

The future  
of nostalgia:

Gordon Bennett  
and Mia Boe

Tim Riley Walsh

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*Our wealth and lifestyle, the notion of ‘Godzone’ country, the much touted ‘Aussie way of life’, have all been achieved as a direct consequence of Aboriginal dispossession.*

– Bruce Elder in Gordon Bennett,  
‘Re-writing History,’ 1992<sup>1</sup>

The footprint of dispossession and displacement is presented in varying registers in two concurrent exhibitions at Sutton Gallery. From Country and homeland at the hands of colonisation to culture at the behest of the state and systems of education, the late artist Gordon Bennett (1955–2014) and emerging Naarm/Melbourne-based artist Mia Boe explore the sense of (un)belonging that flows naturally from the maintenance of these bonds.

Boe’s *Suspicion is proof enough* looks at contemporary Myanmar through the architecture of the country’s notorious Insein Prison in the former capital of Yangon, a relic of British colonial rule. Here, the artist builds on her ongoing engagement with carceral systems and their imbrication with Empire. Conversely, the works selected for Bennett’s *This World Is Not My Home* ‘begin at the end’, looking backwards from the contemporary settler-state to its emergence at the point of British invasion and the ensuing, violent division of the landscape. Thus, both exhibitions consider the erasure of ‘home’ by the forceful imposition of outside structural forces.

As artists, Bennett and Boe share a deep investment in art history, and history more broadly. Both incorporate other artistic legacies into their respective practices as a way of relating to or subverting the past and its narratives. The selected works of Bennett’s engage with the art of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Philip Guston, Yala Yala Gibbs Tjungurrayi, Colin McCahon and Hans Heysen. Boe’s in turn contemplate Russell Drysdale, Sidney Nolan and Noel Counihan. Both artists also hold particular interest in interactions between modernism and First Nations’ experience. Though distinct

as individuals and artists, the two are linked by a shared sense of displacement from ‘home’, using their art to critically reflect on the impossibility of a fuller ‘homecoming’ when cultural ties are deeply implicit yet also distanced by colonisation. Both practices – to varying degrees – are thus framed by a quality of nostalgia, defined by Svetlana Boym as a ‘longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed.’<sup>2</sup>

Boe’s works here continue an ongoing interest in systems of incarceration – most recently explored in the context of First Nations’ experience in her suite of canvasses and wall painting as part of NGV Australia’s *Melbourne Now* (2023). In *Suspicion is proof enough*, the artist reprises her interrogation of life under the military junta of present-day Myanmar, which she began in 2022 at Black Art Projects with *Murri in a Hurry for a Curry*. Looming over the work is the threat of Insein Prison – built in Yangon in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by the British colonists and presently the country’s primary correctional facility – notorious worldwide for its inhumane conditions. Seen from above, the penitentiary is framed by square walls but its central structures recall the face of a grandfather clock – the distinct wheel-like formation is based on Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon design.<sup>3</sup> Themes of surveillance pervade all three of Boe’s canvases. Two situate us more intimately as viewers within interiors – one overtly of a prison, the other domestic yet still under state surveillance – while the third and largest occupies a drone-like aerial perspective. The latter is situated within a vast plain, the eerie dusk light and the ground’s rhythmic undulation implying a foreboding, dream-like landscape of the mind. Collectively, these works blur the site of the home and prison in the Orwellian present.

Bennett’s works, on the other hand, present an archaeology of colonial settlement in Australia. Following ‘the way of the shovel’, the visitor begins at the surface of the contemporary and digs down to the ‘birth’ of the settler state, depicted in works from the artist’s early career. First up, *Interior (Two Chairs)* (2008) by Bennett’s alter ego John Citizen presents a scene of purgatory-

like stasis set among tasteful, contemporary interior design. Next come fractured and alienated urban spaces of modernity in the graffiti-style of Basquiat. In *Horizon* (1996) the urban site emerges, mirage-like, among Guston’s hooded Klan figures, which Bennett appropriates from the artist’s 1969 drawing *City* and conflates with a scene of a white explorer surveying the Australian landscape. The assessment and appraisal of land, the future site of Guston’s cityscape, continues as a theme of the exhibition’s concluding works.

Three works on paper from Bennett’s late 1980s series *Notes on Perception* depict the invasive eye of the colonial ‘machine’, using perspectival devices that hover menacingly across appropriations of the German-Australian landscape painter Hans Heysen. At this time, Bennett was engaging frequently with Heysen’s view of the land as a pastoral arcadia that imagined a hopeful, golden dawn for the ‘young’ nation. Bennett troubled this erasure of Indigenous presence by reasserting it – as in *Notes on Perception*, where he overlays shimmering dot work that references the paintings of the late Pintupi artist Yala Yala Gibbs Tjungurrayi. Bennett also appears repeatedly drawn to the gnarled eucalypt trunks of Heysen’s *Red Gums of the Far North* (1931), which appear in three of the early works on display.

