

Fiona Foley. Silent witness?

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Of course Fiona Foley is a witness! In one sense her work is all about determined efforts of remembering – bearing witness to both specific instances and pan-Aboriginal experiences of colonialism – and refusing to remain silent. I want to consider and elaborate this characterisation as relevant to what I'll call Foley's historical art works. But I also want to take Fiona Foley's art as an incitement to ask some different questions: What is witnessing? How have Aboriginal people been called upon to bear witness? What are the relationships between silence and witnessing? What kinds of connections can be made between witnessing, human rights and other kinds of rights: rights to knowledge, to land or perhaps even silence?

Strong examples of Fiona Foley's historical art as bearing witness can be found in works such as the survival series (1988), various Eliza Fraser works (most produced between 1990 and 1992), *Lost Badtjala, severed hair* (1991), *Native Blood* (1994), and *Land Deal* (1995). In a literal sense, the very existence of her work echoes and amplifies the foundational claim of Aboriginal people in the twentieth century: 'We have survived!'

More specifically, Foley's work stages a palpable connection between art, Aboriginality and place. As Djon Mundine has observed, her work literally re-makes materials gathered from Fraser Island/Thoorgine/K'Gari, the land of her Badtjala people:

*this raw material – [is] a form of cultural memory – from Fraser Island itself ... For Foley, this was an art practice carried out in a custodial role; a way of reclaiming the history of her people and their land.*¹

What is custodial about this work is that it refuses to be silent about Aboriginality and place. I think of it this way: large numbers of Badtjala people (like many other Aboriginal people) were removed from their country by the early twentieth century. This sometimes initiated a kind of silence over country, not an absence of song (although this was sometimes the case) but new constraints as to what could be sung and when. In the face of colonisation, custodians had to come up with new strategies; they had to be secret and

innovative, silent and declarative, proud painters and pious priests.

Broad and multiple processes of dispossession enabled non-Aboriginal institutions to deny and frustrate indigenous rights, particularly rights to land, and such dispossessions continue to this day. Only last year, after an appeal to the High Court, Yorta Yorta people failed to win 'native title' rights to their lands and waters, in part, because they could not demonstrate continuous relationships to those lands adequate to the test required under the *Native Title Act 1993*, section 22. In the words of the trial judge 'the tide of history [had] ... washed away any real acknowledgement [by the Yorta Yorta people] of their traditional laws and any real observance of their traditional customs.'²

But as an island woman and a coastal dweller Fiona Foley knows that tides wash out and they wash in, twice every day. What tides carry out they can also carry back in, along with the unexpected things that make tidal beaches such interesting places to walk. It is precisely against banal understandings of tradition such as those of Justice Olney, that Fiona Foley is talking back. So, in *Badtjala Woman* (1994), a series of three black-and-white photographs, Foley takes off the garb of everyday life in contemporary Australia and puts on the markers of Aboriginality; 'traditional' necklaces and a woven basket carried on the head. She stands bare-breasted and adorned, flirting with both anthropological and *National Geographic* traditions of eroticising and primitivising black women; do the tits titillate or does the averted gaze and the claim made in the present – 'Badtjala Woman' – take precedence?

For my purposes here, what is important is that the voice, or the mode of address, of Foley's work is historical. In other words, it takes the historical experience of colonisation – an historical experience shared by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people – as the terrain on which it will operate. That so many Aboriginal artists operate on this ground is unexceptional; from Tommy McRae and Namatjira to Foley and Paddy Fordham Wainburranga and Gordon Bennett, Aboriginal artists have in content and form endlessly negotiated the transactional space of colonial histories.

A didactic but no less evocative piece of Foley's in this mode is *Lie of the Land* (1997). This consists of seven sandstone blocks, each about three metres in height, engraved on two sides with the names of objects – blankets, flour, knives, beads, scissors, tomahawks and looking glasses – which were due to Aboriginal people under the 1835 'treaty' that John Batman entered into with Aboriginal people around what is now Melbourne. It is a sad and sombre piece, effectively recording on giant headstones the objects which cost so many lives.

It is also clearly a work that is in dialogue with particular non-Aboriginal histories; histories that have sought the disappearance of Aboriginal people. Again, this work bears witness to other historical realities: indigenous occupation prior to dispossession, the fiction of land deals, the deceit of a white woman 'lost among the savages', and, above all, continuing Badjala traditions and relationships to land. About these matters, much of Fiona Foley's art refuses silence.

The same could not be said about other art works by Foley. Indeed some of her work is both strangely illegible while, at the same time, purporting to offer specific and important meaning. Foley herself offers an explanation:

My drawings are event-oriented, it may be a place where I've been or something that has taken place, and it could be difficult to ascertain the meaning of these symbols in my art unless you speak to me ...

