

# Thunder rumbles darkly in Australia

An exhibition on the 1956 atomic tests is shocking but incoherent, finds **Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore**

**I**n the exhibition *Black Mist Burnt Country*, one photograph by Jessie Boylan sticks out. Yankunytjatjara man Yami Lester stands on the deep red earth next to a single skinny tree. His brown jacket reflects the muted landscape. His hands are clasped on his chest as if in pain, and his eyes, tilted to the sky, are scrunched shut. Yami Lester, you see, is blind.

Lester was a child when the British tested the atomic bomb near his home in the Australian outback, in what came to be known as Maralinga. "It was coming from the south - black, like smoke," he later recalled. "I was thinking it might be a dust storm, but it was quiet, just moving through the trees."

Elders thought it was an evil spirit and tried to use *woomera* (spear-throwers) to disperse it. But the damage was done. Lester's family soon fell sick. He lost his sight. The trees, too, shrivelled and died.

The touring exhibition, which runs in various venues across Australia until 2019, commemorates the 60th anniversary of the Maralinga atomic tests through painting, sculpture, printmaking and installation. Spanning 70 years, from Hiroshima to today, it covers artistic reactions to nuclear warfare from more than 30 artists.

*Black Mist Burnt Country* may be broad in scope but it concentrates heavily on the infamous 1956 Maralinga tests in South Australia's Great Victoria Desert. Maralinga is an Aboriginal word for thunder: the cathartic clearing of a stormy sky. In this case, however, the word has taken on a darker meaning. Indigenous people were forcibly removed from their lands or, if they stayed, suffered horrific injuries. Service and military personnel working on the sites, too, were exposed to hazardous radiation.

As such, blindness is a central metaphor. *Black Mist Burnt Country* examines the physical repercussions of atomic tests (from cancer to deformities to loss of sight). Yet blindness also references a government who wilfully ignored repercussions from its actions, shrouded its deeds in secrecy and shied away from responsibility.

Craig McDonald's 2010 bronze sculpture, *Maralinga Test Dummy* (pictured), shows a man, his body taut with excitement, watching the explosion through a visor. McDonald notes in the catalogue: "Blindness, from viewing the blasts, was a real threat, but this figure explores the notion of a more menacing blindness - that of ignorance coupled with colonial arrogance."

There are important issues here, both historical and spiritual. The themes are explored in *Black Mist Burnt Country*'s well-researched curatorial essay, but the exhibition falls short of telling a coherent story. More detailed information, not to mention placing the works in a timeline rather than their current haphazard arrangement, is badly needed to maximise the full impact of what is essentially a tale of horror.

Still, there are some impressive paintings.



A tale of horror, arrogance and ignorance ... Sidney Nolan's *Central Desert: Atomic Test*

They include one of Sidney Nolan's lesser-known landscapes, *Central Desert: Atomic Test*. Painted in the 1950s, it shows a terrain so red it is almost raw, like exposed flesh. In the forefront sit mountains the colour of charred bone, and in the far distance - almost imperceptible - a mushroom cloud explodes.

Arthur Boyd, a pacifist, also painted the atomic bomb in his *Shoalhaven* series. *Jonah on the Shoalhaven - Outside the City* (1976) shows Jonah as a half-human, half-animal carcass sprawled under a lone tree. His stomach is ripped open violently, revealing gold coins stored in his guts, and a mushroom explodes in the distance behind the walled city

of Nineveh. As with Nolan it is set against blue sky, this time brilliant cobalt.

If Nolan and Boyd represent the big showy set pieces, smaller works speak just as loudly. Aboriginal artist Jonathan Kumintjarra Brown's 1992 painting *Maralinga* is a traditional dot painting but blurred by a wash of brick-red sand, rendering its meaning opaque. Protruding from this exterminated earth is a tiny, delicate lizard skeleton, frozen in the process of destruction.

*Black Mist Burnt Country* is an uneven exhibition. However, that small lizard stays with you: it is as apt a symbol as any for the realities of atomic war.

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