

Disrupting Artistic Terra Nullius: a focus on the processes and places of repair

Dr Paola Balla

Moondani Balluk Indigenous Academic Centre, Victoria University

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Ghost Weaving, survivance, disruption, artistic repair, sovereignty

This written piece and accompanying images of my artworks focus on aspects of my practice-led PhD titled *Disrupting Artistic Terra Nullius: The ways that First Nations women in art & community speak Blak to the colony & patriarchy*, an exhibition and exegesis which threaded the concept of Ghost Weaving, a practice named by Professor Tracey Bunda in a PhD yarnning session with me.¹ Ghost Weaving describes the woven practice of the matrilineal, intergenerational approach, to embody the “everywhen” (Gilchrist 2016), rather than separating past, present and future. This work held connected threads of story, art and writing as a methodology of practice-led research for public pedagogy and Indigenous anti-colonial practice.

This project was driven by my respect and recognition for Blak women’s work and the disruptive, constructive, and creative acts of survivance by Blak women in so-called Australia. This piece reflects on and talks to the processes and daily acts of repair I created on Country and in various places to create and recreate healing ways. This work was driven by my desire to more deeply understand and platform the work of Blak women as sovereign warriors active in colonial resistance, and the places of repair and healing needed to survive and heal from ongoing colonial traumas. In these places, in so-called Australia, where our presence is contested and we are subjected to ongoing violence, we strive to find places of respite, peace and justice as our homelands are occupied and invaded. The work was to hold the ways we participate in the “the knowing, being and doing” (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003), and to show how we have been active in the resistance to colonialism, patriarchy, and state settler violence.

In my recent exhibitions, I have created installations that audiences/visitors can enter, sit inside, and be within. I intend for this written piece to embody how I develop these installations to resemble little houses or large tents, made predominantly of calico or silk organza. They are reminiscent of little Mission Houses, dwellings that Aboriginal People made their homes while their lives were regimented and controlled by the churches and the state to control their movements through Aboriginal Protection Acts. On the missions and reserves my people’s movements were restricted and controlled through acts that dominated their lives and attempted to rob them of their self-determination but did not extinguish their sovereignty.



Paola Balla, *Murrup (Ghost) Weaving in Rosie Kuka Lar (Grandmother's Camp) 2021* with Rosie Tang, Untitled wallpaper, image c.1978. Installation view, WILAM BIIK, TarraWarra Museum of Art, 2021. Photograph courtesy of T J Garvie.

Many Aboriginal Peoples protested these inhumane conditions and treatment and walked off Missions, the most famous of these being the Cummeragunja Walk Off of 1939, that included the esteemed Yorta Yorta man William Cooper (Foley, 2010). These little cloth houses, or Mission Houses, were presented both in my PhD exhibition, *Disrupting Artistic Terra Nullius*, at Footscray Community Arts Centre in 2019 and in the installation *Wilam Biik* at TarraWarra Museum of Art in 2021 as part of the Yalingwa Creative Victoria, ACCA, and Tarra Warra First Nations art initiative (Piper, 2021). These public installations were referential of little Mission Houses and soft landscapes, created from over two hundred and fifty bush dyed calico clothes and silk organza, dyed ropes and strings, and women's and children's clothing. These installations were conceptualised and installed by hand to embody the unconditional love most needed in resistance and healing, through visual public works, and as a memory structure of timeless space, that gave a space of respite for those doing the exhausting work of resistance.

Through the visual works and within the broader exhibitions, these temporal places were created through brewing stories of nostalgia and longing for Country and People lost to traumas. These works are active in speaking 'Blak' to dominant white and patriarchal public narratives, including galleries and institutions that are simultaneously educative for a public but also spaces of violence and erasure for Aboriginal Peoples. We must resist and contest at the same time we participate in the act and practice of public pedagogy, which is risky business for Aboriginal People. The risks include being exposed to further violence, racism, exclusion, ridicule, and the resulting injuries from this. The exhausting business of being Black in Australia. Public space is not a safe space for us.

In doing this work, I acknowledge Aboriginal feminist or womanist ways of "being knowing and doing" in Blak art (Deacon & Frazer, 1994) known through expressions of identity, lived experience, and embodied experiences of memory. The lack of memorialisation of Blak bodies, let alone Blak women's bodies in public space and representation is a stark reminder of the cost of colonisation and the ongoing violence on the bodies of Aboriginal and trans women and non-binary Aboriginal people.

