

# Black Mist Burnt Country: art under the nuclear cloud of Maralinga

By Karen Hardy

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On September 27, 1956, the British exploded an atomic bomb on Pitjantjatjara land in South Australia. The place would become known as Maralinga, which means “thunder” in the now-extinct Garik Aboriginal language.

Black Mist Burnt Country tells the stories of the atomic tests in Australia in the 1950s and '60s, revisiting the events and locations through the artworks of Indigenous and non-Indigenous contemporary artists across the mediums of painting, print-making, sculpture, photography, video and new media.



JD Mittmann, curator of Black Mist Burnt Country at the National Museum of Australia. CREDIT: ELESA KURTZ

Now showing at the National Museum of Australia, it has been touring with great success since September 2016, opening then to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the first test at Maralinga.

Curator JD Mittman, from the Burrinja Dandenong Ranges Cultural Centre, grew up “under the nuclear cloud” in Germany during the 1980s and when he came to Australia he was surprised to learn there had been atomic tests here.

In the collection of the small community arts centre he found a large canvas work by Jonathan Kumintjarra Brown entitled Maralinga Before the Atomic Test.

“The question for me was what did ‘after’ look like?”

When he began his research he was surprised to find so many works concerning Australia's place in the nuclear race.



Blak Douglas, Tjarutja Tragedy, Synthetic polymer on canvas, 2016. CREDIT: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Artist Arthur Boyd participated in anti-nuclear demonstrations in the 1960s and his *Jonah on the Shoalhaven – Outside the City* (1976), features a tiny mushroom cloud, blending biblical imagery with contemporary landscape and personal symbolism.

Sidney Nolan's *Central Desert: Atomic Test* (1952-57) is 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.

"This exhibition doesn't look at any one artist's body of work," says Mittman, "but displays how varied the approaches were, how different the perspectives were, and what the original stories were.

"Every generation has taken a different approach."

There are large canvases by Kumintjarra Brown, one *Frogmen*, shows three men in masks and protective suits, another *Black Rain* tells the tragic story of a group of Anangu people who were found huddled together, dead, in a crater near the bomb site.

Mittman says it's important for Australians, particularly generations who may not have even heard of the testing, let alone those of us to whom *Maralinga* is a familiar word but were unaware of such details as then prime minister Robert Menzies did not even consult cabinet when he gave permission to begin the testing.

"And it's not just a story of the past," he says.

“There is great concern among the indigenous community, and I don't want to speak on their behalf, about the ongoing repercussions of the testing on country.

“And it's even more than that, the multi-media work from Linda Dement and Jessie Boylan builds a bridge between the past and the present.



Hugh Ramage, Taranaki, oil on canvas, 2014. CREDIT: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

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

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“There are 15,000 warheads in the world at present, many of them on planes, in submarines, ready to strike within minutes.

“The Cold War might have ended but the nuclear threat has not gone away.”

He says it's somewhat fitting that the exhibition opens in Canberra in the same week the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons protest arrives in Canberra heading to parliament to urge politicians to ratify the nuclear weapon ban treaty.

Black Mist Burnt Country at the National Museum of Australia until November 18.