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All too mixed up and civilized now

A uniquely Australian wild dog, a creature of many forms, inhabits the fractured mythological core of *The Dingo Project*, curated by Bandjalung artist, Djon Mundine. Through personal experience Mundine knows the dingo well—as fellow traveller and fireside friend, a companion and a real dog. But he is also acutely aware of its powers as a totem spirit being, a shape-shifting guardian of considerable awe, a wise adjudicator and counsellor in foundational fables of Aboriginal creation and law. For the settler culture of the British arriving after 1788, the dingo was an altogether different thing, a wild creature conjuring the dread of the European wolf and a killer of sheep, its identity affirmed in the ‘big bad wolf’ of the forests of counter myth.

Within this broad compass, Mundine has drawn from an inclusive range of artists, many of whom he has worked with before.¹ But, the deeper insights he brings can be traced back through his decades-long engagements with the Ramingining community in Arnhem Land, as cultural advisor, curator and creative director, and internationally touring works of national importance like *The Aboriginal Memorial*, and securing its installation in the National Gallery of Australia.²

Mundine’s own video performance, *Conversations with my Grandmother* (2021), conducted with a live dingo, offers the best introductory insight into *The Dingo Project*’s agendas. Joseph Beuys was possibly the first artist to stage a performance with a wild dog in *I Like America and America Likes Me* in 1974. For three days Beuys cohabited with a wild coyote in a New York gallery, and the performance, much feted in its day within the emergent ecological consciousness of Europe, was championed as restorative of the lost spiritual kinship with the natural world on the far shores of America. For Sydney Contemporary, New Zealand artist Hayden Fowler reprized Beuys’ pact as a premise for collective ecological action and locked himself in a cage with a dingo for *Together Again* (2017). Mundine’s *Conversations with my Grandmother* follows suite, marking a critical difference,

¹ Daniel Boyd, Michael Cook, Judith Crispin, Karla Dickens, Blak Douglas, Fiona Foley, Maddison Gibbs, Julie Gough, Aroha Groves, Fiona Hall, Sandra Hill, Warwick Keen, Garth Lena, Trish Levett, John William Lindt, Johnny Malibirr, Teena McCarthy, Tallulah McCord, Danie Mellor, James Neagle, Lin Onus and Michael Eather, George Pascoe Jnr., Jenny Sages, Peter Swain, Jason Wing

² See footnote 4 page 40

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From my perspective Beuys and Fowler were trying to present that they had a special spiritual persona; they were a 'shaman' and were being with the primitive. They dramatized this by putting themselves in a cage in front of the public. And didn't speak or discuss with an indigenous person. I, an Indigenous, a primitive, shared a large room space with my dingo relative for my performance without a public audience – I know who I am – I don't need to reclaim it.³

Rather, what matters for Mundine is the faltering of the bonds of kinship binding Aboriginal people to the natural world. Without the intercessions of totem spirit beings assigned to individuals at birth and affirmed through the rituals of coming of age, Ceremony⁴ cannot be performed, and Country (tribal lands)⁵ properly managed according to traditional law. Under the ongoing pressures of contemporary dispossession, these bonds with totem spirit beings have begun to fray. Mundine explains, "Aboriginal people are bonded 'totemically' to think of nature as being us. The exhibition is to examine human-animal relations/consciousness. For Aboriginal people it appears as a totemism and for non-Aboriginal Australians an archetype, and ideas of the passions remaining in 'the Id'."

Hence, *Conversations with my Grandmother* opens with the assumption that the narrator and his totem animal, the dingo, are already known to each other, unlike the coyote that appeared unsettled and anxious in the documentation of Beuys' performance. In *Conversations with my Grandmother* the dingo wags its tail. Perhaps she knows him? And he, in turn, recognizes her. Therefore, the conversation flows along familial lines: "How are you Granny? Well, look at you. Well, I haven't seen you for a long time. Not for a long time. Can you hear me? Do you know who I am? Do you remember me? They call you *Gunjungjurra*." She can only be approached by the correct name appointed by the creator spirits: *Gunjungjurra*. In the Aboriginal world naming is sacred. Every rock, tree and animal etc., has been given a name and a place. Everything, in varying degrees—plants, animals, people, earth, sky and water—is interconnected in a person's 'country' (or tribal lands) in Aboriginal culture. When Aboriginal people visit their homelands their first duty is to sing out greetings to the landscape so that country will know them, and that they belong. Forgetting, in this context, is a community tragedy. How will their country recognize them if they misremember the names?

