



## Exhibition explodes Australia's atomic past

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**GINA FAIRLEY**

A new touring exhibition tells the long overdue story of Australia's dark atomic past through five decades of art.



*Detail of Jnathan Kumintjarra Brown's painting Frogmen (1996); Private collection, courtesy the artist estate*

Legend of Australian art history, Margaret Olley often advised Archibald-winner Ben Quilty not to get involved in causes. Quilty clearly did not listen. If Olley were still alive he would have received an admonishing phone call today, having last night opened *Black Mist Burnt Country* (<http://blackmistburntcountry.com.au/>) - *Testing the Bomb, Maralinga and Australian Art* at S.H. Ervin Gallery.

The subject is particularly close to Quilty. He attributes his passion for causes and his awareness of the human condition to his father, who took him to the Woomera rocket range at age ten to witness the impact of weapons testing on the community who had lived on that land for 40,000 years.

Quilty said Australia's decision to allow the British testing on traditional Indigenous lands is one of the darkest part of Australia history, and that we still have yet to acknowledge that fully. This exhibition is a great step to telling that story.

Timed to mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the first bombing on Maralinga in South Australia, the exhibition includes work addressing the tragedy over five decades. It will tour across 10 venues around Australia over the next two years.

Work that speaks of dislocation and nuclear colonialism is at the heart of this exhibition, which includes 30 artists, many Indigenous, and has been curated by JD Mittmann of Burrinja Cultural Centre in the Dandenongs Ranges.

'In the now-extinct Garik language of the Northern Territory the word "Maralinga" means thunder,' writes Dr Elizabeth Tynan in the exhibition catalogue.

'This is a tale of nuclear colonialism, in which a non-nuclear nation handed over part of its territory to an emerging nuclear nation to test the most destructive weapons ever invented. Remnants of the toxic physical and political legacy endure to this day' she continued.

### **Black Mist Burnt Country**



*ArtsHub You Tube channel; produced by Gina Fairley*

Peter Garrett – pop-singing politician and nuclear activist whose song *Maralinga* topped the Australian music charts in 1982 - writes in the exhibition catalogue that this is a story that has almost been buried by the sweep of time.

He describes the exhibition as 'an act of remembering and bearing witness to a momentous series of calculated acts that shattered lives, especially the communities of the Pitjantatjara and Yankunytjatjara lands.'

A whole generation of Australians know little of this story – its forced removal of Indigenous people, devastation of country, and exposure of servicemen. This exhibition seeks to redress that.

Artist and former Yalata Community Chairperson, Mima Smart said: 'Because of the poison from the bombs being tested at Maralinga the country is no good. No good at all. That poison has killed so many of our people...And radiation on everything – sand, trees, animals, buildings and other things. Our families are upset by all this mess.'



*Jonathan Kumintjarra Brown, Maralinga before the Atomic Test Ochres, sand and kapok on linen*

### **SAME STORY DIFFERENT VOICE**

It was a work held in the collection of Burrinja that inspired Mittmann to tackle this long overdue topic. Jonathan Kumintjarra Brown's painting *Mardlinga Before the Atomic Test* is the backbone to the exhibition he has curated.

The story of dislocation from Ooldea Aboriginal Mission station in the 1950s, and the destruction of country (the environment and resources for living) is evident in the works by members of the Yalata community: Hilda Moodoo, Mima Smart, Terence Edwards and Yvonne Edwards.

Mittmann explained that these paintings could be described as naïve in style, but document important aspects of the story in a remarkable way.

In contrast, modernists Sidney Nolan and Albert Tucker were touched by the debate of the day. Tucker went to Japan in 1947 and visited Hiroshima. Nolan retrospectively added a demonic mushroom to a painting of his famous Central Desert series while he was living in London.



*Sidney Nolan's painting Central Desert: Atomic Test (1952-57) was painted in the same year that the Defense (Special Undertakings) Act was passed by the Menzies Government; Collection of Old and New Art (MOINA)*

The exact date of the production is not known, but it can be assumed that Nolan had heard about the atomic tests in Australia through the British media. If not out of protest against the tests, then perhaps in defence of the Aboriginal country he regularly visited and enjoy.

And this conversation is capped off by contemporary engagement in the issues, with work by Marilyn Fairskye, Rosemary Laing, Blak Douglas, Kate Shaw, Luke Cornish and others.

Sydney-based artist Kate Downhill's father worked as a British nuclear scientist on the tests at Montebello Island, Emu Field and Christmas Island and went on to develop the British H-bomb. Her artwork extensively addressed various aspects of his story and the British atomic tests. The patchwork painting Operation Hurricane is included in the exhibition.

## **A POTTED NUCLEAR HISTORY**

July 1945: The first atomic test is carried out at Alamogordo, New Mexico code named *Trinity*.

6 August 1945: The aircraft Enola Gay drops *Little Boy* on Hiroshima on killing 70,000

September 1950: Prime Minister Robert Menzies agrees to a British request to allow atomic weapons testing in Australia.

June 1952: The Defense (Special Undertakings) Act is passed. Ooldea Aboriginal Reserve is closed to move people away from weapons tests.

3 October 1952: The first test in Australia, codenamed Hurricane, is conducted in the lagoon between the Montebello Islands, Western Australia.

October 1953: Two nuclear tests are conducted at Emu Field in Northern South Australia.

27 September 1956: A permanent nuclear test range is established at Maralinga, South Australia and the first of seven major atomic explosions at the site occurs. More than 500 smaller nuclear tests were also conducted over the next seven years.

1957: A poll shows half the Australian population opposes the testing.

1963: The last Australian tests are conducted at Maralinga

1984 -85: The McLelland British Royal Commission uncovered nuclear contamination caused by the testing, with particularly devastating effects for Aboriginal communities.

***Black Mist Burnt Country* is showing at S.H. Ervin Gallery 24 September – 30 October.**

The exhibition will travel to Art Gallery of Ballarat (VIC, December 2016), Swan Hill Gallery (VIC, February 2017), Gold Coast City Gallery (QLD, May 2017), Pinnacles Gallery Townsville (QLD, July 2017), Glasshouse Regional Gallery Port Macquarie (NSW, September 2017), Western Plains Cultural Centre (NSW, December 2017), Penrith Regional Gallery (NSW, May 2018), Flinders University Art Museum (SA, September 2018) and Burrinja Dandenong Rangers Culture Centre (VIC, December 2018).

[Blackmistburntcountry.com.au](http://blackmistburntcountry.com.au)  
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