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Australia's nuclear testing 'gave me chills', says curator Jan Dirk Mittmann

Growing up under the threat of nuclear war has given this curator a keen sense of Australia's own history with the bomb, as he tells Konrad Marshall.

Konrad Marshall

<http://www.smh.com.au/good-weekend/minutes-with/growing-up-under-threat-of-nuclear-war-spurred-jan-dirk-mittmans-curating-path-20170131-gu26px.html>



The fallout from humanity's nuclear exploration, he points out, is an ongoing history. Photo: Simon Schluter

The ground floor of the Art Gallery of Ballarat is no serene viewing space this Thursday, but rather loud, chaotic and dirty. Dusty, at least. Masking tape, bubble-wrap and white title plates are strewn all about the dark parquet floor. Men with sleeve tattoos are working power drills and belt-sanders, unpacking the custom wooden crates of a travelling exhibition and fixing their contents to white walls.

Jan Dirk Mittmann is here, too, hand holding chin, coolly assessing the layout, making sure his "mud map" for more than 50 works has the right flow aesthetically, thematically and chronologically. "It is a bit of a tight hang," says Mittmann, 48, the curator at Burrinja Cultural Centre in the hills outside Melbourne. "You do it on paper first, but you need to look at it in the space, play with a few ideas.

The exhibition, *Black Mist, Burnt Country: Testing the Bomb, Maralinga and Australian Art*, opened in Sydney in September, moved to Victoria's goldfields, and will visit another eight locations in four states over the next two years, starting with Swan Hill on February 24. Mittmann, Ray-Bans dangling from the neckline of a sweat-soaked Calvin Klein polo shirt, is the man who drew it all together. "I'm German, and I grew up under the cloud of nuclear war and this looming threat," he says. "So when I looked at the story of nuclear testing in Australia, it gave me chills."

It was the early 1950s when Liberal prime minister Robert Menzies allowed the British to test nuclear bombs in the outback. "This was a time when Aborigines were considered flora and fauna," Mittman says. "Their traditional lands were big, open, empty spaces, seen as perfect for these undertakings. But the impact of these explosions was catastrophic."

He came to the exhibition idea after seeing the work of the late Jonathan Kumintjarra Brown, who has three pieces in the show. Brown was a softly spoken member of the Stolen Generations who eventually tracked down his family and ancestral lands to a place in outback South Australia not far from Maralinga. He painted to overcome that trauma – to explain a people dislocated from their sand dune-dominated homeland, now contaminated by plutonium shards.

The works Mittmann found – from indigenous artists but also Albert Tucker and Arthur Boyd – tell a story of mushroom clouds, blood-red soil and craters in the South Australian desert. It is a story of dark skies and lifeless scrub, which touches on the Manhattan Project and starts with the 1945 bombing of Hiroshima (rendered in watercolour by Tucker in 1947). "That was the start of the nuclear age, the arms race," he says.

"It's a story that has not finished yet, of course."

Through the exhibition, Mittmann has highlighted the devastating impact of years of bomb testing in Australia, from diarrhoea and skin rashes to stillbirths and blindness, withered fruit trees and poisoned water affecting everyone from locals to armed forces servicemen, and the royal commissions and inadequate clean-up efforts that followed. "The ground was really just graded, and a big hole dug, and everything was pushed in, with three metres of topsoil on top," he says. "The land has been handed back [to local Aborigines], and parts are cleaned up and safe to visit, but it's not good for permanent habitation. Plutonium has a half life of 24,400 years."

He points to work from the 1970s, including a Toni Robertson screenprint resembling a World War I propaganda poster, titled *Daddy, What Did YOU Do in the Nuclear War?* It looks like a "father knows best" living-room scene, until you realise the daughter has a pig nose and third leg, and the son has a hunchback and pointed ears.

I point out it is hard to notice the genetic mutations from a distance. "Yes," he says, with a tight frown. "Sometimes it pays to look a little closer."

Mittmann first came to Australia in 1998 as a tourist, leaving a career as a radio journalist and filmmaker. He fell in love with the vast, open skies here when touring the Top End, tracing the footsteps of another German, Ludwig Leichhardt, who explored northern Australia in the 1840s.

In 2004, when the graffiti and street art-scene was exploding, he helped found the Melbourne Stencil Festival – his entry into the art world. He also started a gallery – Famous When Dead – and had a good client base, but not the deep pockets required. Ultimately he joined Burrinja, and loves his brief to research important stories. The fallout from humanity's nuclear exploration, he points out, is an ongoing history.

There are protests now in South Australia over a new radioactive waste dump. "But what continues to astound me is how little people here know about what has happened in their backyard," he says. "People walk in and see the show and say, 'I never knew this.'