

COMMENTARY

DESTINY DEACON

Walk & Don't Look Blak

Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
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Indigenous artist Destiny Deacon has described herself as an, 'old-fashioned political artist' and to some extent this is true. Certainly, many of the works representing Deacon's career in this mini-retrospective testify to such an outlook. In fact, virtually all the works represented in this exhibition evidence the artist's frustration in grappling with the many clichés that have become politically central to the strategic use of Aboriginal imagery as signifiers of a distinctive and generalised 'Australian National Identity.' Indeed, one of the principal targets in Deacon's work is the patronising and saturated use of such imagery by white Australian culture, both in the past and presently. As part of her endeavour to combat this situation through her art, Deacon employs a range of satirical visual conventions to 'blakly' critique the current sidelining of Aboriginal politics; a sidelining that occurs simultaneously with the national and international popularity and collectability of indigenous Australian art – both 'traditional' and contemporary. The irony of the 'savage' petit-bourgeois mindset that today successfully manages to separate Aboriginal art from evidence of its political, social and economic realities, is far from lost on Deacon, an artist admirably prepared to wear her political affiliations 'old-fashioned' or not, on her sleeve.

At the entrance to the exhibition the audience is faced with a reconstruction of her one-time Melbourne living room in *My Living Room, Brunswick 3056*, part of a series of similar reconstructions the artist has presented in various contexts between 1996 and 2004. While it may be tempting for some to read such a reconstruction literally, as visual evidence of how a contemporary Aboriginal artist 'really' lives, it is obvious from the perspective of much of Deacon's other work that such a reconstruction partakes of her broader concerns to present what may be described as an 'inverse anthropology.' That is, the artist appropriates the anthropological conventions used traditionally and often still by white Australia, in an attempt to consider and objectively 'analyse' Aboriginal lifestyles in the search for hidden traces of an authentic 'Aboriginality'. In another example, Deacon employs a similar approach by presenting a museum cabinet display of 'white Aboriginal' memorabilia. Deacon's collection of

Aboriginal 'artefacts' produced for our burgeoning tourist industry, points to the degree to which white Australian culture has utilised [and still utilises] this highly generalist category of 'Aboriginality' for tourism purposes, to sell and promote a specific image of an intrinsic Australian difference. The clichés that abound in the production of such products Deacon makes absurdly obvious by appearing to treat them at face value, as though they represent an idealised, actually existing Australian 'native' way of life. Of course, the utopian vision portrayed by the tourist industry is often a convenient means of obscuring the more damning social realities, still shamefully facing much of Australia's indigenous population.

Perhaps Deacon is most widely known for her numerous photo series, many of which are included in this exhibition. The photographs in these series often feature the artist herself, her relatives and friends. Many also feature dolls in the guise of pseudo-realist Aboriginal children. In fact, the presence of these black dolls is central to Deacon's oeuvre, their artifice a highly effective means and medium through which to address serious political issues. Furthermore, the innate pathos and the exaggerated helplessness of their simultaneous status as animate and inanimate objects, presciently indicates the careless objectification and disregard for Aboriginal identity and concerns, endemic to recent Australian politics. The more successful of these photographic works, such as *Being There* [1998], depicting two black dolls sitting forlorn and 'destitute' in a gutter, in front of a graffiti strewn wall and *Melancholy* [2000], depicting a doll whose head and body have been separated, the doll's head lying atop a freshly cut watermelon, evince a degree of pathos that is both absurd and unnervingly accusatory. This sense of intermingled humour and anger appears also in a work like *Adoption* [1993–2000], showing the miniaturised figures of mass-produced plastic babies, each placed in the centre of a patty-pan, used commonly to produce such Australian culinary delights as 'chocolate crackles.' The deliberate triteness of this image belies an underlying sense of outrage at the Australian government's refusal to acknowledge the ethical ramifications and ongoing trauma experienced by children of the so-called 'stolen generation,' farmed out to white families for years in a systematic effort to 're-educate' them in the more 'civilised' ways of Anglo-Europeans.

Again, this unnerving combination of political

accusation and disembodied humour arises in Deacon's video work *How Low can you go*, produced in 1996 in collaboration with Fiona Hall. The video, partly filmed in slow motion and regularly in close-up, depicts a woollen 'gollywog' doll as a clichéd representation of the universally abused black person. The doll is trampled and kicked as it lies soaking in water at the bottom of a shower cubicle. It is then viscerally wrung out into a bucket and finally pegged upside down to dry on a suburban clothesline, all to the slow and melancholic strains of *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*, sung by a female vocalist. Overall, this work is strangely and emotionally affecting as the offensive and 'idiotic' figure of the rag doll as a signifier of Aboriginality, functions simultaneously as a container for collective suffering at the hands of a nonchalantly disregarding ruling power. Yet, with equal

complexity, the viewer's identification with and empathy for the inanimate figure of the doll, parodies too universal depictions of blacks as simply pathetic victims. Considered in total, it is specific works such as these that grant Deacon's exhibition *Walk & Don't Look Blak*, its significant artistic and political import. However, if the exhibition were to be criticised, it would be for the apparent overall lack of differentiation between the works and series of works. Indeed, while Deacon's work here is regularly highly affecting, it appears also at times seemingly lacking in variation and diversity. Therefore, lesser works which in the end seem merely supplementary, occasionally undermine the impact of the strongest works – works of a very particular and distinctive iconic power.



Destiny Deacon, *Oz Games – Under the spell of the tall poppies*, 1998/2003
Photo courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney