

## Maralinga: Nuclear Colonialism, Militarism, and Colonial Arrogance

January 20, 2017 By [Federica Caso](#)

I didn't know about Maralinga until I came across the art exhibition titled *Black Mist Burnt Country* hosted by the S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney. I wasn't the only one, though. When I shared the shame for my ignorance at a couple of watering holes, I realised that shame and ignorance were more widespread than I imagined. The resonance of Maralinga is minimal, like the style of the atomic mushrooms offered by Judy Watson for *Black Mist*. Unfortunately, this is not the case for its implications.



Bomb Drawing 1 and Bomb Drawing 5, by Judy Watson, 1995, exhibited at *Black Mist Burnt Country*

What is Maralinga? At *Black Mist* and through some research I have learnt that Maralinga is a remote region in South Australia, a land inhabited by Indigenous people with cultural and traditional [links with the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara people to the north and the Tjuntjuntara people in the west](#). Since the 1970s though, Maralinga has become the shorthand for the British nuclear tests

carried out in Australia between 1952 and 1963 that occurred at Emu Field, Maralinga (both in Western Desert), and Montebello Islands (northern Western Australia).

The British tests were kept secret, and so were the effects of the nuclear and radioactive materials on the land, the environment, and the people. In fact, little attention was paid to the possible environmental consequences of the nuclear testing, and Indigenous people autochthonous of the region were not properly informed or consulted. Official cover-up, an uncritical media, and excessive patriotism contributed to the Maralinga taboo during the 1950s and 1960s.



Portrait of a Whistleblower: Avon Hudson in his office surrounded by his archives, by Jessie Boylan. Retrieved at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-09-21/avon-hudson/7865302>

Secrecy and silence were eventually challenged in the 1970s following growing concerns over the prolonged Cold War, improved scientific literacy, and especially the leaking of classified information by veterans and whistle-blowers like Avon Hudson, a leading aircraftman for the RAAF during the nuclear tests in Maralinga.



Maralinga Test Dummy, by Craig McDonald, 2010, exhibited at Black Mist Burnt Country

The nuclear and radioactive tests brought displacement of Indigenous people, diseases associated with radiation amongst veterans and Indigenous people, and contamination of the soil and environment. Equally worrying to the physical and material implications of the nuclear contamination was the political, social, and cultural blindness that followed, which is captured by the sculpture exhibited at *Black Mist* by Craig McDonald, who [says](#) about his work:

“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.”

This form of blindness is also well captured in the work of the Japanese artist Tsunehisa Kimura which shows a man and a woman drinking Coca Cola and watching, delighted and amused, an atomic mushroom in the horizon.

Americanism, by Tsunehisa Kimura, 1982, exhibited at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art



And certainly this blindness can be juxtaposed with the blindness of Yami Lester, an Indigenous man who lost his sight as a result of the nuclear explosions at Emu Field in the 1950s.

Yami Lester, by Belinda Mason, 2012, exhibited at Black Mist Burnt Country



For the artist Craig McDonald, Maralinga was the result of ignorance cum colonial arrogance. I would say it was more about nuclear colonialism, militarism, and colonial arrogance. Ignorance might be said to have played a role at the level of the democratic process, insofar as it sufficed a phone call from the British Prime Minister Clement Attlee to the Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies asking if Australia was willing to provide a permanent site for British nuclear tests to initiate the saga. Menzies agreed, and even offered to bear [some unsolicited costs](#), without passing the matter to the Cabinet for democratic scrutiny ([Tynan, 2016](#)).

This was not ignorance. It was a matter of nuclear colonialism, militarism, and colonial arrogance. Nuclear colonialism is an expression coined by the US activist Jennifer Viereck in 1992 who defined it as 'The taking (or destruction) of other people's natural resources, lands, and well-being for one's own, in the furtherance of nuclear development' (Tynan, 2016). Settler Australians gave permission to the former British colonial power to use the land of Indigenous people for military purposes with the political strategic aim of demonstrating that Australia was now a global player supporting the western efforts against the Soviet Bloc during the Cold War, as well as the political commitment to nuclear deterrence.

