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The black mist of Maralinga nuclear tests provides confronting fodder for artists

John McDonald

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As we watch an American presidential campaign descend into crazed conspiracy theories it seems clear that the Age of Information is also the Age of Paranoia. The chief source of fear and loathing is government, now widely viewed as a tool of "dark forces" hell-bent on enslaving the population. This kind of talk has probably been around since the ancient Greeks, but never has it enjoyed the same opportunities to spread virally, gathering support among the disaffected masses.

All of this seems to ignore the fact that politicians are under greater scrutiny than ever before. Every little slip is punished in the opinion polls to the point where our leaders are paralysed by the dread of unpopularity. To see how much things have changed one might consider Australia's shameful acquiescence in the British atomic testing program that ran from 1952 to 1963.



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Belinda Mason's photo of Yemi Lester, who was robbed of his eyesight by the Maralinga nuclear testing

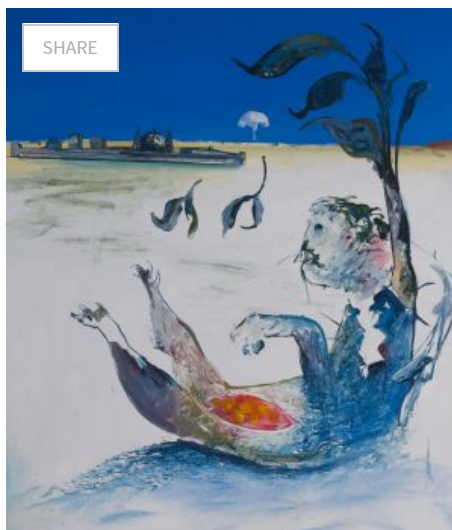
Delinda Mason's photo of Liam Lester, who was robbed of his eyesight by the Maralinga nuclear testing.

On September 16, 1950, the British Labour Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, wrote to Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies, asking permission to hold nuclear tests on the Montebello Islands off the coast of Western Australia. For Menzies this was not an outrageous imposture. As historian Elizabeth Tynan writes: "Menzies was eager – far too eager – and readily agreed without consulting his colleagues."

Today's politicians can't bring themselves to vote on same-sex marriage but in 1950 Menzies could agree to make the country a bomb site without even discussing the issue in cabinet! Had he resorted to a plebiscite most Australians would almost certainly have endorsed the decision, as there was an extraordinary glamour associated with atomic energy. It wasn't until the Whitlam era that the idea of Australia becoming a nuclear power in its own right was taken off the table.

The story of Australia's complicity in Britain's nuclear ambitions, and the way this has been portrayed in art, is the subject of *Black Mist Burnt Country*, at the S.H. Ervin Gallery. The show has a little more than a week to run, but will be touring until early 2019, and returning to Penrith in May 2018.

Black Mist has been put together by curator J. D. Mittmann for the Burrinja Dandenong Ranges Cultural Centre. It comes with an excellent catalogue that provides an overview of this episode in Australian history, and its echoes in art and popular culture.



Arthur Boyd's *Jonah on the Shoalhaven - Outside the City* (1976).

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Everyone has a vague idea about the atomic tests that took place in the 1950s at Maralinga, in the South Australian desert. We know that the Indigenous inhabitants were displaced and their lands polluted by radiation. We may also remember that the most recent clean-up was as late as 2000. It was declared a success by the presiding minister, Senator Nick Minchin, and a disaster by engineer Alan Parkinson, who was appointed to oversee the project and subsequently sacked when he complained about the procedures adopted.

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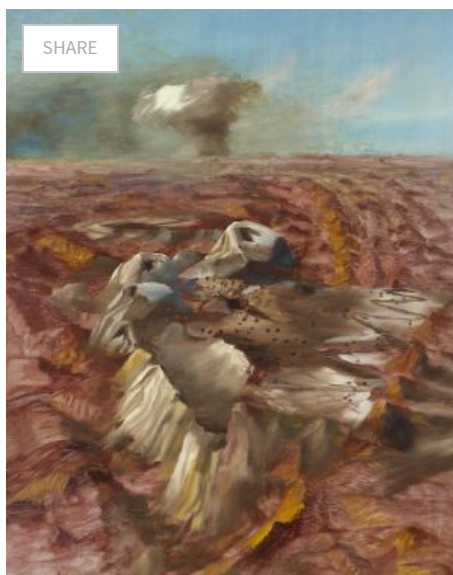
The larger story, as detailed in the exhibition catalogue, is an appalling indictment of Australian sycophancy towards "the mother country", and Britain's indifference to the mess it made and the lives that were destroyed. The project was veiled in secrecy, with media coverage ending in 1957, while the tests continued for six more years. Tynan uses the apt phrase, "nuclear colonialism".

It wasn't until the late 1970s that questions began to be asked about Maralinga, first in the press and then Parliament. In August 1984 a Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests was established, and the full horror gradually came to light.

One can see the way Maralinga began to seep into the popular consciousness in the paintings of artists such as Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd. One of the first works we encounter in this show is Nolan's *Central Desert: Atomic Test* (1952-57). It's part of a classic series of desert landscapes Nolan began in the late 1940s. He added a mushroom cloud on the horizon at a later date.

