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Black Mist, Burnt Country: Artistic responses to nuclear tests in Australia

7 hours ago

Caroline Lafargue, Radio Australia



JD Mittmann, curator of the exhibition Black Mist, Burnt Country.

ABC: Cyril Paquier

60 years ago the British detonated their first nuclear bomb at the Maralinga test range, in the South Australian desert. They conducted a total of 12 major tests on the Australian soil in the 1950s and 1960s.

A [royal commission](#) into this dark chapter of Australia's history took place in the 1980s, however the [British nuclear tests](#) have been largely forgotten about ever since.

With the 60th anniversary of the tests last year, Burrinja cultural centre's curator JD Mittmann launched a national touring exhibition titled [Black Mist Burnt Country](#), which is now showing at the Art Gallery of Ballarat.

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The Black Mist - Australia Plus



[YOUTUBE: Black Mist, Burnt Country](#)

Black Mist, Burnt Country is now showing at the Art Gallery of Ballarat. ABC: *Caroline Lafargue*

39 Australian artists have collaborated to tell a story of mushroom clouds, contamination and displacement, against the backdrop of the South Australian red sand.

Black Mist Burnt Country is a survey exhibition bringing together more than 50 artworks – paintings, photography, sculptures, and videos from the last seven decades.

Works by famous Australian painters such as Sidney Nolan, Albert Tucker and Arthur Boyd are shown alongside the work of contemporary artists such as photographer Jessie Boylan, and Indigenous artists Jonathan Kumintjarra Brown and Tjariya Stanley.

Nuclear fallout over large parts of Australia

In 2016, author and lecturer at James Cook University Graduate Research School Liz Tynan published *Atomic Thunder – The Maralinga Story* about the British atom tests in Australia

“Several bombs that were detonated at Maralinga dropped fallout on different places including Adelaide. Some of them went across to the New South Wales coast, some of them went up to Darwin. But it’s difficult to establish a causal link between fallout and health problems,” Liz says.

She writes about how some bombs produced a very harmful fallout in the direct vicinity of the test zone. In particular, the series of tests called [Vixen B](#), which scattered more than 22 kilos of plutonium 239 in Maralinga.

The other most famous and chilling event was the “black mist” contamination, a phenomenon that occurred after the first atomic weapon (called Totem 1) was tested at Emu Field, in October 1953.

“A few hours later in settlements to the north-east of the test site, the Indigenous people who lived in that area... noticed what they described as a black mist. It was a very greasy, thick, unpleasant, smelly mist, that rolled across the land,” Liz explains.

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“A number of Aboriginal people became very ill. Some of them died. Some of them were blinded like Yami Lester who was a child at the time.”

- Liz Tynan, author of *Atomic Thunder – The Maralinga Story*

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“I think we can be fairly sure that some people at least did die. And a number of people were injured or were otherwise affected by the exposure to radiation, even though there’s the intrinsic problem involved in drawing a causal link between exposure to radiation and health problems,” Liz Tynan says.

In total, 35 000 servicemen - of those, 25 000 British and 10 000 Australians, worked at the Maralinga testing range between 1952 and 1963. There were also civilians who built the base’s village. And 2000 to 3000 Aboriginal people were also living around Maralinga. They were evacuated but some continued to traverse the test zone.



Author and historian Liz Tynan has spend years researching the nuclear tests at Maralinga.

ABC: Cyril Paquier

Today, art seems the only way to represent this inconceivable event.

In the exhibition, a painting by Tjariya Stanley called *Puyu – Black Mist*, gives a striking vision of this black mist. The artist depicts Aboriginal people sitting at their camps in the outback, sharing a meal.

“The black mist is symbolised here by black snakes that invade their country... and the Aboriginal magic men, the healing men, are trying to fend off this mysterious black mist by throwing bones at it,” curator JD Mittmann says.

Mr Mittmann commissioned a painting from a group of Pitjantjatjara-Anangu women who tell the story of the evacuation of 2000 to 3000 Aboriginal people were also living around Maralinga.

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“Their traditional lifestyle ended, and they were all herded together and gathered up in trucks and driven to a new place - Yalata - almost on the coast.”

- JD Mittmann, curator of *Black Mist Burnt Country*

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“I was interested in creating a new work and engaging the younger generation, so that they put their own voice in this,” Mr Mittmann says.

Using art to tell an unknown story

JD Mittmann believes that knowledge about the tests at Maralinga is very low.

"Art is a good vehicle to bring that particular story and part of Australian history to people's attention," he says.

Angela Robinson, a visitor to the exhibition, had never heard much about it before.

"So I was really interested to see how the artists interpreted their experiences, those of people before them and how it still affects them today," she says.

Early on, a group of Australian painters were the first to voice their opposition to any sort of nuclear weapons trial. In May 1957 they demanded an immediate end of nuclear tests from the Australian government.



Black Mist, Burnt Country is currently showing at the Art Gallery of Ballarat.

ABC: Cyril Paquier

But at that time, in the midst of the cold war, the government presented the testing of British nuclear weapons as a great opportunity to ensure the country's safety. It was even promoted as a source of national pride.

90-year-old Dolcie Brooke who visited the exhibition, remembers seeing the newspapers at the time which said 'there will be no conceivable injury'.

The 60th anniversary of the Maralinga tests now gives a new opportunity to all Australians to discuss this history.

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“What struck me most is how ignored it is and how difficult it is to have access to this kind of information. Just really important to keep having these exhibitions and keep the conversations going.”

- Angela Robinson

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Black Mist, Burnt Country is currently showing at the Art Gallery of Ballarat until February 5, and will be touring around Australia for another two years until February 2019.

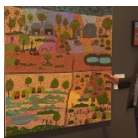
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