australia

Abi see da classroom

2006

10 min, sound

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living Australian Artists, 2019

Blak lik mi

1991; printed 1995

exhibition version printed 2020

colour laser print from Polaroid original

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased, Gwynneth White Adamson Bequest, 1997

Me and Virginia's doll (Me and Carol)

1997, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

Destiny Deacon began her professional career in photography in her late thirties as a way to express herself and her political beliefs. A self-taught artist, Deacon is primarily known for her photographs and videos where she subverts familiar icons with humour and wit. Often when Deacon photographs people she poses them like paintings. In this image, Deacon presents herself as Frida Kahlo, staging the image as an homage to Kahlo's 1937 painting *Me and my doll*.

Where's Mickey?

2002, printed 2016

exhibition version printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living Australian Artists, 2016

Where's Mickey? plays on the Australian slang phrase 'Mickey Mouse', used to refer to something that is substandard, poorly executed or amateurish. Mickey Mouse is also the archetypal figure of an (often white) American consumerist culture. In this portrait of Luke Deacon, Deacon pokes fun at the cartoon icon, suggesting his animated spirit has possessed the body of an Aboriginal Australian man, who is dressed as a woman.

Last laughs

1995, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

In this image Deacon both reclaims and ridicules a genre of colonial photography, which historically depicted Aboriginal women as a highly sexualised or exotic 'other'. In the nineteenth century it was commonplace for Aboriginal women to appear naked in ethnographic photographs that were mass reproduced and distributed as souvenirs around the world. In *Last laughs* three Blak women pose for the camera, limbs intertwined, performing their sexuality. Unlike in the colonial photography it references, the subjects in this work are the ones in control.

Dreaming in urban areas

1993, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

The late Lisa Bellear, Minjungbul/Goernpil/Noonuccal/Kanak writer, broadcaster and political activist, is depicted here with her face painted with what appears to be tribal body paint, but on closer inspection is actually a clay cleansing mask. Her gaze is directed away from the camera while below her are three long-exposure vignettes: two street scenes and one image of the sky taken from the Westgate Bridge in Melbourne. Far from her northern ancestral lands, Bellear appears as if in ceremony as she 'dreams' in the urban landscape.

Being there

1995, printed 2016

exhibition version printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living Australian Artists, 2016

Employing what she describes as low-budget techniques, Deacon uses her own brand of complex humour and scathing wit to play on common Indigenous clichés. In a 2005 interview with Natalie King, Deacon said, 'First I labour for an idea, one that usually ends up being sad or pathetic, and then during the agony process of getting the image done, somehow things take a turn toward the ironic. Humour cuts deep. I like to think that there's a laugh and a tear in each picture'. In this image dolls sit in the gutter with a box of matches. Are they up to no good? Perhaps the clue lies in the graffiti behind them.

Adoption

2000; printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living Australian Artists, 2016; copy printed 2020

In this image Destiny Deacon has placed a collection of plastic, black toy babies into paper cupcake shells. Titled *Adoption*, this work directly references Australia's shameful history of government-sanctioned Aboriginal child removal. In addition, *Adoption* also pokes fun at the deeply offensive misnomer of the nineteenth century that Aboriginal mothers were both infanticidal, as well as cannibals of their newborns. Deacon describes how she came to collect dolls, saying 'in the beginning I wanted to rescue them, because otherwise they'd end up in a white home or something, somewhere no one would appreciate them'.

DESTINY DEACON, 2019

Over the fence

from the *Sad & Bad* series

2000, printed 2000

exhibition version printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living Australian Artists, 2016

The nostalgic qualities in Deacon's poignant photograph *Over the fence* reinforce a narrative familiar to many Aboriginal people. Two segregated dollies peer at each other across a suburban, wooden fence, leaving the audience wondering who is fenced in, and who is fenced out? The image illustrates an 'us' and 'them' mentality towards race, which many Aboriginal people would recognise beneath this seemingly 'friendly' neighbourhood encounter.