However, the dingo, like a forgetful elder relative, seems not to quite know him, no doubt for reasons of their long separation. The displacement and fragmentation of colonization have been long and many. Therefore, Mundine invokes the tribal language he still retains, in order to jog her memory. At the same time, he begins to doubt. Is it really her? Perhaps, she no longer knows her name and who she is for Aboriginal people. There has been no one around to perform

³ Email from Djon Mundine (and all following quotes by him), 25 May 2022

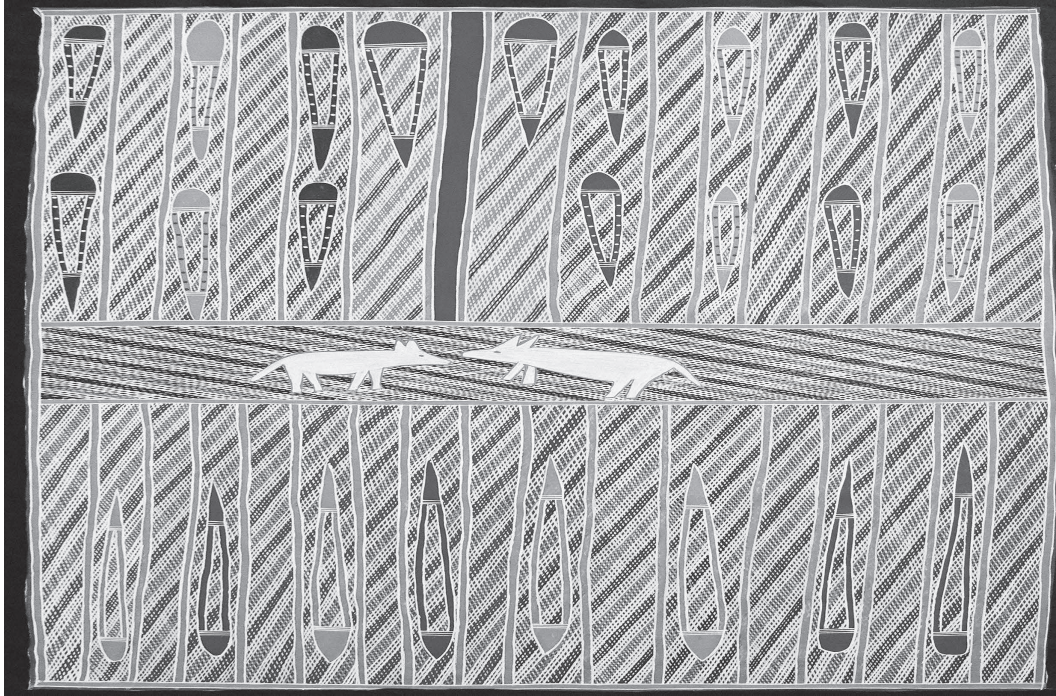
⁴ Ceremony with a capital 'C' is the formal, collective reference to the traditional cultural practices connected to Country. See following footnote. Ceremony with a small 'c' is a more informal reference to a person's own ceremonial obligations

⁵ Country is the term often used by Aboriginal peoples to describe the lands, waterways and seas to which they are connected. The term contains complex ideas about law, place, custom, language, spiritual belief, cultural practice, material sustenance, family and identity. A capital 'C' is used in reference to the system in its fuller formal ramifications, whereas country with a small 'c' refers to the place a person comes from and the land for which a person has responsibility and duty of care

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the necessary ceremonies. This state of affairs is not unlike the scenario still playing out for the Stolen Generations, who, as children, were removed from their families by government agencies as late as the 1970s.⁶ Without their proper clan names (erased in the institutional ledgers under new Anglicized appellations), how are they going to find and know each other?

Clearly the conversation is not going well. Mundine provokes with a little teasing, hoping to get a rise. “Tell me, *Gunjungjorra*, you look a little different, are you really a dingo? You don’t look like a dingo. You look too white to be a dingo.” And indeed, Granny doesn’t much resemble a dingo, which is characteristically lean and golden brown. Granny, stumpy-legged, with odd dark spots lurking around her ears, is certainly very white. But this remark is really directed at the fact that, these days, it is not infrequent for a person’s Aboriginality to be challenged on the basis of appearance, rather than on cultural knowledge and clan belonging. Mundine full well knows that appearance is an unreliable test of heritage. He explains, “My banter is really for the benefit of other Aboriginal people—it’s what is always said to us by unsophisticated ‘white’ people—we don’t look like the stereotype of an Aboriginal and we resent it.” Nonetheless, he perseveres with Granny. He tries a different tack, addressing her with a common Walpiri lingua franca for calling to attention. “*Namaka*. Can you hear me? Are you really listening? Tell me whoever you are.” Finally, he has to give up, ending with a shrug of resignation, and a closing dig. As an Aboriginal she is not nearly aggressive enough. Given the long list of urgent complaints, including ongoing deaths in custody,⁷ poor Indigenous health, and the lack of a constitutionally formalized Voice to Parliament,⁸ she is not as angry as she should be, if she was really Aboriginal. “Are you really a wild dog? I think you are really too friendly to be a wild dog. Well, I guess we are all too mixed up and civilized now.”

