

Negotiating the *Third Space*: Hybridity and Identity in Contemporary Australian Art

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At my last lecture here at USST China I was asked a wonderful question, that is: do our cultural histories and traditions help or hinder our development as artists? Seven months later I have returned to try to answer this question.

To do this I am going to examine the theoretical frameworks on which a number of contemporary Australian artists are now basing their practice, and who's focus related to the third space theories and on the related issues of personal and national identity.

Keep in mind that while China has a long standing and identifiable visual history on which to build, white Australian culture has been affected very little by Australian Indigenous histories, most of which has been denied through colonial settlement and migration.

In this respect Australian identity can not be defined in terms of collective philosophy consistent visual styles, only in terms of individual expression often affected by perhaps colonial attitudes and geographic isolation.

Theories surrounding hybridity, particularly in western culture, also suggest that globalised consumption as a marker of our identity, which is particular to diachronic cultures that are constantly in change.



So what is the *third space*?

So what is the Third Space? Homi Bhabba explains the third space in these terms:

“The non-synchronous temporality of global and national cultures opens up a cultural space – a third space – where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences ... Hybrid hyphenisations emphasize the incommensurable elements as the basis of cultural identities” This is a theoretical position that refers to social conflict created when cultures collide.

To refine this meaning, Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin talk about the third space as a notion “ *not based on exoticism or multiculturalism of the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and the articulation of culture’s hybridity*” This transformative space has been countered by such writers as Ien Ang, a Chinese–Australian theorist in her comment on Felski’s paper “*The Doxa of Difference*”. In her paper “*The Uses of Incommensurability*” she discusses the meaning of “identity” and “togetherness” in the context of how we live together in the 21st century.

Ang highlights the breakdown of cultural boundaries in a growingly interconnected and interdependent globalised world, and suggests that the moments of incompatibility that occur between cultural groups are crucial in forming our new complex hybrid societies. Her observation about language within this incompatible space offers us a freedom to work as artists, designers and collaborators. The third space for artists therefore presents itself as a positive and interpretative space allowing collaboration and dialogue through a shared visual language. Why would the *third space* be productive for art practitioners? As Rutherford asserts: “For me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the ‘Third Space’, which enables other positions to emerge” In considering artists practices the project asks how can negotiating theoretical models of third space and hybridity be productive?



George Pitt Morrison
The Settling of Perth 1929



Gordon Bennett
Possession Island 1991

To frame the project, I will look at a number of contemporary Australian artists who are working in an often confrontational way, questioning existing attitudes and assumptions through highly charged political work.

Australian Indigenous artist Gordon Bennett acknowledges how his identity has been impacted upon by the “narratives of colonialism”. He comments:

“... all the education and socialization upon which my identity and self worth as a person, indeed my sense of ‘Australianess’, and that of my peers, had as its foundation the narratives of colonialism.

I had never thought to question those narratives and I certainly had never been taught at school to question them... only to believe them. Neither had I thought to question the representation of Aborigines as the quintessential ‘primitive Other’ against which the ‘civilized’ collective ‘Self’ of my peers was measured”

His work “Possession Island” refers to early colonial paintings in the European style which are full of symbolism and narrative that depict the power of white over black.

The grass tree in the foreground of this early 20th century settler painting by George Pitt Morrison above for instance has been cut down by the settlers, symbolising the death of indigenous life. The settlers wear white clothes, symbolising the purity of cleansing and so on.



Gordon Bennett

Notes to Basquiat (Jackson Pollock and his other) 2001

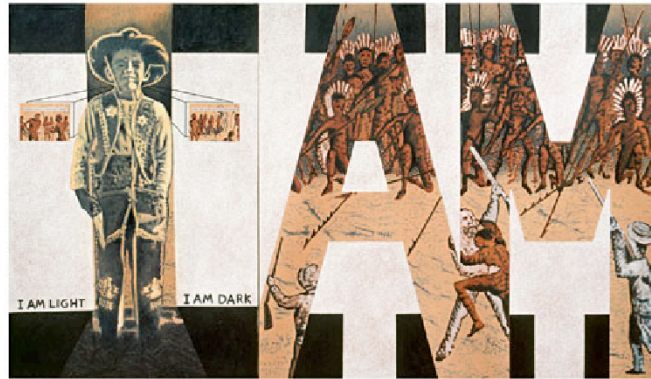
Gordon Bennett, by critically engaging with his identity as an indigenous Australian operating within a western arts paradigm, negotiates the third space of hybridity.