Meloncholy

From the *Sad & Bad* series

2000; printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living Australian Artists, 2016; copy printed 2020

In 1970 African-American film director, Melvin Van Peebles released *Watermelon Man*, a movie in which a fictional, white insurance salesman wakes up one morning only to discover he has turned Black overnight. The film is inspired by John Howard Griffin's autobiographical novel, *Black Like Me*. In this image Deacon gives the watermelon a double meaning. The emptied peel of the melon cradles the doll's body, kind of like the coolamon, but it is also a fruit that has been severed from its skin. She challenges the relationship between identity, skin colour, and how the world perceives and responds to both Blackness and Blakness.

Portrait of Gary Foley, activist

1995, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

Often in Deacon's portrait photography, sitters are posed like those in paintings. In these three images, Deacon presents Gary Foley, an Aboriginal Gumbainggir activist, academic, writer and actor; Peter Blazey, the late journalist, author and gay activist; and Richard Bell, an activist and artist of the Kamilaroi, Kooma, Jiman and Gurang Gurang communities. All three men are posed in a near identical way to the 1932 painting *The boy at the basin* by Australian landscape and portrait artist William Dobell.

Portrait of Richard Bell, artist

2004, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

Portrait of Peter Blazey, writer

2004, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

Koori Rocks, Gub Words (A–C)

1990

black-and-white photographs

These powerful black-and-white images depict sacred Aboriginal rock sites that have been vandalised with white graffiti. The word 'Koori' refers to Aboriginal people, particularly those from Victoria and southern New South Wales. 'Gub' is Aboriginal slang and was used in the early days of colonialism to refer to European settlers – 'Government man' was shortened to 'gubba-min man', and then to 'gubba/gub'. Deacon memorialises the sites by drawing attention to how these 'Koori rocks' have been desecrated with 'gub' words.

Destiny Deacon

Kuku/Erub/Mer born 1957

Michael Riley

Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi born 1960

Welcome to my Koori World

1992

Video transferred to DVD

In this film Deacon introduces audiences to her alter ego, Delores, the ultimate troublemaker. Delores is the extreme, outrageous, alter-ego version of Deacon and appears in a number of other video works including in her 1987 video collaboration with Lisa Belleair and Tommy Peterson, *Home video*, as well as in her 1999 video *I don't want to be a bludger*, produced with Michael Riley.

Portrait of Eva Johnson, writer

1994, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

This work directly references J. M. Crossland's 1854 painting *Portrait of Nannultera, a young Poonindie cricketer*, which is in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia (NGA), Canberra. In Deacon's version, the subject's cricket bat has been replaced with an axe. Deacon has described feeling sorry for Nannultera and not wanting him to be alone when she first saw the portrait on display at the NGA. The NGA has since acquired an edition of Deacon's own portrait, ensuring Nannultera is no longer alone in the collection.

If I had a hammer

2003; printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

Taking its name from Peter, Paul and Mary's Grammy-winning cover of the song 'If I Had a Hammer' (released in July 1962), Deacon has photographed a ceramic garden statue of an Aboriginal woman, which she has dressed in a white fur coat standing next to a hammer on a chair. The song the image takes its name from was originally written as an anthem for the Labor Movement, and features images of blue-collar workers with hammers and bells as a rallying call for justice and equality.

Portrait of Fiona Hall

2004, printed 2020

lightjet print

Deacon's portrait of her friend, the artistic photographer and sculptor Fiona Hall, is as much a celebration of contemporary women artists in Australia as it is a critique of postcolonial Australian art. Like with many of Deacon's photographs, Hall has been posed in direct reference to a painting, in this instance *The sock knitter*, 1915, by Grace Cossington Smith. Cossington Smith was a pioneer of modernist Australian painting. Deacon places Hall in direct dialogue with the pioneering artist, suggesting each of their work sits within a continuum of great artists in Australia.