“Too mixed up and civilized now”: the irony bites, a mantra for contemporary times in which hybridity is now the norm but only sometimes manages to paper over the cultural losses. Such impasses are not unexpected and knowledge recuperation has its limits. Across Australia the survival rates of traditional culture and story is patchy at best.

Though there were massacres in Arnhem Land, some genocidal, including most of an entire Yolngu clan in Gurruwilling, the Arafura swamplands,⁹ where *Ten Canoes* (2006)¹⁰ was filmed, not far from where Mundine was based, nonetheless, many of the ceremonies and lines

⁶ The Stolen Generations were children of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent who were removed from their families by Australian federal and state government agencies and church missions, through a policy of assimilation. See <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/stolen-generations>

⁷ Deaths in custody refers to the loss of aboriginal lives while in police or prison custody. For further reading see <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications/indigenous-deaths>

⁸ A Voice to Parliament, enshrined in the Constitution, would enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to give advice to the Federal Parliament about laws and policies that impact them through a simplified policy making process and structural change

⁹ As recounted by Djon Mundine. In the 1880s the notorious Jack Watson, who worked on a number of cattle stations in Arnhem Land, was responsible for numerous massacres. Detailed accounts can be found at <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/detail.php?r=720>. For a firsthand account of an encounter with Watson and his grisly exploits see extracts from *The Diary of Emily Caroline Creaghe* available at <https://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/real-life/grisly-secret-of-cattlemen-who-kept-40-pairs-of-ears-as-trophies-in-outback-horror-house/news-story/17022ba7691314b4cff5aadb8511936>

¹⁰ The Australian film *Ten Canoes* (2006) directed by Rolf de Heer, won the *Un Certain Regard* Special Jury prize at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival and was the Australian official entry for the Best Foreign Language Film category for the 2007 Academy Awards

of transmission through “story”¹¹ (a term that also encompasses custodial duties) survived in the more remote regions of the Top End.¹² This includes Cape York visited by artist Karla Dickens and a considerable slab of Warwick Thornton’s film *We Don’t Need A Map* (2017)—in essence an examination of Australians’ relationship to the celestial constellation of the Southern Cross—was told in Arnhem Land through the preparation for and performance of the traditional ceremony that had survived intact. *Ten Canoes*, realized through a partnership between director Rolf de Heer and the Yolngu peoples, at their instigation was told entirely in their language, with subtitles, and based on the retrieval and revival of lost cultural practices from the anthropological record.

Earlier, in the 1930s, anthropologist Donald Thomson and Wonggu, head of the Djapu clan, had formed a partnership through which they secured the peace to end Arnhem Land’s ‘Black Wars’.¹³ Hence in the Top End, the historical record is less dark, the cultural losses fewer and attitudes towards cross-cultural cooperation more upbeat. Or such is the tone conveyed in the work produced through the partnership of Indigenous artist Lin Onus and non-Indigenous artist Michael Ether, for whom cultural ‘mixing up’ is a way forward, and a bit of an infectious lark. An entire room of *The Dingo Project* was given over to the decidedly sunny project of the *Ongoing Adventures of X and Ray* (2000) in which ‘Ray’ the dingo, and ‘X’ the stingray, ride the waves of contemporary hybridity together as best mates. Their names, placed adjacent, and read across the line, spell out the collaborative pun of X-Ray: a traditional Top End style of bark painting (in which the outer layer of a body can be seen through to the bones), and Ray the dingo wears a coat of traditional *rrark* crosshatching on his back. With titles *X and Ray discover father’s country* (2001); *X and Ray in the garden of earthly delight* (2021) and *X and Ray witness the sinking of the last ship carrying woodchips from Tasmanian shores* (2021), they demonstrate an ethos of “getting along”, echoing that important partnership between Djapu, clan head Wonggu, and anthropologist Donald Thomson, still passed down in the stories of the Yolgnu today.

