

'Powerful': Black Mist exhibition explores the disturbing truth of Maralinga

By Sasha Grishin

5 September 2018 — 11:17am

Black Mist, Burnt Country: Testing the bomb, Maralinga and Australian art. National Museum of Australia, Lawson Crescent, Acton Peninsula. Daily 9am-5pm until November 18.

The Hiroshima Panels, which depict the consequences of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, were created by the collaborative husband and wife team Maruki Iri and Maruki Toshi.



Kate Shaw: Charcoal, UK: Maralinga, acrylic and resin on board, 120 x 240 cm, 2012. Copyright: the artist.

When The Hiroshima Panels were shown in Australia in 1958, they had a profound impact on Australian artists with a whole generation of major artists responding to them in their work. This could be viewed as marking the beginnings of atomic bomb art in this country.

Australia agreed to become a nuclear test site in 1951, when Liberal Party prime minister Robert Menzies acceded to a request from Britain to test the nuclear weapons it was developing in the less populated parts of the country.

Indigenous peoples were thrown off their lands and Maralinga became a primary test site with atom bomb tests continuing until 1963, when mass movements and the nuclear test ban treaty came into force in August 1963.

In 1984, under Labor prime minister Bob Hawke, a Royal Commission was established to examine the British nuclear tests and in 1993, the UK government begrudgingly agreed to pay £20 million towards the rehabilitation of the Maralinga site. This was only a fraction of the sum needed, not to speak of the huge and permanent damage done to the inhabitants and servicemen exposed to radiation.



Paul Ogier: One Tree, carbon pigment on rag paper, 94 x 117cm, 2010. Copyright: the artist.

This exhibition is a collection of protest art made by Australian Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists in response to the atomic bomb in general, and to the nuclear tests at Maralinga in particular. It is the initiative of the Burrinja Dandenong Ranges Cultural Centre in Upwey, Victoria, and has been touring since its first showing in 2016. The curator of this show, Jan Dirk Mittmann, has assembled a wide cross-section of artworks that reflect a reaction to nuclear warfare, to nuclear testing and to the general threat of possession of nuclear arms.



While the bombing of Japan may be interpreted as an act of deliberate genocide, it was well publicised and many Australian artists - including Albert Tucker, who went to Japan immediately after the war - reported in a direct and graphic manner what they saw. Tucker's small watercolour *Hiroshima* (1947) is direct and unadorned. However, the British nuclear tests in Australia were conducted under the veil of military secrecy and although, in principle, they were on the parliamentary record, they were not largely in the public eye until the 1970s and 1980s, long after the event.

Hugh Ramage: Taranaki, oil on canvas, 42 x 37cm, 2014. Copyright: the artist.

Sidney Nolan got a very early whiff of what was going on and in his *Central Australia: Atomic test* (1952-57) added a mushroom-shaped cloud to the horizon. This is a hauntingly effective image. As a purely formal device, I suspect the horizontal disposition of the terrain juxtaposed with the thrusting vertical of the nuclear explosion was a temptation that few artists could resist.

The politically motivated poster collectives of the 1970s and 1980s saw nuclear disarmament as part of their central agenda and hard-hitting posters including Pam Debenham's No nukes in the Pacific (1984) and Toni Robertson's Daddy, what did you do in the nuclear war? (1977) became well-publicised classics.

Indigenous artists interpreted the tests at Maralinga as a crime perpetuated by the British authorities who treated Australians with colonial arrogance with the acquiescence of the Menzies government. Lin Onus' Maralinga (1990) is a strangely haunting and effective summation of the tragedy facing an Aboriginal family clinging together for support while facing a metaphysical force that is beyond human comprehension.

Other Indigenous artists, including Jonathan Kumintjarra Brown and Tjariya Stanley, expand on this theme of uneven conflict, where the nuclear war machine is directed against a dispossessed and impoverished population.

It is a richly contextualised exhibition with graphics, paintings, photography, sculptures and installations, which, from many different perspectives, examine the ongoing catastrophe caused by the British nuclear tests in Australia.

Although displayed in the unsympathetic space of the Focus Gallery at the back of the First Australian section of the museum, it is a powerful and disturbing exhibition that examines a very black page in the history of white Australia.