

## **Intro by Ryan Johnston, Buxton Contemporary 2020**

Thanks-very much for the invitation to speak tonight, it's as flattering as it is daunting to be invited to launch 3 exhibitions by 3 such eminent artists. Jacqui Stockdale, Robert Fielding and Karla Dickens are all artists I have admired for many years now, and I'm very pleased that the team at Linden New Art are presenting such substantial exhibitions of each here in Melbourne.

### **Jacqui Stockdale's *The Long Shot* is the first exhibition you will encounter tonight.**

Stockdale is perhaps best known for a photographic practice that theatrically reframes Australian historical narratives, frequently colonial narratives, so as to surface their cultural and social milieu, including those of women, Indigenous Australians, diasporic cultures and others who all too often inhabit the margins of populist historical understanding.

With this exhibition Stockdale amplifies this method quite considerably by extending her practice into large scale sculpture and installation. The ostensible subject of the exhibition is the bushranger Ned Kelly, the subject of more published biographies than any other Australian (and probably more artworks as well). However the Kelly story as we know it is here fictionally remixed with allusions to other popular histories: Phar Lap, a New Zealand horse with a Chinese name that became arguably Australia's greatest sporting icon, is here ridden by Ned Kelly's lover; and the discovery of the largest gold nugget ever to be found, the Welcome Stranger (so-named despite the brutal racism of the goldfields) is also interwoven albeit, and quite literally, as horseshit. Furthermore, Kelly himself is almost entirely marginalised, and appears as an awkward peripheral figure wearing, memorably, a kangaroo head codpiece.

Stockdale's demythologising of this history culminates here in a major new work: *The Outlaw's Inn*. Presented as a life-size animatronic diorama, the visitor enters a crowded, oppressive period room (replete with period sounds and smells) where Ned Kelly's mother, pregnant with her 12<sup>th</sup> child, looks on as Chinese pioneers mix with drunken bushrangers (some of whom appear to be partially flayed); dogs gnaw and nap on severed heads; and the entire extended Kelly milieu cavort riotously in a surreal, spectacular and syphilitic shindig. It is as if with this space Stockdale has opened a temporal and psychological portal between contemporary Australian cultural identity and its

exuberantly unedifying colonial unconscious. It is a work that, quite simply, defies description, but in the very best way imaginable.

**The 2<sup>nd</sup> exhibition tonight is Robert Fielding's Routes/Roots. That's R O U T E S/R O O T S.**

This show emerged from Fielding's fieldwork in the archives of the Museum of South Australia, where he researched historical objects of Anangu culture dating back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. While there Fielding was struck both by the inappropriateness of their storage alongside un-related objects, and that how while still accessible in some sense, these objects had been deadened or culturally flattened by the museological context and its taxonomic regime.

Returning to the community of Mimili in North East South Australia, where he lives, Fielding showed photographs of these to his Elders, Sammy and Nihlan Dodd, themselves master makers, and whose parents and grandparents had created many of the objects Fielding had seen. All three observed instances of consistency and fidelity with contemporary practices but also instances where certain techniques were no longer practiced, in part due to the removal of these and other objects to geographically remote Museums and collections

In response to this, Sammy and Nihlan produced new Kulata (spears), tjanpi (weaving) and other objects in replication of those displaced, effectively re-animating and re-integrating the fractured range of historical practices within contemporary culture. Fielding in turn cast these in bronze and painted their surfaces in gold leaf, an act which both shored up the objects for the future, while incorporating anglo-Australian signifiers of artistic value (i.e. the materials bronze and gold) into objects more commonly viewed through the lens of craft and/or anthropology.

In another series of work on display, Fielding adopted the reverse approach, and scavenged iron from ruined water tanks that had been installed around Mimili when the area was a cattle station, and which were left behind after the hand back of the area to traditional owners in 1981. Poignantly, many of these tanks would also have been built by Sammy Dodd. However whereas the objects in Adelaide have been remade and reinforced in bronze, here the metal

has been stripped back with a sandblaster (loaded with dirt from country) to create and reveal expressions of Anangu culture and history. [These works are hard to describe but you'll see what I mean].

Viewed together, these works provide a sophisticated yet pointed meditation on how both geographic and historical cultural trajectories (routes and roots) act upon the meaning and significance of objects. Here, Fielding implies that the steel water tanks and the colonialism they represent were simply one brief episodic overlay in the infinitely longer history of the Anangu people; just as kulata making and tjanpi, once mistaken for anthropological or craft artefacts, had already been cutting edge contemporary Australian art for hundreds if not thousands of years.

### **Karla Dickens**

The third and final exhibition opening tonight is Karla Dickens' *My mother's keeper*, featuring film, photography and textiles that both document and archive the 2019 performance work titled *Mother's little helpers*. The performance film exhibited here features the renowned author Bruce Pascoe (best known for his remarkable book *Dark Emu*), walking silently and pensively through the landscape wearing a cloak bearing the words Mother Earth Country, and accompanied occasionally by young Aboriginal children also wearing capes adorned with single words including: listen, care, respect and culture.

Pascoe's character, Mother Earth, follows an unclear itinerary, surveying the country through which he journeys with a mixture of absorption and apprehension. The more he walks the more his path becomes obstructed: by locked gates, fences, stone walls, a quarry, and hard rubbish dumps overflowing with sheet metal similar to that used in Fielding's work. In response he subtly but increasingly shakes his head. Finally, Mother Earth follows a path traced by the shadow of an enormous tree, and the landscape opens up once again to the horizon as his own shadow converges with that of the shadow that is guiding him. At this moment he is rejoined by the children, and the lowered perspective of the camera behind them as the film cuts to black leaves open the possibility that the viewer will shortly join the walk.

This shadow following scene is one of the most beautifully elegiac sequences I have seen for a long time, and it speaks to our current moment with such

succinct poetry that any further explication from me is, I think, entirely redundant and potentially counter-productive. So all I'll do at this point is encourage you to watch this work right to the end.

Now, by way of conclusion, I'd like to acknowledge all involved in presenting these exhibitions, noting in particular Juliette Hanson's excellent curatorial work on all three. Most importantly, I congratulate Jacqui Stockdale, Robert Fielding and Karla Dickens on their remarkable bodies of work, and their very different but deeply resonant, nuanced and generous approaches to the historical and cultural entanglements of today. I'm now very pleased to officially open these exhibitions. Thank-you very much.