The Dingo Project is multifaceted, the stories move around, crossing clan boundaries, a hydra of a project that branches out in many directions around its loose associative core. However, outside the Top End, there are fewer intact traditional stories of the dingo totem spirits left to tell. Or, even in other pockets, where the culture endured, how many of Australia’s contemporary Indigenous artists would be of the right clan or skin (totemic division) to have the authority or permission to tell them? For most, the dingo is not their totem. To borrow Mundine’s expression, “we are all too mixed up now.” Many of the traditional lines of transmission are either fractured, or broken.

And, additionally, because so much knowledge and culture has been lost, history sometimes appears to start somewhere around the 1780s when their dispossession begins and the psychological damage starts to accumulate. Hence for some, *The Dingo Project* is a haunting ground in which tales of the wild dog circulate through unresolved resentments, where trauma runs deep and old scores remain to be settled, injustices set to right—as in the more savage, less sunny and less

¹¹ Aboriginal peoples customarily refer to ‘story’ in the general global sense without the article (the)

¹² The Top End of Australia usually refers to the regions of Cape York (northern Queensland) and Arnhem Land (northern region of Northern Territory), but can more generally indicate a broader area that also encompasses the Kimberley region of Western Australia

¹³ For an account of the role Thomson played in securing the peace of Arnhem Land, and his partnership with Wonggu, see <http://sensiblefilms.com/portfolio/thomson-of-arnhem-land/>

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forgiving works of Fiona Foley's *Dingo Hunter* (2021) and Julie Gough's *Kaparunina (For the Dead Are Many)* (2021), which bluntly recall the historical culls of the wild dog¹⁴ and Aboriginal people alike – and, by inference, the infamous attempt to drive Aboriginal people out of Tasmania under the notorious Black Line.¹⁵ Again, as underlined by Mundine in *Conversations with my Grandmother*, talking about the fate of the dingoes is also a mode of talking about the fate of Aboriginal people.

The brutality of the colonizers can be perhaps, partially explained through the psychological darkness of the colonial imaginary introduced to Australian shores. In a painting titled *Pest Is Less* (2021), Blak Douglas tackles the 'black dog' of the depression endemic in Aboriginal communities, through the near wholesale absorption of Francisco Goya's *The Dog* (c. 1820s), painted by the Spanish artist during his black period of acute mental and emotional distress. Douglas barely

¹⁴ In Tasmania, the Thylacine, a 'relative' of the dingo, was a large carnivorous marsupial known as the Tasmanian Tiger or Tasmanian Wolf, now believed to be extinct

¹⁵ The Black Line followed a number of massacres committed by both European settlers and Aboriginals defending their land. Colonel George Arthur, Lieutenant Governor of Tasmania, under pressure from a committee of private citizens implemented in 1830 the operation of the 'Black Line', made up of a force of two thousand and two hundred conscripted settlers, to corral and drive the remaining Aboriginal people from a large area of Tasmania's most productive farmlands with the view to transporting them to Flinders Island. Most Aboriginal people escaped, with two recorded killed and two captured. See <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/the-black-line>

changes a detail, exchanging the head of Goya's dog with that of a dingo, just poking out of an absorptive surface representing the 'black dog', an intensive nothingness that sucks down, like an undertow, bearing down from above. Except for the head, whether dingo or dog, the entire field of the painting is filled with the 'black dog' of depression.

You have to look hard to discern the difference, that Douglas' painting isn't simply a copy of the Goya. In exchanging the head, the contagious field of depression's 'black dog' switches continents, imported wholesale. Prior to this, the beastly figure of the 'big bad wolf' arrived in the collective psyche of the early colonizers. Even though supposedly eradicated in Great Britain prior to 1788, residual dread of the wolf endures. To give some indication of what the dingo was up against, Mundine installed texts from European folkloric tradition on the gallery walls: "The time between midnight and dawn when most people die, when sleep is deepest, when nightmares are most palatable. It is the hour when the sleepless are most pursued by their sharpest anxieties, when ghosts and demons hold sway. The hour of the wolf is also when most children are born."¹⁶ More dangerous for the dingo, was the logic that eliminated the distinction between beast and pet, "The hour between dog and wolf, that is, dusk, when the two can't be distinguished from each other... when country people believed that transformation might happen at any moment."¹⁷

