Since his 1996 award-winning work Sexy and Dangerous hit the contemporary art scene, Brook Andrew has created major photographic, neon and multi-media artworks, installations and public art, and engaged in interactive art and archival community projects. His work with archival material has created debate and new thought surrounding contemporary philosophies regarding memory, its conceptual and visual potency linking local with international histories. By co-opting the tools of advertising, the media, museums and Wiradjuri language and culture, Brook Andrew’s art challenges the limitations imposed by power structures, historical amnesia, stereotyping and complicity.

The Danger of Authority series was a good place to begin our conversation. We were in his Footscray studio and Brock showed me how he developed the works from a discarded archive found in New York of opulent American and English interiors dating from as far back as the 11th century to the 1970s, collaged with recent 2009 headlines from The New York Times. He enlarged the collages, most of which became lithographs, as well as three massive screenprints and two woodblock prints, made with master printer Shiochi Kitamura who flew in from Kyoto to work with Brook in his studio. The woodblocks alone required 39 different impressions—a process that took around nine months to complete.

Laura Murray Cree: Capitalism now has different mechanisms …

BA: We’ve got better bombs and better spy technology …

LMC: And more seductive means …

BA: Yes, very seductive, like The Jumping Castle War Memorial that I’m making for the Sydney Biennale …

LMC: The Jumping Castle is clever because it has so many connotations. It speaks to much of your past work but also to the Aboriginal War Memorial in the National Gallery of Australia (NGA), war memorials Australia-wide, worldwide, disappeared peoples worldwide, museums like The Killing Fields in Cambodia—and also to children’s parties. The figure looks like an Oscar statuette, only black and with arms outstretched …

BA: The figure was influenced by Chinese and Russian communist sculpture. It’s not brutal, it’s about the magnificence of the human body, the way in which classical sculpture rejoices the body, powerful and strong, people power. The arms outstretched are more about a command to rest, I suppose, and to play. I wanted those forgotten of the world to be remembered in a powerful way.

LMC: But I immediately think of all the people under the thrall of communist leaders and how such hope went so wrong and how it always seems to, in human affairs. That’s getting off the point …

BA: I don’t think it is getting off the point because this is a worldwide phenomenon. Recently I was looking at some glass plates in A. O. Neville’s collection in the Berndt Museum of Anthropology at the University of Western Australia—Neville was the Protector of Aborigines from 1915 to 1953—and I saw images of stolen generation children doing repetitive physical exercises.
just like they did in Communist China, the kind of thing we in the West were terrified of during that whole McCarthy era. The Soviets had nuclear weapons and Americans became suspicious of minority groups such as Native Americans, African Americans and immigrants, they became targets of suspicion, surveillance, and infiltration, a similar phenomenon happened in Australia. We can argue that one system is communist and one is capitalist, one has free will and one doesn’t, but …

LMC Capitalism has trapped us in a consumer treadmill where we don’t know whether we can afford to buy a house or not, have children or not …

BA And the clothes we wear—there’s a conservatism and a clinical aspect to that as well. But then there is arguably the expression of freedom and ‘free self’, however this is transposed. I suppose it’s about self-presentation and deception. This also reflects how people conceive history through identity, it’s not just inherited, it changes all the time, except some people think it doesn’t, or others try to forget. And this is the trick.

LMC You have talked about ‘the skin of now’ being like a membrane … Is this now a global membrane, does it cover the whole planet?

BA It’s also about our disconnections to the planet and to each other.

LMC We’ve ruptured the membrane—things are leaking out, pouring out—but all can contain that for us somehow and concentrate our gaze—‘I see you, you see me’. That’s a function of art, isn’t it?

BA Most definitely it’s a function of art and there’s that intensity— it’s a pivot and maybe a seeing glass. I’ve heard some people say they don’t like ‘political art’ or how artists in Australia reflect our histories so it’s interesting when international artists like Jenny Holzer exhibit in Melbourne, with her guerrilla-style work that’s been drawn from American National Security Archive’s declassified documents. We are still dealing with our own mess, and this is evident in the debates surrounding many issues from asylum seekers to the Intervention and lost memories.