In other words, the image itself operates with signs that require certain knowledge in order to be legible. This seems to me to work in the case of some of her stunningly beautiful pastels such as *Catching Tuna* (1992); a story attached to the painting opens up the image. And this is exactly of a piece with much Aboriginal art in the market today: event pictures of a story that is not necessarily legible until one learns to read the signs, which may be possible because there is a story attached and perhaps a key-map on the reverse.³

If Foley's 'historical' works bear witness and her 'event drawings' encode certain cultural experiences, a third category of Foley's work seems to implicitly evoke what in another context we might think of as secret and sacred culture. In these art works, it's not witnessing but silence that carries real cultural force. Let's consider one of Foley's two works in this

exhibition, *Ya kari – speak for* (2001), in this light.

The piece was originally a four-panelled work, each rectangular-shaped canvas inscribed with both a pattern and a pair of words: *Bunda-Bundagun, BaringBaringun, Balgoni-Balgonigun, Therwein-Therweingun*. Because I have asked Fiona about these terms, I know they refer to an account by A. W. Howitt, in his 1904 book, *The Native Tribes of South-Eastern Australia*,⁴ in which he describes and reproduces an image of a carved piece of wood and bee's wax that maps marriage relationships among the 'Kaiabara' people who live in south-east Queensland. Howitt was setting out kinship relations that would today be described as subsection or skin relationships. The first term in the pairs refers to the male member of a particular subsection; the second to the names taken by female members of the subsection. In each case, subsection membership involved particular kinship, custodial and other cultural responsibilities and rights.

There are two aspects of Foley's use of these terms that interest me here. The first is in relation to rights. While I have no expertise in relation to the particular subsection rights that Howitt sought to describe, one thing is entirely clear: to talk of subsection rights is to talk about an entirely other way of understanding rights than that invoked by the notion of human rights. Of course, human rights is a notion that comes to us as part of a package of entitlements sometimes thought of as due to citizens in post-Enlightenment democratic societies – the right to free speech, to freedom of information and so on. We know that these rights are not natural but their peculiarity only comes into view when other rights are asserted in their stead. That is a long-term predicament in this country: the subterranean tension between various European-derived rights and Aboriginal rights, a tension which emerges episodically but persistently in proper names – Hindmarsh Island and Eddie Mabo – and in relation to rights to land, knowledge, images, objects and culture.

Secondly, it seems to me that Foley's naming of skin groups evokes the names of actual witnesses who cannot bear witness. This is a point I take from the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's discussion of the writings of Primo Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz. Agamben argues that witnessing and silence are not alternatives or opposites but terms that are inevitably intertwined. He writes:

*The 'true' witnesses, the 'complete witness', are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness. They are those who 'touched bottom': the Muselmann, the drowned. The survivors speak in their stead, by proxy, as pseudo-witnesses; they bear witness to a missing testimony.*⁵

Colonial Australia was not Auschwitz but the skin names of witnesses who did not or could not bear witness point very precisely to a missing testimony. Let me explain this by following Agamben's detailed commentary on Primo Levi's story of a child of deportees:

Hurbinek was a nobody, a child of death ... He looked about three years old ... He was paralysed from the waist down with atrophied legs, as thin as sticks; but his eyes, lost in the triangular and wasted face, flashed terribly alive, full of demand, assertion, of the will to break loose, to shatter the tomb of his dumbness. The speech he lacked, which no one had bothered to teach him, the need of speech charged his stare with explosive urgency.

Agamben goes on:

Now at a certain point Hurbinek begins to repeat a word over and over again, a word that no one in the camp can understand and that Levi doubtfully transcribes as mass-klo or matisklo ... despite the presence of all the languages of Europe in the camp, Hurbinek's word remains obstinately secret.

Levi concludes:

Hurbinek, the nameless, whose tiny forearm—even his—bore the tattoo of Auschwitz; Hurbinek died in the first days of March 1945, free but not redeemed. Nothing remains of him: he bears witness through these words of mine.

Perhaps it's through repeating secret words from those who were witnesses that we both remember their silence and 'bear witness to a missing testimony'. Perhaps this reminds us of another way of quietly and respectfully recalling the drowned.

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¹ Djon Mundine, 'Fiona Foley' in *Eye of the Storm: Eight Contemporary Indigenous Artists*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1997, pp. 63-4. See also his Foreword to Benjamin Genocchio, *Fiona Foley Solitaire*, Piper Press, Sydney, 2001.

² *The Members of the Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Community v The State of Victoria* [1998], FCA, 1606.

³ Importantly, I'd also insist that these 'event drawings' do not only encode particular personal experiences of the artist. I'd be equally interested in exploring the extent to which these event drawings share certain cultural features with those of her aunt, Wandi, whose remarkable drawings illustrate Wilf Reeves and Olga Miller, *The Legends of Moonie Jarl*, Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1964. But that is a project for another day.

⁴ A.W. Howitt, *The Native Tribes of South-Eastern Australia* (1904), Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1996, p. 231.

⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans., Daniel Heller-Roazen, Zone Books, New York, 1999, p. 34. The quotations that follow are from pages 37 and 38.

⁶ Thanks to Hilary Ericksen for comments on the essay, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery and Andrew Baker Art Dealer for images, and Fiona Foley for talking to me about her work.