

Black Mist Burnt Country review – exhibition covers devastation of nuclear war

With works by Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd and Jessie Boylan, Black Mist Burnt Country homes in on the 1956 British atomic tests in the Great Victoria Desert

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Wednesday 12 October 2016 12.22 AEDT

In the new 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 just 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, shrank, shrivelled and died.

The national touring exhibition, which runs until 2019, commemorates the 60th anniversary of the Maralinga atomic tests through painting, sculpture, printmaking and installations. Spanning 70 years, from Hiroshima to today, it covers artistic reactions to nuclear warfare from more than 30 artists, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

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 far 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, shows a man, his body

taut with excitement, watching the explosion through a visor. He 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 meaty issues here, both historical and spiritual. Yet while such themes are explored in Black Mist Burnt Country’s well-researched curatorial essay, the exhibition falls short of telling a coherent story. More detailed information, not to mention placing the works in some sort of 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. They include one of Sidney Nolan’s lesser-known landscapes, not seen by the public until 2001. Central Desert: Atomic Test, painted in the 1950s, 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 distance - far enough away as to almost be imperceptible - is a mushroom cloud that explodes against a queasy blue sky.

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. Judy Watson’s Bomb Drawing 1 and Bomb Drawing 5 are simple sketches of ash on white paper. Despite, or perhaps because of, their size and quietness, they pack a punch.

As does Aboriginal artist Jonathan Kumintjarra Brown’s 1992 painting Maralinga. Brown was removed from his family as a child, who were themselves displaced due to the Maralinga tests. In his large canvas Maralinga, a traditional dot painting is blurred by a wash of brick-red sand, rendering its meaning largely lost. 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: it is a shame so many good works lose their reverberations and power in hit-and-miss curating. Leaving the show, however, that small lizard stays with you: it is as apt a symbol as any for the toxic realities of atomic war.

. Black Mist Burnt Country is at the SH Ervin Gallery and will tour NSW, VIC, SA and QLD until 2019

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