My boomerang did come back

2003, printed 2020

lightjet print

This image is a reference to Charlie Drake's 1961 song 'My Boomerang Won't Come Back'. Drake sings in a halting and staccato manner, wildly grunting 'ho' and 'ugh' as he narrates the story of an effeminate young Aboriginal boy named Mac, who has been banished from his tribe because he is 'a big disgrace to the Aborigine [sic] race' because his 'boomerang won't come back'. A single hand (Lisa Bellear's) reaches upward, grasping a bloody boomerang in front of a black background. Deacon suggests that Drake, whose song is at best a kind of vaudevillian blackface, has assassinated himself.

Hear come the judge

2006

exhibition version printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

Purchased NGV Foundation, 2016

Deacon references the 1968 comedic funk song 'Here Comes the Judge' by American entertainer Dewey 'Pigmeat' Markham, which is regarded by many to be the first recorded hip-hop song. Markham's lyrics ridicule the formalities of courtroom etiquette by painting a picture of a make-believe world where justice is in the hands of Black people. Deacon's photograph uses humour to disarm and interrogate something that is inherently unfunny. The Blak/Black judge is only comical because it is supposedly unbelievable, a notion Deacon challenges audiences to reconsider.

Ride a cock horse (A)

2006, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

This image takes its title from a nursery rhyme connected with the English town of Banbury, 'Ride a Cock Horse to Banbury Cross'. A 'cock horse' has many vernacular meanings within contemporary society. It can mean a high-spirited or uncastrated horse, as well as an assistance horse for moving heavy carriages. Here, Deacon draws a parallel between the many meanings associated with the term and the colonisation of Australia.

Border patrol

2006, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

Reserve nature (A)

1998, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

Sheep dip

2006, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

Heart broken

2006, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

No need looking (A)

1999, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

Slumber party (A)

2006, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

Ask your mother for sixpence

1995, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

This image takes its name from a cheeky nursery rhyme Deacon recalls learning when living in Port Melbourne as a child. The playful limerick teases audiences with the threat of a rude word: 'Ask your mum for sixpence, to see the big giraffe, pimples on his whiskers, and pimples on his – ask your mum for sixpence'. The work was originally displayed in juxtaposition with a photograph of a half-built Crown Casino in Melbourne, challenging audiences to consider the dynamic between the main character, a Blak woman working in service sweeping up coins, and the multinational gambling corporation.

Some night musak

1997, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

Welcome to my island home

1993, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

This portrait of Kim Kruger, one of Deacon's regular models, takes its name from 'My Island Home', a pop song written by Neil Murray and originally performed by the Warumpi Band. Kruger wrote about this image in 2019: 'To me the background of the corrugated iron building represents the places where colonised peoples are forced to exist. There are many coded symbols in this picture that mean something to me – who the necklaces are from, what the plant I am holding is used for. But these are only for the people who know'.

I don't wanna be a bludger

Playing in this room is a collaborative film *Destiny* Deacon wrote and directed with the late Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi artist and photographer Michael Riley. The film is divided into chapters. In the first chapter the main character, Delores, played by Deacon, wakes up and decides she wants to be an artist and get off the dole because she doesn't want to be a 'bludger' anymore.

Deacon plays Delores as the ultimate troublemaker. She is the extreme, outrageous, alter-ego version of herself. The character of Delores appears in several of Deacon's works, including in her 1987 video collaboration with Lisa Bellea and Tommy Peterson, *Home video*, as well as in her 1992 video, *Welcome to my Koori world*.

Delores lacks empathy and will do anything to avoid making life easier for her co-stars. As Delores, Deacon uses acerbic, high-energy dialogue to ridicule the negative stereotypes that persist about Aboriginal people by becoming an exaggerated, narcissistic and outrageous version of herself. In the same way, Deacon uses dollies and photographs to reflect and parody the world around her, exposing many uncomfortable stereotypes about Aboriginal people.

