

Moorina Bonini,
'A Tribute to the
Concrete Box (For
Aunty Hyllus)'

'We move in
with caution'
by Timmah Ball



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‘We move in with caution’

without white art

I begin thinking about what would be without white art and writing. If no art had been created in the almost 250 years of invasion what would be in its absence?

If white art started today, centralized in the cities of now, would there still be a need to colonize the landscape through art? Does this colony always insert bush poetry until there is no bush? In the absence of white representation would white artists appropriate blak ways of working?

- Ellen van Neerven, 2017, from UNFINISHED BUSINESS: Perspectives on Art and Feminism, ACCA

We’re drinking sparkling water at AMCI just moments from hearing our matriarchal queen Paola Balla give a lecture about blak art as an act of disruption, as a way of talking up space. As we enter the auditorium Ellen mentions that Paola has commissioned them to write an essay for the ACCA exhibition Unfinished Business. In the gallery with tid I feel a blak wave sweep through the cities elite institutional art spaces, which had always felt cold and foreign as a child. Something is changing but Ellen quietly mentions that there were moments they felt lost writing an essay for an exhibition about feminist art, (when feminism can feel like a white thing), even when it was co-curated by Paola who ensured that the matriarchy was centered, that deadly blak women like Natalie Harkin, Megan Cope, Fiona Foley, Hannah Brontë and others were represented. And I understood their feelings. It was an honor to receive these commissions, to see the white cube slowly disintegrate as we moved in. But as it unraveled the presence of a white man sitting above us still holding the key remained scorched in our memories.

When Moorina invited me to write about the box she had created to celebrate the words and work of her Auntie Hyllus I was moved by the concept but also reassured that the Collinwood Arts Precinct was centering blak work. This Mob was about to move in and it was vital that Moorina's exhibition should initiate the new arts precinct. On my first visit to Bus Projects the skeleton of the box was just beginning to emerge as the space chaotically came together in the hectic beauty unique to artistic practice. I was struck by its presence but moved by the intricacies of Moorina's burning on the gallery windowsill, where the markings influenced by Koori patterns would seep into the space long after the box was dismantled in place of the next show. The diagonal patterns burnt into the buildings infrastructure shifted what was essentially a conventional gallery space, which like many institutions across the city were beginning to include blak art. Instead the windows markings suggested permanency, an explicit connection to the Wurundjeri/Boon Wurrung land in which the gallery space existed on, a promise that the work was deeper than the rapid interest in decolonization that proliferated the arts industry.

This subversion reflects the cultural commitment of many blak artists rising across Naarm/Birrarung-ga. Writing about This Mob's 2019 residency at West Space, curator and writer Andy Butler noted that it 'seeks to subvert the way artists are meant to interface with the public. The collective has been given the space and its resources in a very central location, but there's no set public outcome or pressure to produce an exhibition.'¹ Like This Mob, A Tribute to the Concrete Box refuses to produce work for an eager white public audience, instead it leaves intimate traces of a culture that continues even if the streets and institutions in which it is contained could be mistaken for any westernized city across the globe. Moorina replicates the box her auntie imagined and allows us to dismantle it with the tools of her culture, as settler audiences watch us reclaim space and place.

1 Andy Butler, This Mob at West Space, The Saturday Paper, 2019, <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/2019/08/10/this-mob-west-space/15653592008590>

As her aunty wrote ‘they’re going to try all the keys and they’re going to find the right one and unlock the box and the people will go free.’ This freedom fills the gallery space as we witness mob break the box and scrawl their hopes, reflection’s and attitudes on its clean white surface. We feel free, we have greater freedoms then previous generations but as we express these new freedoms a lingering concern persists. We have access to spaces we were previously locked out of but do we actually hold the key?

These uneasy thoughts surfaced when Moorina emailed me explaining that she had received a call from Bus Projects stating that a contract painter hired by CAP had gone into the gallery space before 7:30am (when gallery staff are not present) and had proceeded to paint over 2 of the window pains with the burnings. After some thought the painter stopped because they imagined that the amount of markings must indicate that they meant something to the gallery. When the gallery staff found out they alongside the painter tried to sand the white paint of the windowsill to save the burnings underneath but it had already affected the subtle engravings. To focus on this act may seem unfair, but the painters inability to recognise the distinct markings as culturally significant reflects the ongoing challenges blak artists face. Blak culture is celebrated but only when it fits the framing of whiteness, when it’s beauty is grand and spiritual, when it contributes to capitalism or tourism. The white eye that holds the key casually erases the culture, which Mooraini and other Koori mob practice. These are the real moments, proof that blak culture is alive and thrives but formal artifacts relegated to museums and gallery spaces are given precedence.

There is a double irony to this unforeseen intrusion when we consider the thirst to decolonize our cities, an act which Moorina performed with generosity on the gallery windowsills. Working in urban planning I am regularly asked to contribute to reference groups, panels and other public events on the need to privilege First

Nations knowledge systems in cities. The desire to break down the impact of colonization is there yet whiteness keeps repeating the same mistakes, unaware of the subtle markings of our culture as they drive towards mega projects and million dollar design statements while they unconsciously paint over Koori burnings. Yuin designer Linda Kennedy asks ‘how do we flip the power play and stop indulging in the frameworks that continue to oppress and control us?’² Moorina’s work is a step in this direction through its subtle attempt to mark and break the framework that holds the key, even if it’s markings are carelessly painted over. We still know they are there, just as we know that the buildings, which explode through the city, will never dilute the sacred Wurundjeri/Boon Wurrung land we walk on.

The incongruities that blak artists face leads me back to the essay that Ellen wrote for Paola with searing honesty and hope. In it they wonder what the landscape would look like with out white art and writing. Would we need bush poetry and the desire to decolonize if our country wasn’t ravaged by fire in the climate crisis. If white gallery spaces never existed would Moorina’s burnings be commonplace etched into our surrounds rather than a small marking crudely misinterpreted as a mistake by the omnipresence of whiteness. Without white art and institutions would we all practice culture without threat or compromise, strongly aware that it is part of our everyday life rather than a temporal statement to analyze in a gallery space. As we move into strange and uncertain times blak artists are making strong statements that our culture moves beyond the crisp gallery walls, beyond the institutional white gaze. It has it’s own existence and ability to mesh into the structures which attempt to oppress us even as they invite us in.

Things are changing as institutions crave our work, but structural whiteness permeates these new entry points. And we move in with caution never entirely sure of who holds the key.

(Timmah Ball, 2020)

2 Linda Kennedy, Sovereignty + Spatial Design, Future Blak Blog, 2017, <http://www.future-black.com/blog/sovereignty>

Moorina Bonini is a proud Yorta Yorta and Woiwurrung woman. She is descended from the Dhulunyagen family clan of Ulupna people (Yorta Yorta) and is part of the Briggs/McCrae family. Moorina is an artist whose works are informed by her experiences as an Aboriginal and Italian woman. Within her practice, she creates artwork that examines contemporary Indigenous histories through the use of installation and video.

Moorina holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from RMIT University and a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours) from VCA. Her work has been exhibited within group shows and at various galleries such as Ballarat International Foto Biennale, Sydney Festival, Blak Dot Gallery, c3 Contemporary Art Space, SEVENTH Gallery, Koorie Heritage Trust and Brunswick Street Gallery. Moorina has produced and co-curated art and cultural programs across RMIT University and the University of Melbourne. Moorina is currently working at Next Wave as a Producer-in-Residence. She is a board member of SEVENTH Gallery, where she is currently the First Nations Programming Coordinator.

Bus Projects acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which we operate: the Wurundjeri people and Elders past and present of the Kulin nations.

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