

DISCOVER

By [Nakari Thorpe](#)

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The award-winning exhibition *Black Mist Burnt Country* brings together over five decades of work to tell the story of British atomic testing in Australia.

Art beneath the mist of Maralinga

***This article contains images and names of people who have died.**

The burnt, barren trees in Blak Douglas's *Tjarutja Tragedy* are bent, leaning to one side with their branches split in two representing the letter Y.

"That's because I'm asking why did this happened to us people?"

The Dunghutti artist's work captures a land destroyed by atomic testing in Australia and speaks to the deep displacement of its Traditional Owners.

"I wanted to create a piece that really encapsulated the return of blackfellas to their country when your country has been blasted. It's metaphoric for a lot of blackfellas... [And] effectively it's a metaphor for the continent en masse, and how much of us can't return to our tribal homelands including myself," he told NITV News.

Sixty-two years ago, on September 27, 1956, the British government exploded an atomic bomb on the traditional lands of the Anangu in remote western South Australia.

"Whole peoples were dispossessed from their country and this was done complicity on behalf of the British government and the Australian people really had no say in it."

The fission bomb created a huge mushroom cloud over more than 3,000 square kilometres of the now dusty site, known as Maralinga.

It was just one of 12 tests carried out across the country throughout the 1950s.



BLAK DOUGLAS, Tjarutja Tragedy, synthetic polymer on canvas, 100 x 200cm, 2016, copyright: the artist

Then-prime minister Robert Menzies allowed the British to test atomic weapons at two more sites: at the Montebello Islands off Western Australia; and at Emu Field in South Australia.

Prime Minister Menzies justified the tests with the assurance that they would be 'conducted in conditions which will ensure that there will be no danger whatsoever from radioactivity to the health of the people or animals in the Commonwealth'. But this was not the case.

Leading researcher Dr Elizabeth Tynan described the Maralinga tests as "the most damaging chapter in the history of British nuclear weapons testing in Australia". "The damage done to Indigenous people in the vicinity of all three test sites is immeasurable and included displacement, injury and death," she said.

Government propaganda was used to scare Traditional Owners off their country to make way for the tests, but despite these measures not all Aboriginal people were evacuated.

At Maralinga, the tests caused adverse effects on both the local people and military personnel, but in many cases it was difficult to determine the extent to which people had been affected.

But for Yankunytjatjara Elder Tjamu Yami Lester it was devastating. He was blinded at 10 years old as a result of the 'black mist' that descended onto his country. He died last year at the age of 75.

Much of his life was spent fighting for people affected by nuclear testing, subsequently becoming the public face of a tireless campaign. He led the push for the 1984 Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia, which resulted in a clean-up of the testing ground and compensation for the Anangu people.

While reparations can never repair the damage inflicted upon Yami Lester, his people and country, his remarkable legacy lives on.



JESSIE BOYLAN, Yami Lester at Walatinna Station, South Australia, digital inject print, 85 x 85cm, 2006 copyright:the artist

The *Black Mist Burnt Country* exhibition brings together over five decades of work telling the story of the atomic testing through more than 30 Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists.

Featured is an image of Mr Lester captured by photo media artist Jessie Boylan. His blinded eyes are closed shut, his face clenched in pain - evoking his catastrophic experience.

Blak Douglas says his own work was inspired by Mr Lester's spirited crusade.

"I remember seeing images of him and I googled Maralinga on YouTube a long time ago and I saw Uncle Yami as he was blinded as result of the atomic tests," he said.

“I’ve dedicated this painting to that mob and I’m proud of that and I’m sure that Uncle Yami, or that mob there when I meet them in due time, will be embracing of it.”

He says Maralinga was one of the "worst atrocities any blackfella has suffered".

“To blow bombs like that on country and to name them gammin white names or code names that’s just the epitome of colonial fireworks,” he says.

The work of Waanyi artist Judy Watson and her two pieces *bomb drawing 1* and *bomb drawing 5*, question how the tests did not have major political ramifications.

“Who makes those decisions and how do they get away with it, that’s the sort of thing I would like people to learn more about,” she told NITV News.

“There was also a lot of tearing down of Aboriginal sites according to what I’ve heard and just sort of this blinkered vision, and I think it’s a horrible education to learn that’s the way Aboriginal in those areas were perceived... and then you look at the ramifications of the health of both the people and the land and how that has been totally compromised,” she said.



PAULOGIER, One Tree, carbon pigment on rag paper, 94 x 117cm, 2010, copyright: the artist

“They are carrying the impact of those nuclear tests and will be carrying it for years to come.”

Ms Watson says artists carry a responsibility to bring stories, like Maralinga, forward in the future.

“So the next generation know about it and also so you can get rid of the complacency of history and miseducation which I think certainly occurred in the '50s,” she said.

“Whether it came to treatment of Aboriginal people or whether it came to treatment of the environment. Hopefully [the exhibition will] engender something that people will fight, fight for their rights and fight for their land.”

Much of the exhibition centres on the story of artist Jonathan Kumintjara Brown who was removed from his family at Ooldea Mission near Port Augusta.

Three of his works feature in the exhibition, and grainy textures bring his pieces to life. One in particular, *Black Rain*, powerfully illustrates the destruction of country through a black sky punctured by white thick stripes of rain and cloud.

“He did it with such a great sense of power and visual impact,” says Burrinja Executive Director Ross Farnell.

“He would depict the landscape and then basically throw a whole heap of ochre, sand and glue over the top of it and then just obliterate most of the painting and then go that’s Maralinga after the test, ‘that’s what happened to my country’,” Mr Farnell told NITV News.



JONATHAN KUMINTJARRA BROWN, Frogmen, synthetic polymer paint, natural ochre and sand on canvas, 122 x 92cm, 1996, copyright: the artist estate

“The simplicity of the gesture is incredibly powerful.”

A project of Burrinja Cultural Centre in the Dandenong Ranges, the exhibition has been touring Australia since September 2016.

Mr Farnell says the show worked closely with the Anangu to capture their experiences.

“This is their story; the dispossession is absolutely their story.”

Mr Farnell hopes the show will help educate about the Australia's nuclear history.

“It’s a story that a lot of Australians don’t even know that there was an atomic nuclear testing in the centre of Australia and people died, that whole peoples were dispossessed from their country and this was done complicity on behalf of the British government and the Australian people really had no say in it,” he said.

“Art is a fantastic of way to bring different elements of stories to people’s attention especially those stories that are sometimes overlooked or those stories that have social impact, or cultural impact.”

Curator JD Mittmann said it is surprising how few people are aware atomic bombs were exploded in Australia.

“And how little they know about the dislocation of Aboriginal people, the exposure of Australian servicemen and the contamination of the land,” he said.

“This exhibition offers some remarkable insights into a chapter of our history that has long-lasting consequences, while it poses some important questions in relation to contemporary nuclear issues.”

Black Mist Burnt Country is on display at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra until 18 November.