The violence of Heysen’s artistic gestures is most graphically interrogated in the final work *Landscape Painting* (1988). Here, a cross-section of the earth reveals a butcher’s cornucopia beneath the ground’s surface, imagery that Bennett directly reproduced from a meat cookbook. Meat becomes a metaphor for human flesh. During this period of Bennett’s career – concurrent with 1988 Australian Bicentenary, marking two hundred years of invasion by the British Crown – the artist frequently equated the settler’s treatment of the land with the disturbance of remains and the defilement of a corpse, drawing the viewer’s attention to the long history of massacres that undergird Australia. In *This World is not my Home* (1988), not shown here but whose title this exhibition borrows, what at first appears to be a mountain range in the red desert is actually derived from an illustrated anatomy resource, specifically a section

of the large intestine of a human cadaver.<sup>4</sup> In works on paper from the following year, *The Little Brick Schoolhouse* and *Untitled (after The Little Brick Schoolhouse)* (both 1989), the fleshy meat of *Landscape Painting* is now gone and, in its place, human remains are littered. A human skull hovers over a newspaper advertisement for superannuation. The colonial schoolhouse – where the myth of the ‘Australian Dream’ and its cruel optimism is instilled in young minds – is revealed to be built upon the site of a mass grave.

Despite these revelations, the ‘Australian Dream’ and the erasures it perpetuates persist. To quote Bennett’s *In My White Winter (after Colin McCahon)*, a subtle-yet-powerful reworking of the New Zealand/Aotearoa modernist’s 1971 charcoal text work *In my dark winter*:

IN MY WHITE  
WINTER  
LYING ILL  
AT LAST I ASK  
HOW  
FARES  
MY  
DARK NEIGHBOUR

Not until the very end, Bennett seems to suggest, will contemporary Australia finally look back upon itself and its past with a fuller, more radical honesty.

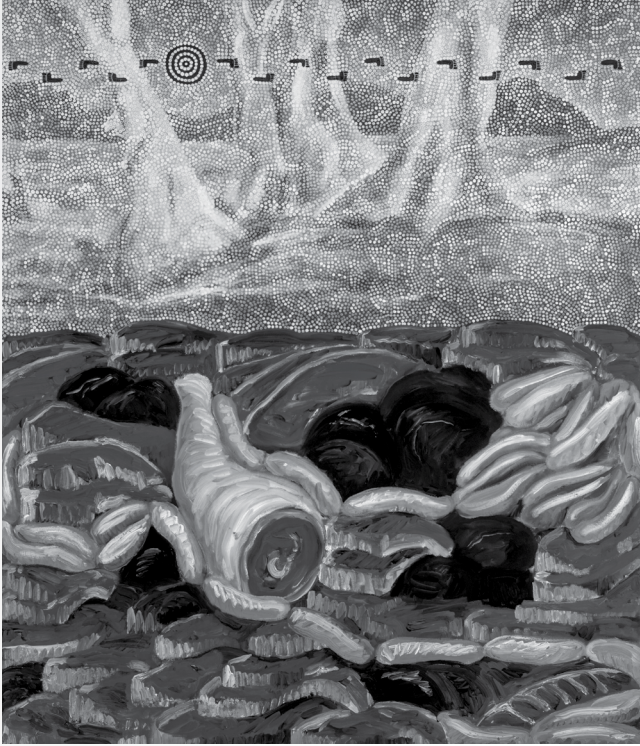
Through their respective practices, Bennett and Boe recognise that a desire to reconcile the polarities characterising states of distance and removal – returning to Svetlana Boym: ‘home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life’ – frequently leads to frustration. Yet perhaps within both artists’ work a position of *nuance*, to borrow one of Bennett’s key terms, is built – a refuge between these binaries.

– Tim Riley Walsh

Gordon Bennett, *This World Is Not My Home*  
Mia Boe, *Suspicion is proof enough*  
Sutton Gallery, Naarm/Melbourne  
24 June–22 July 2023

#### Notes

1. Bruce Elder in Gordon Bennett, ‘Re-writing History,’ *Gordon Bennett: Selected Writings*, ed. Angela Goddard and Tim Riley Walsh (Sydney and Brisbane: Power Publications and Griffith University Art Museum, 2020), 22.
2. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York City: Basic Books, 2001), 10.
3. ‘The Panopticon,’ *University College of London*, accessed 8 June 2023, [ucl.ac.uk/bentham-project/who-was-jeremy-bentham/panopticon](https://ucl.ac.uk/bentham-project/who-was-jeremy-bentham/panopticon).
4. This work is held in the collection of the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art: [qagoma.qld.gov.au/search/?s=gordon+bennett&facet=collection](https://qagoma.qld.gov.au/search/?s=gordon+bennett&facet=collection).



Above  
Gordon Bennett  
*Landscape Painting*, 1988  
oil on canvas  
127 x 109cm  
Courtesy the Estate of Gordon Bennett  
and Sutton Gallery, Naarm/Melbourne

Below  
Mia Boe  
*Interrogation room*, 2023  
acrylic on linen  
100 x 200cm  
Courtesy the artist and  
Sutton Gallery, Naarm/Melbourne



GORDON

BENNETT

MIA

BOE

SUTTON

GALLERY

24 JUNE -

22 JULY '23