

THE MOST GAOLED RACE ON EARTH

BLAK DOUGLAS AND ADAM GECZY

19 MARCH – 24 APRIL 2016

When The Lock-Up was re-launched in 2014, it was with a vision to be a space where ideas that challenge the status quo could be presented and discussed; where this space with its loaded history and difficult environment could be used by artists to speak beyond its walls in ways that inspire, provoke and disrupt.

The idea for this exhibition was first discussed with me not long after The Lock-Up re-opened in November 2014 and I was immediately taken with its potency. The artists expressed the difficulty they had encountered over the years in finding arts institutions that would be prepared to show the work that came out of their collaborations. Its confrontational, 'smack you in the face' approach, its play with "irony, sarcasm and truth", so aptly expressed by Blak Douglas in past weeks, and the very nature of an Aboriginal and white artist collaborating on work with these themes, had provide points of resistance to the work finding a public voice and audience in Australia. It seemed The Lock-Up with its history, its contemporary vision and our desire to step willingly where others might not, was potentially the perfect vehicle for this project.

When newly nominated Federal Labour Senator and Indigenous leader Pat Dodson gave his first media interviews on 2nd March 2016, he called Australia's Indigenous incarceration rate "scandalous" and vowed to make it a top priority of his time in office. Dodson drew national attention to what the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities of this country know and have experienced since occupation. By presenting this exhibition, The Lock-Up aims to be another avenue to bring awareness to the wider community around these issues and to facilitate open discussion. The content may offend, disturb or upset some visitors but the hope is that it will encourage people to think, question and be agents for changing the underlying assumptions and prejudices that contribute to racism and its results.

Critical to this exhibition was the need to connect with members of the Hunter Region's Aboriginal communities before the work was made public; to let people know the intent behind the work and to proceed in ways that were appropriate and respectful. We extend our sincere thanks and gratitude to Donna Fernando and Cherie Johnson for their advice and generosity of spirit in consulting on this project. Thanks to Ray Kelly Jnr and Rod Smith at the Awabakal Co-op, the staff of the Wollotuka Institute, University of Newcastle and the Awabakal Land Council for all their assistance and support and to all who have distributed information through their personal and professional networks. We thank and pay our respects to Aunty Sandra Griffin and Uncle Bill Smith for bringing their wisdom and blessings to the opening and closing events. We are especially grateful to and humbled by the Weatherall and Boney families who welcomed us into their home, shared their stories and gave their support to the project.

- Jessi England, Director, The Lock-Up 2016

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The title of this exhibition is not a gratuitous provocation, it is a fact: per capita the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia are the most gaoled race on Earth. This is a sad fact not taught in schools, along with other sorry details about how many languages have been lost forever, how many stories, and how many people have been and continue to operate under the yoke of violence, disrespect and neglect. How many educated, 'concerned' and 'liberal' people in Australia are aware that the colonisers successfully effected racial cleansing in Tasmania? Or that until late in the last century we too had an apartheid system where the Indigenous population were placed on par with animals and plants? Or that Indigenous peoples are still not written into the national constitution? Or that the life expectancy of Indigenous men and women is around fifteen years below their non- Indigenous counterparts? This makes them not only the most gaoled, but the most dead. Has anyone stopped to think about our two dollar coin?

Coins have heads and tails. The Queen is at the head, and so the black man is at the tail. That places him at the arse end of the arse end of the world.

So what really does it mean when, say, the crowd at an AFL match boos an Aboriginal player (Adam Goodes)? And what does it mean to expect him to 'suck it up'? If anyone has had a friend or relation that has experienced trauma, he or she might recall the silence that follows it. Much is written and reported about war and holocaust victims who do not communicate their experiences to the younger generations because they are too painful to relive, and also of a type that falls beyond the bounds of words. Every Indigenous person in the country with a genuine affinity to their place, people and nation bears a burden that hangs on their shoulders of the innumerable injustices done to them and their people, and to their people before them. It is hard to explain to those free of such concern, but it is ever more present in its very invisibility. It is as profound as the cold silence emanating from a deep, dark and ancient well. So to jeer at black man or woman is not simply to commit some casual offense, as one might feud with a neighbor or curse an irresponsible driver, rather it is more like a gesture that assures that this silent, invisible but nonetheless heavy burden, will not, and can not, be lifted. It is assurance that it stays there, and that any relief from it is temporary, or worse still, illusory.

The works in this exhibition are prompted not by the spirit of 'reconciliation', or of conciliation, or of proselytization. They are prompted by anger. There is a great deal of humour that abuts the more somber work, but it is a kind of laughter that occurs from the inability to express sorrow. It is as if the sadness is of such a harrowing nature that the only way it can make itself be heard is by a cry of a different kind. Given the nature of the works here, the phrase 'gallows humour' has never been more apt. This collaboration, of almost ten years—which has resulted in several major exhibitions, including the Museum of Contemporary Aboriginal Art (AAMU) in Utrecht, Holland—while of different backgrounds, is borne of shared beliefs, a deep friendship and mutual respect. It is this feeling of respect that forms the aesthetic backbone of the work, and which grounds its firmly held set of principles.

- Adam Geczy & Blak Douglas 2016



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