Boyd's *Jonah on the Shoalhaven – Outside the City* (1976), which also features a tiny mushroom cloud, reflects a deep, apocalyptic streak in the artist's thinking. Brought up on stories of the Old Testament, Boyd's more visionary works blended biblical imagery with contemporary landscape and personal symbolism. Boyd had participated in the Aldermaston anti-nuclear demonstrations in the 1960s, and appears to have felt an almost visceral dread of the bomb. Perhaps the work echoes the dark feelings of Jonah himself, who complained to the Lord: "It is better for me to die than to live."

It's a great pity two key works that appear in the catalogue, Weaver Hawkins' *Atomic Power* (1947) and Lin Onus' *Maralinga* (1990), are missing from the S.H. Ervin show. The Art Gallery of Western Australia refused permission for the Onus work to travel from Perth. The Hawkins is in the permanent collection of the Art Gallery of NSW, but is on loan to an exhibition in Germany. Even when it returns, the AGNSW is only making it available to two of *Black Mist's* remaining nine venues



Sidney Nolan's *Central Desert Atomic Test*.

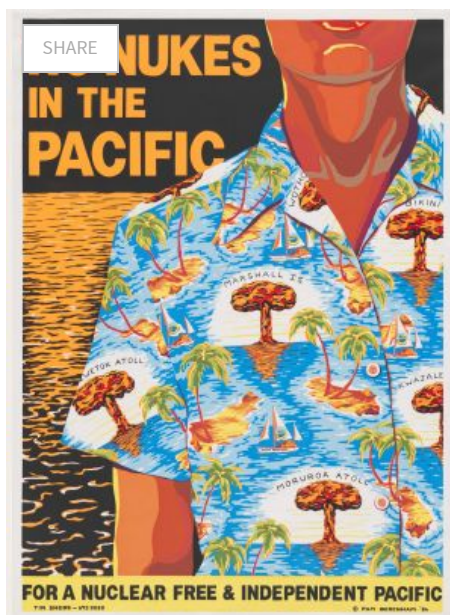


Toni Robertson and Chips Mackinolty's poster: *Daddy, what did YOU do in the Nuclear War?*

two of which are remaining in the collection.

The late 1970s to the early 1980s was the heyday of Australian political poster-making, and the exhibition includes a few renowned examples, notably Pam Debenham's witty, *No Nukes in the Pacific* (1984), which reproduces tiny mushroom clouds on a Hawaiian shirt; and *Daddy, What did YOU do in the Nuclear War* (1977) by Toni Robertson and Chips Mackinolty, which adapts a World War I recruiting poster intended to shame able-bodied men into volunteering for service. In this version the two cute kids have become mutants.

There are numerous contemporary works that take an anti-nuclear stance by artists such as Rosemary Laing, Susan Norrie, Luke Cornish, Adam Norton and Linda Dement; while Hugh Ramage and Judy Watson have depicted the distinctive shape of the mushroom cloud, allowing it to stand alone as a universally recognised symbol of destruction.



Pam Debenham's *No Nukes in the Pacific* poster.

It was the residents of the Ooldea Reserve, 40 kilometres south of Maralinga, who were most directly affected by the atomic tests. Hundreds of people were rounded up and removed from their ancestral homes – a traumatic event for those whose sense of identity was linked with a particular piece of country. Even worse was the fate of the communities of Wallatinna and Mintabie, near the Emu Field testing site, who found themselves enveloped by a mysterious black mist that caused immediate and long-lasting health problems.

In the case of Yami Lester, who was a child at the time, the black mist robbed him of his eyesight. There are two photos of Lester in the exhibition: one by Jessie Boylan, in which he keeps his eyelids tightly shut; the other, by Belinda Mason, showing Lester with his one remaining eye staring sightlessly out of the darkness.

One can imagine the terror of watching a black cloud edge its way towards your home. We might compare it to a science fiction film, but to the Aboriginal people it must have seemed a manifestation of pure evil. Perhaps this is an accurate description. The British scientists in charge of the tests denied any knowledge of the black mist. The abiding attitude towards the native people was that they were "an inconvenience".

It's hardly surprising that Aboriginal artists have been driven to respond to the Maralinga project. The most dedicated was Jonathan Kumintjarra Brown (1950-1997), a member of the stolen generations, who was dispossessed of a family that was dispossessed of their land. In an inventive series of pictures, Brown found ways to combine traditional Aboriginal iconography with references to the tests. In *Maralinga* (1992), a Central Desert dot motif has been partially obliterated by smears of earthy brown, suggesting the disruption caused by the blasts. *Frogmen* (1996), shows three men in protective suits and

masks, bearing a strong resemblance to wandjinas.

Another highlight is *Destruction II* (2002), by Jeffrey Queama and Hilda Moodoo – a multicoloured picture of a mushroom cloud, done in the manner of a dot painting. The energy of the explosion almost crackles on the canvas, against a backdrop of concentric circles that suggests noise and flaring light.

A less spectacular outcome of the blasts, as pointed out by Tilman Ruff in his catalogue essay, is that every single human being alive today carries within their body radioisotopes from nuclear explosions. No matter where we go, there will be a little piece of us that is always Maralinga.

Black Mist Burnt Country: Testing the Bomb, Maralinga and Australian Art

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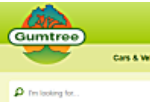
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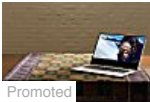
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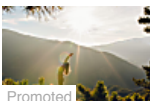
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