This brings into question the ethical and moral position of Indigenous artists and their agents where expectations about what constitutes “Aboriginality” are created within the international art market for broad consumption.

Many urban contemporary Aboriginal artists have been marginalised where their work does not fit the confines of what we expect Aboriginal art should look like, instead choosing to operate in a cultural space in which these issues can be politicised and examined.

Gordon Bennett therefore, by acknowledging that his identity has been impacted upon by the “narratives of colonialism”, has been empowered to develop strategies in which to act upon these narratives.

This presents question to us all: what narratives have impacted upon you, and how much are you aware of them, how in turn do you negotiate them, how much is your personal identity influenced by national and cultural histories?



Gordon Bennett

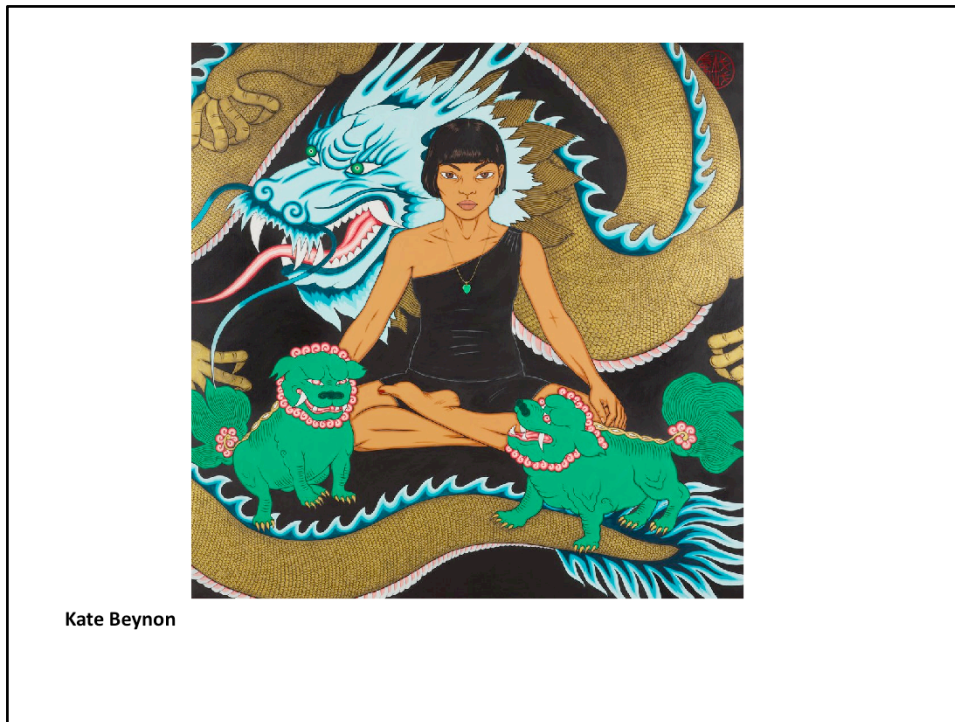
self portriat (but I always wanted to be one of the good guys) 1990

Ien Ang discusses the importance of critically negotiating history and culture.

Ang asserts that the “the politics of self representation” ... can become “a strategy to open up awareness for new speaking trajectories”, and a “reflexive positioning of oneself in history and culture”, which becomes a “useful identity”.

There is also a view that our cultural identity is more dependent on the present than our history.

The book *Complex Entanglements Art, Globalisation and Cultural Difference* edited by Nikos Papastergiadis is an anthology of diverse positions on postcolonial theory, for example Papastergiadis asserts, “that *what* we are is *where* we are now, rather than where we were from”⁴ suggesting that our cultural histories have little bearing on our current identity within a modern hybrid society.



