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Using Art to Address the Deadly Legacy of Maralinga, Australia's Nuclear Testing Ground

Katherine Gillespie (/en_au/author/katherinegillespie) — Oct 13 2016



Blak Douglas, "Tjarutja Tragedy"

In September 1956, the British military detonated the first of seven atomic bombs in South Australia's desert, at a site they named Maralinga—the word for “thunder” in Garik, an extinct Indigenous language. Those tests were followed by hundreds of smaller experiments that permanently contaminated the ancestral homelands of local Aboriginal people. It's an uncomfortable topic even sixty years on, but a new travelling art exhibition aims to address the insidious legacy nuclear weapons have wrought in the Australian outback.

Black Mist Burnt Country (<http://blackmistburntcountry.com.au/>) is curated by JD Mittmann, from Victoria's [Burrinja cultural centre](http://www.burrinja.org.au/) (<http://www.burrinja.org.au/>). Originally from Germany, he explains to The Creators Project that he had no knowledge of the tests at Maralinga before coming to Australia. He was surprised to find that he wasn't alone—many locals are in the same boat.

The curator's interest was piqued when he came across the work of painter Jonathan Kumintjarra Brown—a member of the Stolen Generation who returned to his community outside of Ceduna as an adult, and experienced the aftereffects of Maralinga first hand.



Jonathan Kumintjarra Brown, "Frogmen"

“He learned what happened to the land of his people who had been removed from the test site to the north of the state so that the British, with the approval of the South Australian state government, could conduct atomic tests there,” says Mittmann.

“All of this was very traumatic for him, and he started painting in order—I suspect—to overcome enormous grief. But he also felt he should educate people on the story. He's probably the Australian artist who has created the largest body of work relating to the atomic tests.”



Paul Ogier, "One Tree"

Kumintjarra Brown became a springboard for the rest of *Black Mist Burnt Country*. “The question of arose as to whether other artists had created creative responses in relation to the same subject matter,” Mittmann explains.

Mittmann was then able to trace artistic responses to Maralinga from all over the country, across almost every discipline. The long list of artists represented in the show includes key Australian modernists like Albert Tucker, Arthur Boyd and Sidney Nolan, urban Aboriginal artists like Trevor Nickolls and Blak Douglas, protest artists of the 1970s and 1980s like Chips Mackinolty and Toni Robertson, and desert artists from the Yalata community.



Adam Norton, "Prohibited Area"

For Indigenous artists in particular, the emotional resonance of what occurred at Maralinga is as strong as ever. Its details continue to be shocking, decades later: as a Royal Commission Report explained in 1984, Australian authorities made little effort to locate Aboriginal

families outside of major settlements in the Maralinga area prior to the tests. It is unknown how many of these families were therefore exposed to the blasts.

Yankunytjatjara elder Yami Lester was one of those who fell sick because of exposure to toxic chemicals. The exhibition takes its title from the “black mist” he described seeing in the aftermath of the atomic tests, which killed trees and caused him to go blind. Of course, those Aboriginal people who were not directly exposed to the Maralinga tests suffered in different ways, as they became permanently displaced from the contaminated land they had occupied for thousands of years.

Yet *Black Mist Burnt Country* is more than just an artistic response to tragedy. It's a gentle education on violence. “We're trying to get visitors interested, give them access points to learn about this story, because it has ongoing legacies,” Mittmann says.



Kate Downhill, "Operation Hurricane"

Although *Black Mist Burnt Country* looks back on a history, it's future-orientated too. "In South Australia a lot of people, in particular Indigenous people, are very concerned—because they had all this happen to them once, they weren't consulted about things happening on their land...that is a story they don't want to have repeated," Mittmann says. While atomic testing isn't likely to re-occur in the area, a nuclear waste dump seems like a more distinct possibility.

Mittmann hopes the artworks will touch a chord not only with locals, but visitors from around the world.

"The Australian experience is not an isolated one," he says. "Atomic tests have happened everywhere, and the impact they had on the local communities—and often they're Indigenous or ethnic minorities—is profound."



Kate Standke, "Road to Maralinga"

Black Mist Burnt Country continues at the National Trust S.H. Ervin Gallery, NSW until October 30. It will travel to galleries in Victoria, Queensland, and South Australia—find out more about the venues and dates [here](http://blackmistburntcountry.com.au/index.php/venues/) (<http://blackmistburntcountry.com.au/index.php/venues/>).

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