Destiny Deacon

Kuku/Erub/Mer born 1957

Michael Riley

Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi born 1960

I don't wanna be a bludger

1999

single-channel digital video, colour, sound

Purchased with funds donated by Craig Semple 2019

Thought cone (A–F)

1997, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

Moomba princeling

2004, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

Moomba princess

2004, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

Moomba princess and *Moomba princeling* show Deacon's young niece and nephew dressed in the robes and regalia of Moomba sovereigns. Moomba is an annual parade and community festival held in Melbourne, which each year crowns a 'Moomba monarch'. The portraits reference Elizabethan Armada portraiture, a style of painting which first depicted the Tudor queen seated in royal garb and surrounded by symbols against a backdrop depicting the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. At first glance, the Moomba portraits can be read as innocent children playing dress ups, but by presenting two Aboriginal models in this type of colonial ceremonial dress, Deacon challenges audiences to consider the legacy and impact of British invasion.

Whitey's watching

1994, printed 2020

lightbox from Polaroid original

The menacing face in *Whitey's watching* belongs to the pre-2012 entry gate of Luna Park in St Kilda, Melbourne. Deacon took the photograph by pulling up in a car late at night, snapping one picture and driving away. The photograph captures a hallucinatory presence; the wide-open eyes and exposed teeth glow with manic intensity. The Polaroid reimagines the iconic face of Luna Park with a close crop that divorces it from its well-known context.

Regal eagles (A–B)

1994, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

Academic, historian and Indigenous rights activist Marcia Langton once described Destiny Deacon's work as 'a barometer of postcolonial anxiety'. This diptych combines two congruent images: the photo on the left shows a pair of young, white boys holding plastic Union Jacks and eating in front of a disregarded, spread-eagled Black doll. The image on the right shows another Black dolly in a Koori flag T-shirt pinned onto a board surrounded by appropriated Aboriginalia. As always in Deacon's work, the dolls possess a liveliness and personality, making the violence enacted on to them all the more confronting.

Oz

Slow

Scared

Travelling

Sad

1998, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

In the lead-up to the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, Deacon produced *Oz*, a series of works parodying the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*. In the original film, Dorothy Gale is swept away from a farmhouse in Kansas to the magical land of Oz. In this series, Deacon transforms the journey undertaken by the original characters into a contemporary recognition of Aboriginality. Dorothy, now known as the 'traveller', appears alongside a 'sad' tin man, a 'slow' scarecrow in blackface and a 'scared' cowardly lion. The character's quest for self-realisation resembles the personal journeys many Aboriginal people go through every day.

Forced into Images

Freefall

Baby love

Where's Mummy?

Girl alone

Happy, happy institution

Trustee

Protecting paradise

Home truths

Waiting for work

Escape

2001, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

Deacon's *Forced into Images* series tells the story of a girl born out of the clouds. The girl can be seen with her mother (Lisa Bellear) living in and out of an orphanage

...continued overleaf

and attending a birthday party. The girl encounters a shadowy character, played by David Captain, and from then on finds herself in a series of frightening and ominous situations where things are never quite as they seem. The photographs exist in a strange disjuncture with Deacon's video work of the same name in which two children act out their adult counterparts by trying on a series of masks.

Under the spell of the tall poppies

from the Oz series

1998, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

This work, made to coincide with the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, provokes audiences to question the way in which Australian society treats successful people. The expression 'tall poppy syndrome' refers to the apparent tendency in Australian to disparage and discredit those who have made notable achievements. Deacon's image is a comical reminder of the ongoing Australian 'national identity crisis'.

Destiny Deacon

Kuku/Erub/Mer born 1957

Erin Hefferon

Hawaiian/Australian born 1965

No place like home

1999

single-channel digital video, colour, sound

Waiting for Goddess (A–D)

1993, printed 2020

lightjet print from Polaroid original

In Deacon's *Waiting for Goddess* series, God is depicted as a Black woman who emerges from the heavens only to find humanity living in a desert. Upon seeing the state of the world God does a triple take, suggesting her disapproval. In the fourth image, she returns to the heavens, apparently having seen quite enough.

Melbourne noir

Melbourne noir is a poignant and melancholy memorial to blak life in inner-city Melbourne. The installation is made up of twenty-five photographs, three sculptural dioramas, a video projection and digitally printed wallpaper.