This knowing, in and outside of the body, as known in Creation Stories, Country, Place, Sites and acts of ritual and ceremony in and outside of art, and the 'darkness' explored, presented, and made known through Blak women's work, is part of the beauty of dark matter that rests between the stars and between light.

In art and performance, we hold tight to the stories and atrocities done to Aboriginal women and in this act lies the reasoning as to why knowing and centring Aileen Moreton-Robinson's theoretical positioning of *Towards An Aboriginal Australian Feminist Standpoint* (2013) is critical. Alongside this, her seminal book, *Talkin' Up to the White Woman* (2000, 2021) attests to Blak women's rage. Further, it is through the formative works of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women artists and collectives such as the seminal Boomalli Arts, and the life writings of Aboriginal women — from Kath Noonnucal Walker, Margaret Lillardia Tucker, Ruby Langford Ginibi, Jackie Huggins, to Lisa Bellear — that we know ourselves. Both through them, and ourselves from them in *relationality* as named by Moreton-Robinson.



Paola Balla, *The Mok Mok Cooking Show*, 2016. Photograph courtesy of Paola Balla.

Blak women's artwork and performance is separated from categories of feminist or contemporary art and limited by western and white concepts of artwork, held in an Aboriginal art description, and then bound as either, traditional or contemporary Aboriginal art — descriptions that hold Aboriginal women as being known as 'authentic' or 'urban' (Deacon, 1994; Balla, 2022). This sees curators in so-called Australia, the majority of whom are white, as curating Aboriginal women's work into these categories, and more rarely as feminist or women's work. With the under representation of women as a gender in galleries and collections, the representation of Aboriginal women is even lower. Performance can be known as explicit through installation work (even the act of installation itself) dance, theatre, movement and visual art, and through the continual necessary performance of resistance, activism and warriorship that Aboriginal women have to continue in the practice of protection of ourselves, and our children, community and Country. Aboriginal women's ways of resisting colonisation and knowing Country and naming racism and violence in colonial Australia means that Aboriginal women disrupt how the colony knows and desperately describes itself as 'fair, equitable and free'. Aboriginal women know and state that the colony is racist, violent and oppressive. The naming of this reality by Aboriginal women means that the fictional timeline of a benign, peaceful settlement is a lie, and more than that, an active and constant denial of the ongoing violence perpetrated on Aboriginal women's bodies since the beginning of invasion and throughout colonisation, continuing in the present and into the future.

The notion of an Aboriginal feminist standpoint cannot be separated from Blak women's art, nor can it be separated from the activist and protection labour done by Aboriginal women. An Aboriginal woman's matriarchal and Black/Blak womanist love for her people is central to expressions of this unconditional sovereign love through art, performance, activism, literature, education, health and community and family care. Aboriginal women are at the intersection of colonial injuries that include our gender, race, class, and social positioning. By subverting various forms of art and resistance in diverse contexts of community, and in 'cross spaces' like academia, public life, and social media — Aboriginal women create and recreate strategies to respond and express survivance in Blak ways.

In creating these works of aesthetic repair, of daily acts of healing and repair, and by recreating healing places that remember Aboriginal women and families as places of love and safety, I create public dialogue that challenges white comfort, dominance, racism and violence to create respite spaces for Aboriginal People to be, to know, to remember. To disrupt white and settler audiences, and to offer some respite or comfort to other Aboriginal Peoples is an act of defiance in white Australia. To create places that disrupt white superiority, white indifference and white hatred to all that is soft, gentle and powerful about Aboriginal People, and to celebrate being sovereign Aboriginal Peoples in our own Countries in and with our art.

Biography

Dr. Paola Balla is a Wemba-Wemba & Gunditjmarra woman & a visual artist, curator, writer, lecturer, and researcher at Moondani Balluk Indigenous Academic Centre at Victoria University. During her candidature Paola was a Lisa Bellear Postgraduate Research Scholar. Her practice-led research, art and writing focuses on Black women's contributions & activism & their roles in disrupting racism, and white dominant narratives and spaces.

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ⁱ Professor Tracey Bunda is a Ngugi/Wakka Wakka woman who grew up on the lands of the Jagera/Jugera/Yuggerapul peoples. During the course of her career, she has held senior Indigenous leadership roles in several universities. Tracey's research interests are informed by critical theoretical approaches for understanding how race and power ideologically manifest in white institutions, storytelling as methodology and the agentic role of Indigenous women in Indigenous community uplift.