Australian artist Kate Beynon negotiates issues of hybridity and the third space in her practice. She comments

My concerns of dealing with identity issues arise from being a part of both the constructed entities of 'East' and 'West', while living in the Australian context.

By constantly negotiating a multiple identity, my work comes from what Homi Bhabha terms "the third space" - which in a positive view is "the in-between space of hybridity from which cultural change can be brought about".

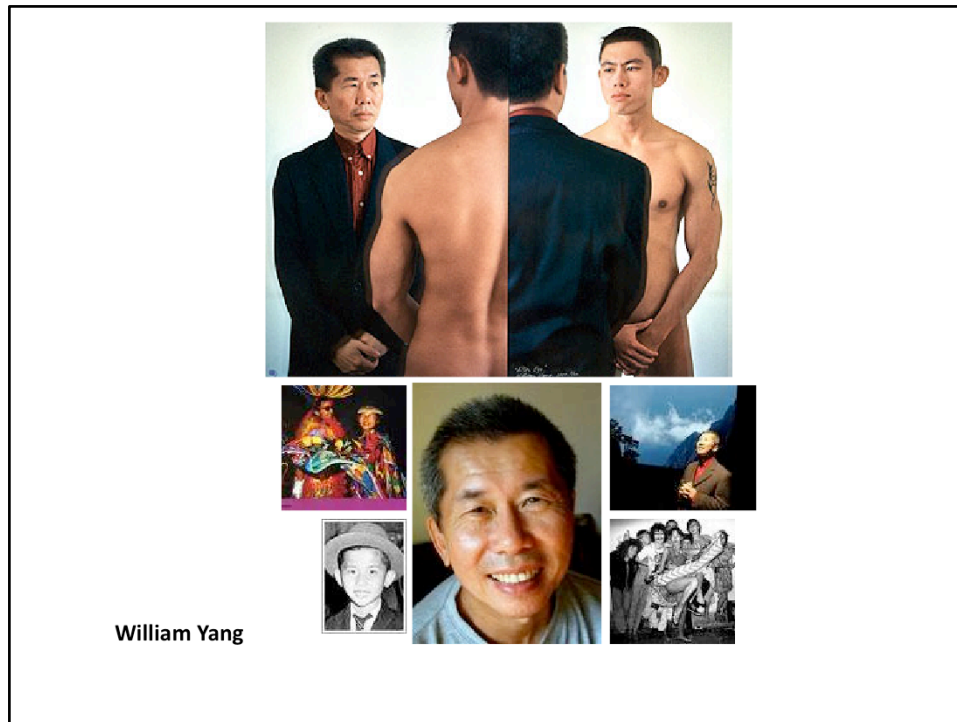
Hybridity blurs the distinctions between 'us' and 'them', 'different' and 'same', Asia and the West - or the West and the rest. Identity for myself embraces a combination of Chinese [from Malaysia]/Welsh/Hong Kong-born/ 'multiple migrant'/ Australian.



Informed by a diverse range of pictorial traditions including Western and Eastern comic books, animation, film, graffiti, calligraphy and fashion, Beynon's works are a nexus of influences influences and communicate ideas of hybridity

Her paintings manifest the hybrid reality of today's multicultural global citizen.

In 1996 Beynon first exhibited images depicting Li Ji, a heroine drawn from an ancient Chinese legend, adapted into a contemporary urban warrior. Li Ji has become a central character in Beynon's works, negotiating her way through a global landscape marked by politics of race and class.



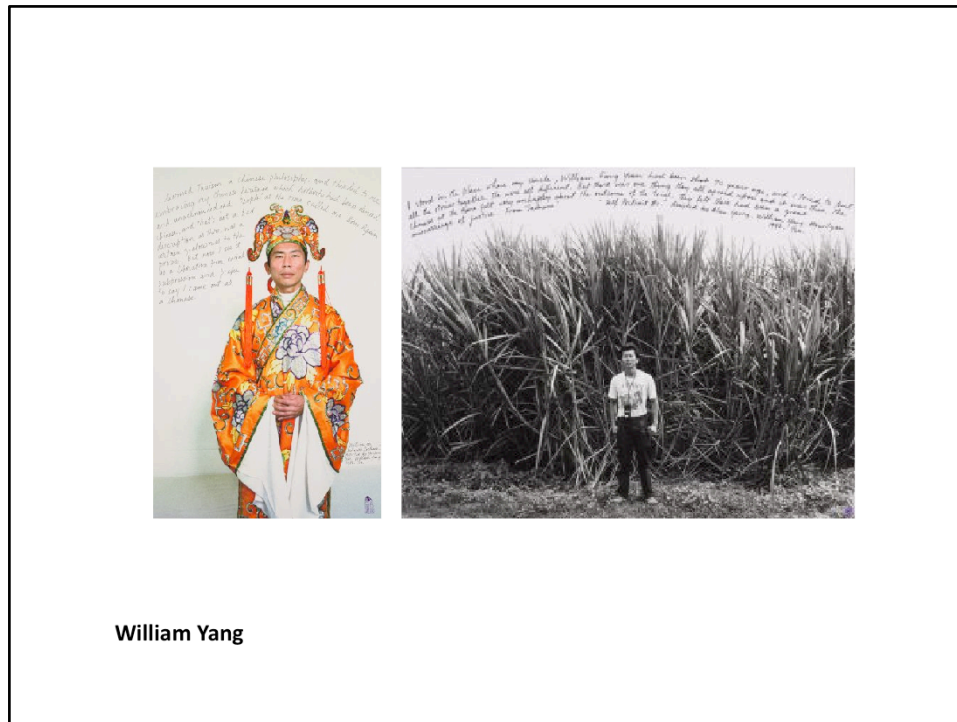
Chinese Australian artist William Yang recalls the story made famous in its re-telling in *Sadness*:

As a child it never occurred to me that I was Chinese and of a different race from other Australians. Someone at school called me “Ching Chong Chinaman”. William was six.

He went home to his mother and asked if he was Chinese: “I’m not am I?” My mother replied with great severity: “You are”. It was her tone that shocked me.

I understood immediately that being Chinese was some terrible curse and I could not rely on my mother for any help, or my elder brother for that matter, who chimed in with the authority of someone who was four years older and so much more experienced in the world: “Yes you are Chinese and you’d better get used to it”.

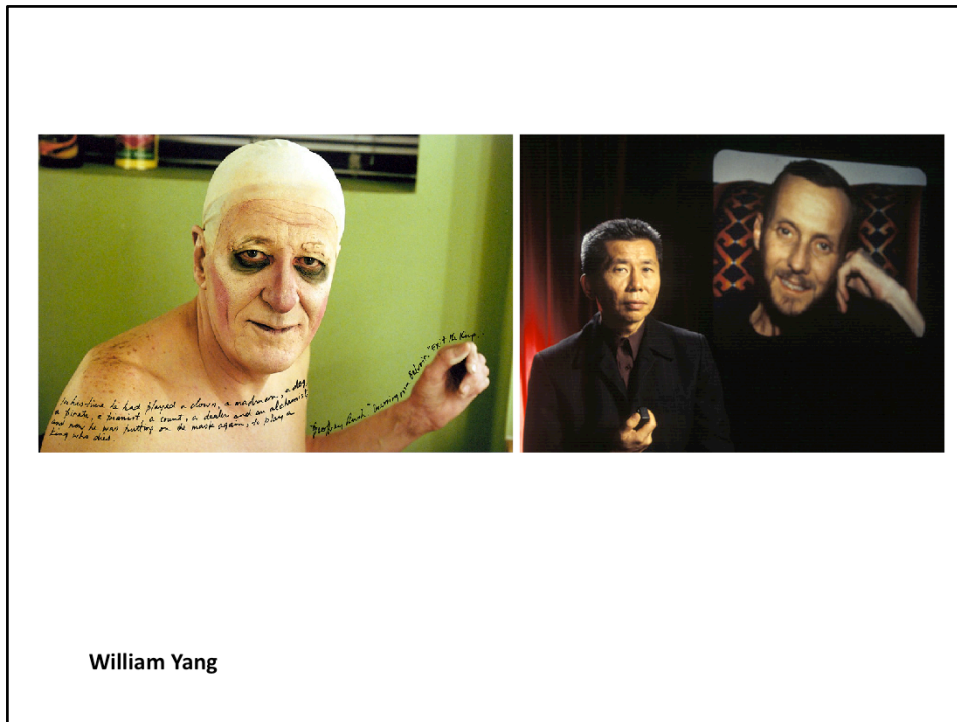
So my first feelings about being Chinese were entirely negative and they remained that way for over thirty years.



Yang's grandparents emigrated from southern China during the northern Australian gold rush of the 1880s. His parents met in Cairns and moved to Dimbulah on the Atherton Tableland, where Yang and his siblings grew up.

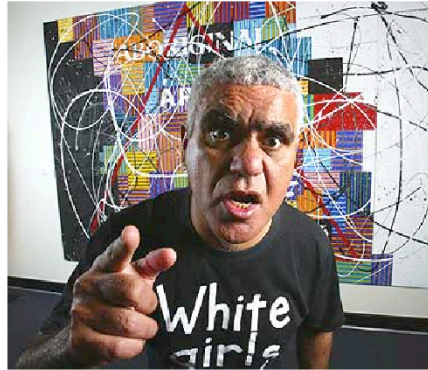
Yang's family is now scattered around Australia and across the world, and one of his ongoing projects has been to meet and photograph them, wherever they may be.

He has travelled to China five times since 1989, visiting his ancestral village and photographing his experiences. These journeys, while constituting a return to Yang's roots, also, as he says, 'tend to reinforce the fact that I'm Australian'.



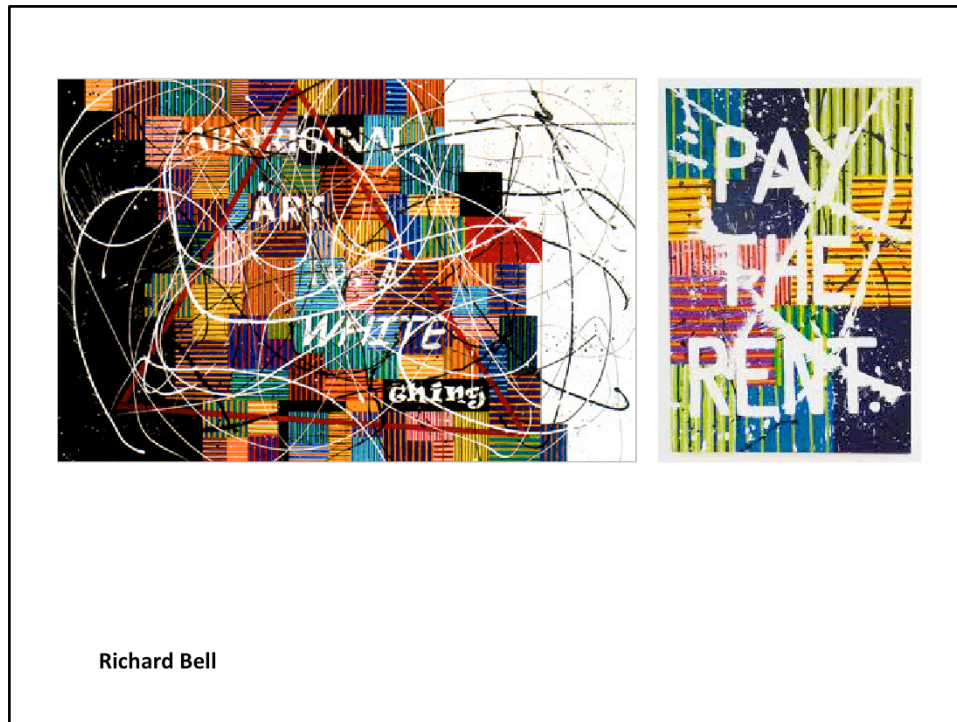
Yang comments:

“Because I’m marginalised myself, being Chinese in a predominately white, Australian society, and being gay in a predominately heterosexual society, just in telling my own story I bring up these issues,” he said. “It has been empowering to me to find my own voice and consequently give voice to others”



Richard Bell: art and controversy

Working in what he calls “unstable cultural field” –Australian Indigenous artist Richard Bell’s work is highly controversial. He uses racist quotes and political messages within his work to confront the issues surrounding the plight of indigenous people in Australia.

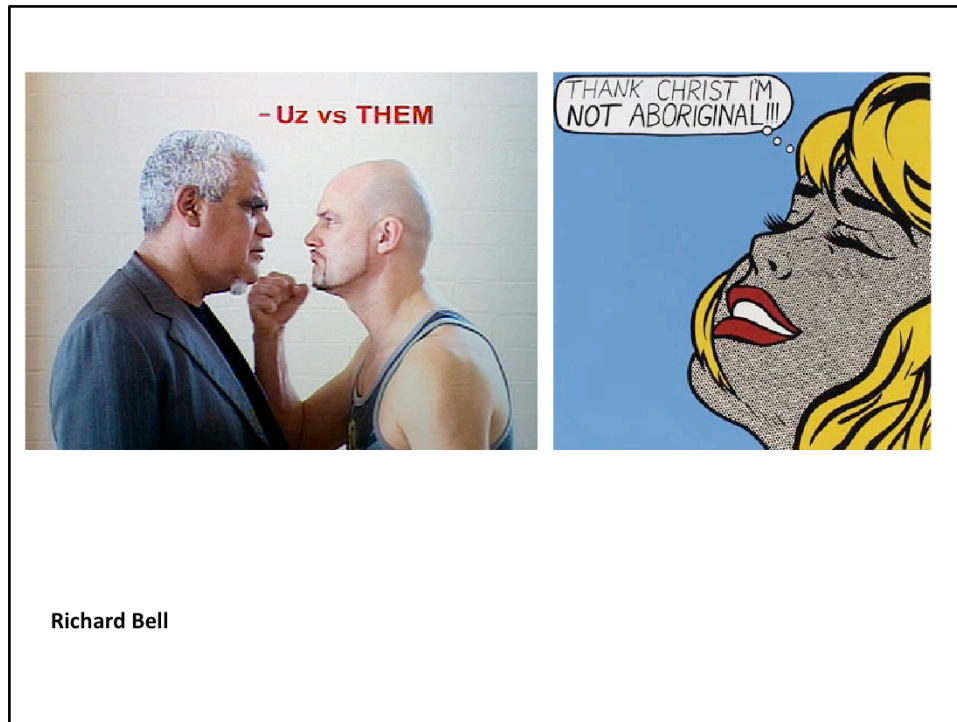


Born in Charleville into the Kamilaroi tribe and currently living in Brisbane, Richard Bell was a leader in the first group of urban Indigenous artists whose work provided a means of expression during the period leading up to the 1988 bi-centenary of white Australian settlement.

During this time, Richard's concentration was on 'challenging non-Indigenous artists who appropriated Indigenous imagery in their work' and the common notions of traditional and modern Indigenous art.

Today, Bell's pieces utilize dot application, cross hatching and traditional hand stencils to examine 'the historical treatment of Aboriginal people after European settlement'.

His work addresses contemporary issues such as religion, art and politics, and responds to issues of oppression, frustration and discrimination.