The wallpaper represents sites of cultural significance to Melbourne's Aboriginal community, such as the Carlton Gardens, the Yarra River, Fitzroy's Nicholson and Gertrude streets and the suburb's housing-commission estate, as well as other sites relevant to Deacon's social and cultural history. A series of portraits of the artist's friends and family are also included in the installation, along with a trailer for an unmade feature film titled *Melbourne noir*. The film poetically reflects upon everyday social life among blak communities in urban Melbourne.

In the three photographic dioramas, with holes cut out for visitors to insert their faces and pose for photographs, Deacon subtly implicates non-Indigenous viewers by encouraging them to swap roles with Indigenous people and put themselves and their identity on exhibition.

Swan dive

2009, printed 2020

lightjet print

This image was taken in 2009 from a penthouse apartment in Eureka Tower, a skyscraper in the Southbank precinct of Melbourne. Deacon incorporates the Melbourne skyline into a deliberately ambiguous scenario where a lone doll is shown either flying through the sky or falling to her doom. Much like the doll herself, a question lingers in the air: did she fall or was she pushed?

Colour Blinded

In this installation, six black-and-white photographs taken on orthochromatic film – a type of film sensitive to all visible light except red – hang in a yellow room. The photographs feature dolls in different social situations displayed near three perspex cubes stuffed to the brim with golliwogs and white polystyrene balls.

The three cubes, each titled *Snow storm*, draw a connection between the so-called ‘white cube’ of the art gallery, as well as the way Aboriginal art is often presented in clinical, museological environments. Together, the photographs and sculptures form an installation lit with low-pressure sodium lamps, much like the ones used to light roads and freeways. The resulting effect is a room which pulsates with an intensely yellow glow as though the white cube has been contaminated. As we enter, our skin tone takes on the same saturated hue as the walls and the photographs – we are literally left ‘colour blinded’. In two videos featuring John Harding and Sofii Harding, both actors intermittently address the audience. We are made to feel like an intruder who has accidentally stepped through a stage door and is interrupting a private presentation.

Colour Blinded

Man & doll (a)

Man & doll (b)

Man & doll (c)

Baby boomer

Back up

Pacified

2005, printed 2020

lightjet print from orthochromatic film negative

Destiny Deacon

Kuku/Erub/Mer born 1957

Virginia Fraser

born Australia

Snow storm

2005

golliwogs, polystyrene and perspex cube

Private Collection

Destiny Deacon

Kuku/Erub/Mer born 1957

Virginia Fraser

born Australia

Snow storm

2005

golliwogs, polystyrene and perspex cube

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living Australian Artists, 2019

Destiny Deacon

Kuku/Erub/Mer born 1957

Virginia Fraser

born Australia

Snow storm

2020

golliwogs, polystyrene and perspex cube

Destiny Deacon

Kuku/Erub/Mer born 1957

Virginia Fraser

born Australia

Good golly miss dolly

2005

DVD looped with sound

Smile

2017

exhibition version printed 2020

lightjet print

Purchased with funds donated by D'Lan Davidson and NGV Supporters of Indigenous Art, 2018

Deacon undercuts our trust in the innocuous smiley face emoji and prompts the viewer to look more closely at the everyday symbols that proliferate in our lives. The dolls appear decapitated, but perhaps even more ominously the disembodied heads are actually poking through a yellow sheet. Deacon uses an op-shop boomerang to complete the smile. When broken down, the individual features that make up the happy face are all racially charged. However, when viewed at a glance, all people see is the familiar smiley face emoji.

Two fishes out of water

2017, printed 2020

inkjet print from digital image on archival paper

Deacon pokes fun at the Disney version of the *Little Mermaid* by recasting her two nieces, who are posing in her suburban backyard, as the mythological heroine. Disney's Little Mermaid has white skin and red hair, and yearns to join humanity above water so much that she is prepared to sacrifice who she is, including the power of speech. Deacon's Blak mermaids have no desire to change who they are. They appear bored, content to play on their smartphones and jet water with the hose.