Though, strictly speaking, these texts were written well into the twentieth century, they attest to a lingering dread. And, inherent in this imported mythological violence, was a core imperative: protect yourself against the wolf. Hence, in settler confections of dingo into wolf, in the transfer from mythical creature of the imaginary to the real-world animal no chances were to be taken with the Aboriginal dog, the sheep killer that was a cognate of the wolf. And by corollary logic, they killed the dingo's kin, the Aboriginal people who also killed their sheep. Not only did they build the Dingo Fence (or Dog Fence),¹⁸ a straggling structure over 5,600 kilometres long, but they also set the dingo traps into which Jason Wing inserted a human skull, *Stop This Thief* (2021) and Maddison Gibbs, her own face, in *Removed* (2021). In stark contrast, for Aboriginal people the wild dog, in spirit form, had an entirely different signification: the dingo totem spirits were creation deities, and protectors and arbiters of justice and law, powerful guardian figures who were the very antithesis of the imported European beast. In Arnhem Land they were responsible for the creation of fresh water streams: a bark painting by Gladys Getjulu recounts the dingo spirit story of how the stream at Gurrka came into being, and a similar Yolngu tale from Johnny Malibirr, *Dog Story* (2015) chronicles the creation of three streams in a cave at Gurrkawakarmurr.

And in the spirit world, the dingo totem spirit beings continued to appear in all their grandeur. The painting, *3AM* (1994), chronicles the nighttime studio visitations of the shadowy forms of twin dingo spirit beings first encountered by non-Indigenous artist, Jenny Sages, many years after she had her first experience of them in Arnhem Land and the Kimberly. Teena McCarthy, travelling near Alice Springs, came across a similar pair of spirits in their role of guardians on a

¹⁶ *Hour of the Wolf* (1968), film directed by Ingmar Bergman

¹⁷ Jean Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, Barbara Bray trans., New York NY: New York Review of Books Classics, 2003

¹⁸ The Dingo Fence is the world's longest human-made structure that stretches over the states of South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria, across the northern border of Australia's most fertile southeastern quarter. Built in the 1880s and constructed of wire mesh and also dug underground to prevent dingoes digging underneath it, it was designed to protect the sheep industry

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lonely stretch of desert in *The Gatekeepers* (2021): “dog horse size Creatures/They seemed not of this world.” There they were, looming large across the highway, on the lookout for a transgressor. “They part to let us drive through/ Coming back together.” On either side of her immense canvas, McCarthy’s handwritten verse subtends the image in the mode of the visionary engravings of William Blake’s *The Four Zoas* (1797–1807). Benign spirits, the gatekeepers were out to catch “That Rubbish-man, who broke our Lore.”

The penultimate word on the dingo, like a good dose of mischief, surprisingly involves a flock of sheep. Installed furthest away from the entrance on the museum’s back wall, literally an endnote to the exhibition, the video of Mundine’s *Judas Goat* (2021) tracks a mob of sheep released into the gallery on opening night, with the footage of their antics live-screened to the audience outside. The irony of this dispossession was not lost on those displaced from their ‘gallery lands’ by the invading sheep. In between calmly munching fodder scattered about and defecating on the floor, the sheep, imported beings that they were, raised their heads to keep a wary eye on the dingoes on the walls.

As ‘imported beings’ the presence of the sheep directly referenced the story of ‘The Dingo: Wungunn, The Macassar, and the Matches’, as told to Mundine. Installed immediately adjacent to the only gallery entrance, the text was the alpha and omega of *The Dingo Project*, the first and last thing visitors would see. It went like this: the Macassar came to trade, proposing many items, rice, tobacco, canoes, even matches, all of which Wungunn, the dingo totem spirit, politely refused. Eventually, the Macassar man said, “What is wrong with you, why do you act this way? Wungunn replied: It’s because I am an independent Aboriginal Black Man. If I took these from you, I would become dependent and become a White Man. (I would be civilized but dependent!)” The Macassar understood, and went away, never to return, leaving Wungunn and his people ‘living happily’ in their country. Therein ended the tale for some several hundreds of years.

Then the British arrived. Apparently, they didn’t meet the Wungunn, or didn’t listen. They didn’t trade, nor did they negotiate, but brought with them murder, disenfranchisement and dispossession. And, exactly as Wungunn had predicted of letting in things you don’t want, the people became unhappily civilized. In this light, *Conversations with my Grandmother* is an affirmation of what the Wungunn foresaw: Aboriginal people have become “too mixed up and civilized now.” But the final words on *The Dingo Project* belong to artist and curator Mundine for whom,

The exhibition really starts with the Dingo and the Matches story as the central premise of the show and the colonial view of Australia and its native inhabitants, about difference and independence and co-existence. How do we live with different independent indifferent beings? Do we control them by making them dependent, by restricting their movement and excluding them, by poisoning them or killing them in other violent ways? Aboriginal people of course are a parallel metaphor, companion being in the examination of this relationship.