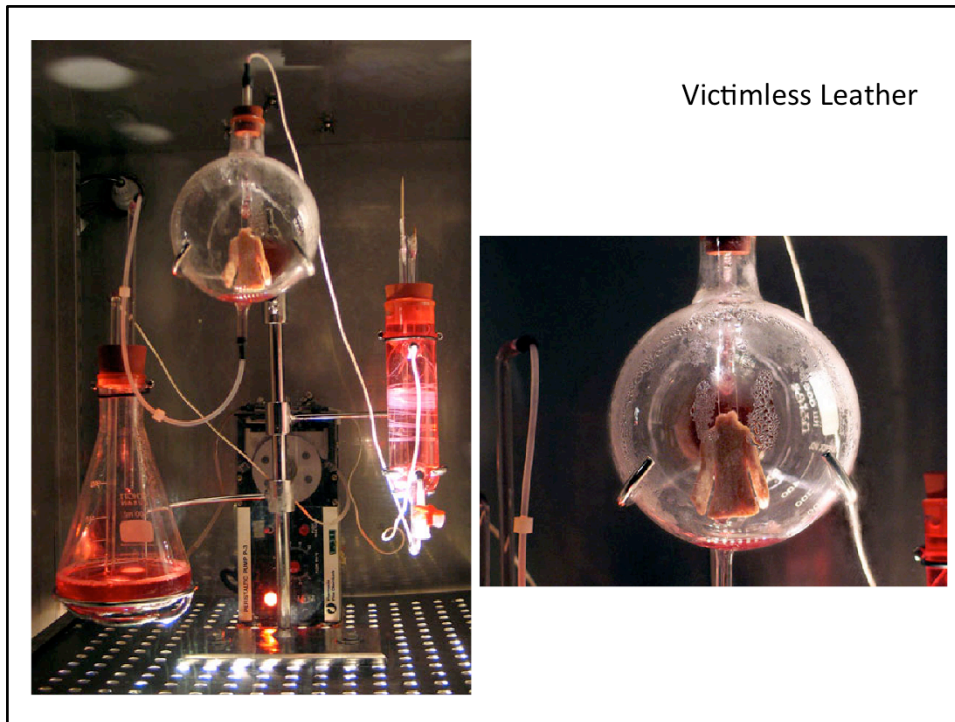
Richard Bell has established a reputation as a political commentator " in Indigenous art. His no-nonsense works frequently confront the viewer with image and text.

He is an avid appropriator who borrows styles and motifs from other artists and periods and cultures to create powerful messages.

Bell was an activist for equal rights for Indigenous Australians before he was an artist. He is on record as saying that he wasn't treated like a human being until in his early 20s.

Among his many theories on art, he comments that Aboriginal Art is a "white thing" , meaning that the perception of what constitutes Aboriginality and Aboriginal art is totally constructed by white people.

This highlights his uncompromising stance on the assimilation and exploitation of indigenous art in the canon of western art.



SymbioticA is an artistic laboratory dedicated to the research, learning and critique of life sciences. It is the first research laboratory of its kind, in that it enables artists to engage in wet biology practices in a biological science department.

SymbioticA specialise in work that is of a hybrid, interdisciplinary nature. A hybrid between art and science practices.

Recently they have 'killed' a living coat at the Museum of Modern Art Sydney MOMA, by growing animal and human tissue in an incubator and turning off the incubator at the end of the exhibition.

'Victimless Leather' was the polemic piece that raised questions about life and death and the ethical boundaries in both art and science.



Patricia Piccinini

Patricia Piccinini asks us to consider issues of humanity through her hybrid works. She says:

“I wanted to address the reality of the creatures themselves in a very compassionate way, and show a very beautiful image of motherhood,” she said. “As you can see, she is really caring towards her children and worried about them. The question I raise, that I am interested in, relates to the distinction between human and animal characteristics, not so much her humanity, but the ‘animalness’ in us.”



Patricia Piccinini is also dealing with human / animal hybridity in her work “The Young Family

The human-dog hybrid is actually what Piccinini calls a "transgenic creature," created for her 2003 show for the Australian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

The work is entitled "The Young Family," and Piccinini said in a lecture that she was inspired by the prospect of growing human organs in other species.



Each of these artists through their creative practices are negotiating their culture, history and globalised context.

In so doing they are identifying new hybrid spaces that allow for new ideas and new ways of understanding – this is what the third space of hybridity allows.

In a multicultural, globalised and cosmopolitan Australian context this is an important undertaking.

Many of these artists works are confronting in terms of ethical, social and political issues, and as such are inviting the viewer to engage in an active dialogue about issues that affect our understanding about identity in a multi cultural and multi complex society

So seven months later I am no closer to answering that very good question relating to the influence of our own histories and traditions.

Hopefully though through this brief lecture we can at least examine a number of artists who, through their work, are also attempting to ask the same questions of themselves.