Kewpie

1995, printed 2020

inkjet print from digital image on archival paper

Whacked

Escape – from the whacking spoon

Whacked to sleep (B)

Fence sitters (A)

The goodie hoodie family

Waiting for the bust

Whacked & coming home

2007, printed 2020

lightjet print

‘There is no excuse for ignorance, and you should make an effort to understand what happens in our world. How else can you be contemporary?’

DESTINY DEACON

This series of photographs references familiar imagery from news media and contemporary culture, making a link between themes of terrorism, surveillance, suppression and Australian nationalism. Playing with stereotypes, Deacon and her friends have masked themselves in long johns with disturbing painted faces. The images use sinister humour to highlight shared similarities between fanatics around the world.

Daisy and Heather discuss race

2016, printed 2020

lightjet print

The sarcastic title of this work pokes fun at the old-fashioned idea that race should not be the subject of polite conversation. Deacon uses a white and a Black dolly to represent the unequal power dynamics that exist within Australian society. The dolls stand in for people who, based on the colour of their skin, experience the impact of racial inequality in vastly different ways. The cracked head of the white doll reveals an empty void. Symbolically violent, perhaps this emptiness suggests the dolls will never be able to fully comprehend one another's experiences.

Ebony and Ivy face race

2016, printed 2020

lightjet print

Blakula rising

2011, printed 2020

inkjet print from digital image on archival paper

In 1972 the American blaxploitation horror film *Blacula* recast the supervillain Dracula as a Black American vampire sent by the elders of the Abani African nation to suppress the slave trade. Deacon takes the joke a step further, recasting Dracula yet again, this time as Blakula, the Aboriginal version of the lovable antihero. Deacon subverts the parody film, adding joke on top of joke.

Blakula's daughter and Joey

2011, printed 2020

inkjet print from digital image on archival paper

Blakula and daughter

2011, printed 2020

inkjet print from digital image on archival paper

Koori lounge room

Destiny Deacon and Virginia Fraser created this interior specifically for this exhibition. Over the past thirty years, Deacon has created a number of domestic interiors of varying scales presented inside gallery settings. These lounge rooms and kitchens are always, to an extent, based on Deacon's own home. Objects, photographs, posters, flags and various knick-knacks turn otherwise ordinary domestic interiors into identifiably blak spaces.

The room is filled with Deacon's personal collection of 'Koori kitsch'. At best, these knick-knacks portray Aboriginal people as merely decoration and at worst, represent overtly racist perspectives of Aboriginal people. Over the years Deacon has amassed a considerable collection of Koori kitsch. In her own words, she has been rescuing Koori kitsch 'since forever': 'In the beginning I wanted to rescue them, because otherwise they'd end up in a white home or something, somewhere no one would appreciate them'.

By amassing her personal collection and putting it inside the Gallery, Deacon challenges audiences to consider how everyday material culture can be, and often is, inherently racist. Deacon also elevates these objects, removing their status as derogatory and imbuing them with a second, more dignified, life.

Peach Blossom's revenge

1990; printed 2020

Colour bubble jet print

In the 1990s Deacon created a series of video-cassette jackets for made-up films in which Blak actors are the stars. From the makers of *I Spit on Your War Medals*, *Peach Blossom's Revenge* shows a Blak femme fatale who, dressed in a peach-coloured cheongsam, drapes herself over an American flag while grasping a machine gun. By reimagining how Hollywood sees Aboriginal people, Deacon draws attention to the absence of positive Aboriginal representation on television, challenging audiences to question what it feels like to live in a world where the only depictions of yourself you see on television, are offensive ones.

Draclubra

1995; printed 2020

Colour bubble jet print

Litle Miss Wonder

1990; printed 2020

Colour bubble jet print

Sand minding / Sand grabs

2017, printed 2020

inkjet print from digital image on archival paper

More than half of all mining projects in Australia are in close proximity to Indigenous communities. This relationship has long been, and continues to be, the source of much debate. In this work Deacon condemns the violence committed by the sand mining industry on the ecosystem, the land and its peoples. A latex-gloved hand makes an incision in a bag of soil, destructively releasing the sand inside. The white hand grasps the contents and takes a handful. Two disturbing characters look on with a seemingly perplexed expression, perhaps inviting us to consider the consequences of mining.

Dolly lips (A–E)

2017, printed 2020

lightjet print

Dolly lips extracts surprising expressions from some of Deacon's regular models. Some of these dolls have been posing for Deacon for decades, but these sensitive and suggestive images show them in a new light.

Gazette

Gossip walks

Look out!

Action men

Arrears windows

Come on in my kitchen

2009, printed 2020

inkjet print from digital image on archival paper

In 2009 Deacon produced the series *Gazette*. These now eerily familiar scenes appear like vignettes, offering windows into the lives of those living inside Melbourne's public housing towers. Recent scenes from the news are echoed in *Arrears windows*, which shows Deacon's collection of black and brown dolls crammed into yellow plastic tubs. The series draws attention to the individual lives and struggles of residents within these buildings, while also reminding viewers of the often-overcrowded conditions these residents live in. Each image brings to light Deacon's idiosyncratic take on current global and national events with her semi-autobiographical edge.

Destiny Deacon

Kuku/Erub/Mer born 1957

Virginia Fraser

born Australia

Runner

2009

DVD

Postcards from Mummy

Destiny Deacon's mother, Eleanor Harding, passed away in 1996, and two years later Deacon produced a moving tribute to her life. *Postcards from Mummy* tracks the story of Eleanor's journey from Cooktown to Brisbane. In part it is an acknowledgement of her mother's legacy, but it is also an exploration into how a person's own identity can be shaped by the past experiences of their family.

In 2005 Deacon described making this work as 'coming to terms with Mummy's beginnings'. This selection of works from *Postcards from Mummy* introduces audiences to a universal narrative of Indigenous dislocation from place. Deacon's attempt to reconnect with the places of her ancestors paints her as a sightseer on her own Country; a visitor in her own home. The postcard is no longer simply a means of sharing travel or sending word back home but a metaphor for Indigenous connection to, and disconnection from, Country. Each image evokes nostalgia, leading the audience to feel a sense of homesickness for a place that both is and is not 'home'.

Postcards from Mummy

1998

colour laser prints, DVD looped silent

On reflection

2019

inkjet print from digital image on archival paper

Yo ho ho

2019

inkjet print from digital image on archival paper

A chair at the table

2019; printed 2020

Light jet print

The exhibition *DESTINY* celebrates three decades of work by one of Melbourne's boldest contemporary artists. Destiny Deacon has received significant acclaim internationally and interstate, however, until relatively recently she has not received the same recognition in her home city of Melbourne; an irony considering that much of her work focuses on Melbourne as a central theme. The expression 'to be given a seat at the table' often refers to those in leadership positions who have the opportunity to shape and influence the trajectory of an organisation. This cutting and astute new work can be read as the artist's acknowledgment of this overdue recognition.

Dolly eyes (A-H)

2020

lightjet print

A doll with piercing blue eyes and dark brown skin is among the unblinking, manic faces that make up Destiny Deacon's most recent series, *Dolly Eyes*, 2020. While people of colour can and do have an array of different-coloured eyes, blue eyes are often seen as a signifier of whiteness. Deacon's tightly cropped images reduce these dollies to just eyes and skin tone, highlighting the problematic nature of using physical features to signify of racial identity.

Blak

2020

Light jet print

Throughout her career, this cast of characters has become central to Deacon's practice, as has her subversive use of language. For Deacon, language, and in particular spelling, has provided an opportunity to reframe and assert her identity on her own terms. In its deceptive simplicity the recasting of 'Black' to 'Blak' resonated with Aboriginal communities everywhere. What started as Deacon asserting her personal identity as a Kuku/Erub/Mer woman, has since morphed into a Community-owned declaration of Aboriginal pride. It is fitting to conclude this exhibition with a singular photographic work: the letters b-l-a-k emblazoned across the surface with seventeen of Deacon's regular dolly models.