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BINDI COLE

Story Jirra Lulla

Racial identity and its intersection with gender and sexuality is a hot but contentious topic. Melbourne photographer Bindi Cole works to expose the questions most are afraid to ask; how black do you need to be to be Aboriginal? How sexy can you appear before your sexuality is devalued? And how is a transgender woman's cultural identity shaped by her gender? The cathartic nature of Cole's practice imbues her work with a gritty honesty. Her images are at times so personal; the viewer experience can verge on voyeurism.

Cole stepped into the South Eastern Koorie arts scene as a portrait photographer in 2007 with 'Heart Strong', a solo exhibition at The Koorie Heritage Trust, and Men in Black, a calendar of elite Aboriginal sports stars. Her portrait of boxer Anthony Mundine titled *Do you like what you see*, won the Boscia Galleries Award for Photography at the Victorian Indigenous Art Awards. It was created in response to controversy over Mundine's comments of media discrimination against Aboriginal athletes and showed vulnerability at odds with his outspoken public persona. "Every portrait I have taken has been politically motivated," says Cole. "The 'Heart Strong' series was created out of a response to being annoyed with the media. I felt like the media was presenting a very one sided and negative view of Aboriginal communities and this doesn't match with what I know of my community which is strong, successful, positive and loving."

The year 2008 saw the evolution of Cole's trademark style; political, quirky and eclectic. A mix of portrait photography, painting, collage, text, weaving, film, performance, soundscapes and projections, Cole's work makes both humorous and melancholy reference to the role that popular culture plays in the formation of stereotypes.

I first worked with Cole when co-curating the exhibition 'A Time Like This' at the Victoria College of Arts (VCA) Margret Lawrence Gallery. In commemoration of a centenary of women's franchise in Victoria the exhibition brought together four curators to each work with two artists. I had the pleasure of working with Cole and Waradgerie sculptor Lorraine Connelly-Northey. For many hours we sat at the kitchen table—discussing the 59 year gap between when Indigenous and non Indigenous women gained voting rights. Together Cole and Connelly-Northey created a provocative series of billboard style images featuring local models and sculptural pieces. They recreated popular Australian imagery from a Koorie perspective. Ethnographic photographs that promoted misleading notions of Aboriginality were reclaimed, advertising campaigns that worked to reaffirm a white national identity recreated.

It was also in 2008 that Cole began her professional partnership with Foxy, a Tiwi Island drag performer who inspired Cole's trip to the Northern Territory to shoot the 'Sista Girl' series. *How to be a Domestic Goddess*, an image of Foxy gazing out of the window of a gleaming kitchen, was shortlisted for the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards.

After creating a number of highly personal works the 'Sista Girl' series saw Cole step outside of her comfort zone to represent the transgender community of the Tiwi Islands. She recalls:

"Doing the project on Tiwi I felt like I was living in the Big Brother house, doing the Amazing Race everyday and trying not to get eliminated! It was a really full-on experience. In my community in Victoria, I know everyone, everyone knows me. It makes things much easier in terms of getting information and cultural protocol. On Tiwi, I was an outsider, I had to earn trust, I had to spend a lot of time getting permission from people who took a leap of faith with me. It was difficult but very rewarding."



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Tiwi is made up of Melville and Bathurst Islands and has a population of approximately 2,000 people, 50 of which are Sista Girls. Sista Girls are born men and develop female identities at a young age. On the islands, Sista Girls are seen as women, called 'Aunty' or 'sister' by most family members and often start wearing girls' clothes as early as kindergarten. Despite this apparent acceptance, prejudice is still a painful reality, suicide a common occurrence and for a Sista Girl the prospect of finding a life partner is often daunting. Cole's portraits draw inspiration from the real life experiences of the Sista Girls to create personas that exemplify both fragility and strength. In 2009 Cole won the major accolade of the Victorian Indigenous Art Awards, the Deadly Art Award, for her Sista Girl portrait of Ajay.

It was Cole's controversial series, 'Not Really Aboriginal', launched at the Centre for Contemporary Photography that solidified her reputation as a tongue in cheek political respondent. Cole does not conform to popular ideals of what an Aboriginal person looks like and consequently has had to defend her cultural identity. To many members of the Aboriginal community, Indigeneity is a birth right, a responsibility. It is about culture and kinship rather than colour. The 'Not Really Aboriginal' series asks audiences; what does Aboriginality look like to you? *Wathaurung Mob* shows her light skinned Aboriginal family gathered for a portrait, they wear somber expressions, 'black' faces and red headbands. Cole found the tins of black face paint at a local costume shop—labelled 'Minstrel Black' and 'Negro Brown' the tins serve as a stark reminder of the history of minstrel performance in Australian Theatre and Cinema. 'Not Really Aboriginal' added fuel to the skin colour debate with some naming the work opportunist and racist, while others thanked Cole for publicly discussing an increasingly relevant issue within mixed race communities.

An installation piece created for the 2009 exhibition 'Just Can't Get Enough' further exposed the cathartic role that art plays in

Cole's life. Best known for work that explores Aboriginal identity, 'Just Can't Get Enough' saw Cole, for the first time, explore her non-Indigenous heritage within the public sphere with moving, if not haunting, effect. Following her mother's death when Cole was just 16 years old, all her childhood belongings were placed in boxes that remained sealed until the creation of this work. Projected onto a wall of the Linden Centre for Contemporary Art was a video work showing Cole, over a number of hours, unpacking each of the boxes. Below it laid the contents; shredded papers, ornaments and family knick-knacks, to the right were framed diary entries penned by her mother's hand. At the front of the room stood an arcade game with a mechanical arm from which audience members could fish for a childhood soft toy unearthed from within the boxes.

In 2010 Cole made her curatorial debut as a part of the Melbourne International Arts Festival. 'Nyahbunyar' (a Wathaurung word meaning 'temple') looked at notions of spirituality, religion, ritual and death through a broad range of works from both established and emerging Indigenous artists. She also travelled back to the Tiwi Islands to take the 'Sista Girl' series home.

In four years Cole has established herself as one of Victoria's most prominent new voices in contemporary art. So what's next? "Right now I'm just dreaming up my next body of work which I will begin this year for 2012. I would love to venture into more curating. I really loved it." ■

Bindi Cole is represented by Nellie Castan Gallery, Melbourne
www.nelliecastangallery.com

- 01 **Shem**, 2009, pigment print on Hahnemuele cotton rag, ed of 8, 85 x 120cm
 - 02 **Nicola**, 2009, pigment print on Hahnemuele cotton rag, ed of 8, 85 x 120cm
 - 03 **Laura**, 2009, pigment print on Hahnemuele cotton rag, ed of 8, 85 x 120cm
 - 04 **Bimbo**, 2009, pigment print on Hahnemuele cotton rag, ed of 8, 85 x 120cm
 - 05 **Frederina**, 2009, pigment print on Hahnemuele cotton rag, ed of 8, 85 x 120cm
 - 06 **Wathaurung Mob**, 2008, pigment print on rag paper, 130 x 94cm
 - 07 Photograph: Bindi Cole
- Courtesy the artist and Nellie Castan Gallery, Melbourne