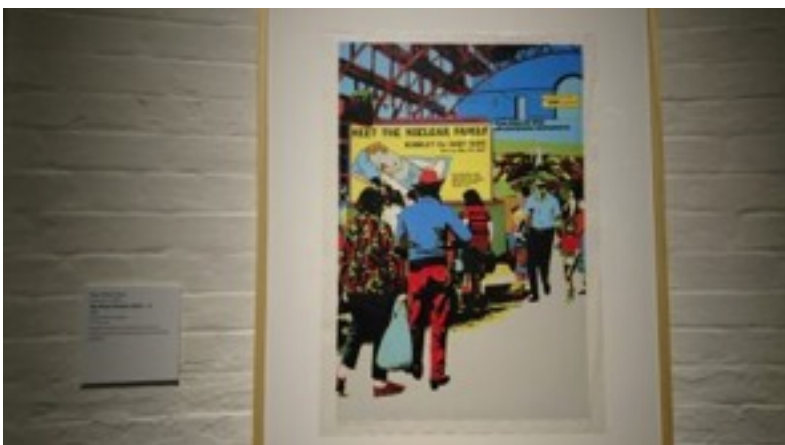
Very little attention was paid to the safety and legitimate claims of local Indigenous people, who were not consulted or properly informed about the nuclear tests and their implications. Most of the Indigenous people inhabiting the land were displaced and [forcefully relocated to Yalata](#) (although some sources – [here](#) and [here](#) for example – claim that the relocation happened prior, and was unrelated with the British nuclear tests). The British and Australian governments tried to prevent Indigenous people from returning to the areas affected by nuclear testing, but they failed to take into account that Maralinga was an important [transit area](#) for Indigenous people, and put [warning signs in English](#), a language which few of the affected people could understand. Displacement of Indigenous people was the way both the British and Australian governments cleaned their consciousness and proceeded with the nuclear exploitation of the area. Australian settlers once again did not shy away from colonial arrogance, declaring as theirs what has never belonged to them, and rendering invisible first nation people who were not even consulted regarding the initiation of the nuclear programme.

Operation Hurricane, by Kate Downhill, 2013, exhibited at Black Mist Burnt Country

The result was threefold: the UK became the third nuclear power after the US and the USSR, Australia became 'fully modern', and first nation people in Australia were once again subjected to colonial exploitation and displacement.



The kind of militarism that was advanced by the British-Australian deal is well captured in the pop art by Toni Robertson. The coming together of Britain and Australia has produced 'BOMBLET THE BABY NUKE', seemingly innocent and harmless in the eyes of the patriotic public. Robertson produced an effective critique of the way the Australian government was selling the nuclear programme on the premises of national security and safeguard of the Australian way of life.



The Royal Nuclear Show 3, by Toni Robertson, 1981, exhibited at Black Mist Burnt Country

Robertson's painting certainly resonates with Carol Cohn's (1987) famous article '[Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals](#)', which reveals how the technostrategic expert language of nuclear defence is sanitised and made appealing through gendered and sexualised

language. Following a gender analysis, Cohn says 'The nuclear scientists gave birth to male progeny with the ultimate power of violent domination over female Nature.' This certainly resonates in a context where colonial power operates through a gendered logic that feminises racialized subjects on the basis of their connection with nature, which was understood by western colonizers as a sign of backwardness and therefore civilizational inferiority.



Maralinga, by Jonathan Kumintjarra Brown, 1992, exhibited at Black Mist Burnt Country

The artwork by Jonathan Kumintjarra Brown materialises the tragedy of the situation, with the dotted and spiral patterns representing Indigenous people paradoxically dying on and at the hand of their own sacred land, poisoned by foreign politics and power struggles.

A final remark is worth making about the issue of compensation for contamination and radiation. Compensation has been paid by the British and the Australian governments to the Indigenous people of Maralinga for contamination and loss of the land. In 2001 Maralinga was declared safe following the clean-up and rehabilitation of the main sites of nuclear testing. In 2009 most of the land was given back to Indigenous local people, although some sites are still deemed [not suitable for permanent habitation](#).

Barely [no compensation](#) has been paid for exposure to radioactive material to Indigenous people and nuclear veterans. The British Supreme Court declared that requests for compensation by Indigenous people have come too late, and therefore they cannot prove that their poor health conditions are related to the nuclear testing of 1950s and 1960s.

The stance of the British and Australian governments in relation to compensation is well captured in the artwork of Luke Cornish representing Jesus wearing a gas mask. Compensation has served to clean the consciousness of the perpetrators of nuclear contamination, but has certainly not put an end to the damage produced. Jesus can just wear a gas mask.

Wake up to the Stink, by Luke Cornish, 2009, exhibited at Black Mist Burnt Country

Although it is illusory to think that art can fix politics, hopefully this great exhibition will help raising awareness about the disastrous consequences of nuclear colonialism, militarism, and power politics.

Black Mist Burnt Country will be touring and available until 2019. The exhibition is curated by JD Mittmann. You can check the dates and locations [here](#).