

The *Stories* that Must Be Told

Words by Amy Middleton

While we don't always have the means to do huge things at Burrinja, there are times when a challenge set by one member of staff is met by the sheer determination and curiosity of another. An exhibition titled *Black Mist Burnt Country* is the result of one such fusion, which has resulted in an ambitious project that Burrinja is incredibly proud of.

Central to *Black Mist Burnt Country* is the commitment to acknowledge and reveal the lived experiences of the individuals affected by the British atomic test series in Australia in the early 1950s. Secondary to this is the ongoing relevance of these events within a contemporary context. The exhibition includes artworks by Indigenous and non-Indigenous contemporary artists, and will be launched in September this year at SH Ervin Gallery in Sydney, marking the sixtieth anniversary of the first atomic test at Maralinga on September 27th 1956. The test was examining one of twelve atomic devices to be trialled from 1952 to 1957 at Montebello Islands off the coast of Western Australia and at Emu Junction and Maralinga in South Australia. The exhibition is scheduled to then tour ten metropolitan and regional public galleries in five states until 2019, when the tour will conclude at Burrinja.

In an interview with JD Mittmann, Curator and Manager of Collections at Burrinja, I was given insight into the origins of the project. It was initiated four years ago when Ross Farnell, Director of Burrinja, suggested developing a touring exhibition. JD's personal interest in a particular work – an item of the Neil McLeod Gift Collection by Jonathan Kumintjara

Brown, titled *Maralinga Before the Atomic Test* – was the starting point for the project. Extensive and ongoing research includes five trips to visit and consult with the Anangu/Pitjantjatjara communities in Yalata and Oak Valley. This research has revealed a dark and untold part of Australian history that continues to affect both the environment and Indigenous communities today.

Maralinga Before the Atomic Test was one of a series of works by Brown that expressed the personal impact the tests had on his life, and gives context to the confronting nature of his artwork. After being removed from his parents at Ooldea Mission at a very early age, he grew up with foster parents in Melbourne and Sydney. It was not until he was in his late twenties that he found his parents at Yalata, South Australia, and learnt about the dislocation of his people and the destruction of the traditional lands by atomic testing. Although he was unable to communicate with his family – as he did not speak the Pitjantjatjara language – he discovered a brother he didn't know about. The revelation was traumatic, and he turned to art for relief and to tell the Maralinga story.

JD extended his research to other Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists to question

what commentary contemporary artists have created on the subject. Lin Onus, an Upwey Koori artist, was one of the first artists to make a direct response to Maralinga with a life-sized sculpture of a woman shielding a young child from the nuclear blast. JD described the sculpture as being 'very emotive – there is anger, but also resilience in the gesture of the woman facing the blast front on'. The exhibition includes the work of over thirty artists, each sharing their voice and their story.

It was only through discussion with JD that I began to understand the underpinning drive that has sustained him through the duration of this project, and why he considers exhibitions like *Black Mist Burnt Country* to be of vital importance. It is the stories of people like Brown that should implore us to question our current political climate, and make a stand accordingly. JD states "We live in a global world. It scares me to see how leisurely we address nuclear issues in politics and policy in Australia. We have heard that the Federal Government has settled on a nuclear waste dump in the Flinders Ranges, and the South Australian government is promoting a dump in Australia for high level nuclear waste from across the world."

With a background in journalism – and having grown up in Germany, where critical debate is part of the culture – JD is a big supporter of people having a voice to steer the decisions made by our leaders.

"Whether we are considering issues on refugees or climate change or uranium, we need more of a public push to say what we do or don't want. Many world issues are complex, but we need to start somewhere," says JD.

Art is a highly effective vehicle for information and to build awareness. It has the ability to make people alert, and at times needs to be confrontational in order to provoke a response.



Top: Jonathan Brown with his artwork.
Above: Cuartor JD Mittman

"It is rewarding when you work on something that beyond its aesthetic qualities has meaning," says JD. "I find it important to highlight that past events have consequences and legacies. They often lead into decisions about today – for our future."

Black Mist Burnt Country addresses contemporary issues in a subtle way. It shares a part of Australian history that is not well known and has not been dealt with properly.

While this exhibition started as a simple idea, it was the leadership at Burrinja that refused to be intimidated by its breadth, significance and the magnitude of work required to bring the project to fruition.

"We are part of the hills community, which has a level of social engagement and elements of activism which led to Burrinja's existence in the first place. In some ways what we are doing here is not too far-fetched in terms of Burrinja's identity; it is something that is still very much related."

For more information, visit www.blackmistburntcountry.com.au