LMC Which brings us to your Gun-metal Grey series …

BA It took me seven years to make this work because of important debates occurring in the community—groundbreaking debates that included artists, curators, policy makers, lawyers and community members. People need to understand that our community and culture is still uncovering the past and working out how protocols operate in a contemporary world … the legacy of historical representation is fraught, especially when frontier postcards at the turn of the 19th century became popular. The image for Sexy and Dangerous was a 1904 postcard with the title ‘Aboriginal Chief’ produced for the international market by the photographic studio ‘Kerry & Co, Sydney’. In the mid-1990s many Aboriginal people, like myself, were looking to subvert these past representations and create positive outcomes even though we were still working out protocols in relation to different kinds of representation and different circumstances. It’s a disputed area—Djon Mundine and Dr Gaye Sculthorpe gave Sexy and Dangerous the RAKA Award in 1998, so there has been community debate and support surrounding these issues since artists like Tracey Moffatt, Rea, Lusha King-Smith and Gordon Bennett began representing the archive … and some have changed their positions on this matter. It may never be truly resolved because of people having quite different and changing opinions.
Lanfrancone’s paintings of the disappeared and reappeared depending on light. There are artists who concentrate on light and the beauty in objects. But there is beauty in pain. Bill Viola made a video artwork [Nantes Triptych, 1992] where a woman is giving birth in a man’s arms and an old woman is dying. It is incredibly comforting birth and death on massive screens. There’s rawness about humanity that scarples back the veneers. I think there is illusion, and the…

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Legions of War Widows Face Dire Need in Iraq, 2009, woodblock print on hand-made kikuban hankusa kouzosi tansyoku Japanese paper, 78 x 61cm

Even a Failing Mind Feels the Tug of History, 2009, woodblock print on hand-made kikuban hankusa kouzosi tansyoku Japanese paper, 76 x 61cm

How did Obama Win Over White, Blue-collar Levittown?, 2009, woodblock print on hand-made kikuban hankusa kouzosi tansyoku Japanese paper, 76 x 61cm

Jumping Castle War Memorial, 2010, (3D rendered drawing), PVC vinyl, 7 x 7 x 4m


Theme Park, 2008, neon and steel frame, 272.5 x 300 x 12cm

Jumping Castle War Memorial, test inflation, 2010, Beijing. Courtesy UAP.

Emu, 2004, animated neon on anodised aluminium, 120 x 164.2 x 18.3cm

The Island V, 2008, mixed media on Belgian linen, 250 x 300 x 5cm

The Island IV, 2008, mixed media on Belgian linen, 250 x 300 x 5cm

Gun-metal Grey, 2007, Ngalan (light), screen-print on gun-metal grey metallic foil & cotton, 170 x 110 x 5cm

Courtesy the artist and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne

admirant to separate everything – the ruling class, and even within small communities where one believes they have power over the other, and arguably the church and its history, divides and conquers. It’s an all too familiar debate with the church … but arts and festivals have always been associated with the dream world and myth, linking story telling, ceremony and politics. Religion and politics have been responsible for the destruction and creation of astonishing artworks – Fra Angelico created his frescoes for the Dominican monastery of San Marco in Florence and Afghanistan’s puritanical Taliban Islamic militia destroyed the world’s tallest Buddha statues at Bamyan. Our world is in collision. But Fra Angelico’s frescoes could also be seen as instruments of domination by an oppressive Church.

LMC Artists find ways around establishment agendas or they may be unaware of them.

BA Yet aware or not, they’re implicit – that is the danger of authority. So there’s always conflict and romance and the dream world and illusions … as Kosuth was saying.

LMC We’re enthralled in illusion.

BA But that’s human, it’s our natural space of being. We construct multiple realities. Which is the birth of misunderstanding.

LMC And none of us knows why we’re here …

At this point the tape ran out. We went on with the conversation. Brook said that he thought about his work in an abstract way. It came from how he researched archives and what he found there and thinking about that. I told him about our family motto—’By God and not by chance’ – which has always been a conundrum for me, especially as our family name is Chance. Does it mean we shouldn’t trust ourselves? Or does it mean that we shouldn’t trust oracles like the I Ching? What is chance anyway? Perhaps God is chance … Brook loved this. He called it mind trickery—he said he thought about his own art like this, like a dream. What does it mean? The Jumping Castle War Memorial is a trick. He said all his work is about binaries, patterns, alternative realities, black and white, the mind playing tricks …

Brook Andrew is represented by Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne. His new work Jumping Castle War Memorial will be shown in the 17th Biennale of Sydney, 12 May – 1 August. www.tolarnogalleries.com

www.biennaleofsydney.com.au