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Two Aboriginal Artists Urge Viewers to See the Universe Differently

Naminapu Maymuru-White and Daniel Boyd grew up hundreds of miles and a generation apart. Yet they share a goal: reframing the way we see the universe.

by Keridwen Cornelius (March 21, 2024)



Daniel Boyd's "Untitled (YAWCWC)."
Credit: The artist and STATION

At Art Basel Hong Kong, two celebrated First Nations Australian artists will present complex and contrasting perspectives on Indigenous identities. In their work, the two artists, Naminapu Maymuru-White and Daniel Boyd, carry on a long tradition of creative expression — harnessing and exploring the history of the hundreds of distinct peoples who established homelands across Australia more than 50,000 years ago.

Their art also reflects the effects of colonialism on Aboriginal Australians: the severed families, displaced people and repeated efforts to erase their cultures. Despite this dark past, the pieces shine with a light of hope. Through glimmering dots and stars, the works illuminate the vast array of Indigenous viewpoints around the world, and highlight ways of reimagining our relationships with one another — and with the earth itself.

Daniel Boyd

At first glance, Mr. Boyd's dappled installations and pointillist-style paintings might seem inspired by the famous Aboriginal dot art. Actually, there's no connection. Instead, his points of light and transparent spots represent lenses through which people project their understanding into the world. The experience of engaging with his interplays of darkness and dots is meant to shatter simple narratives about the history and lives of Indigenous people and "the other" into millions of shimmering, individual viewpoints.

"What I try to do with my art is to share this connection to the diverse cultural traditions, knowledge and experiences that exist in the world," Mr. Boyd said in a video interview. "It challenges the idea of singularity or the definitive and opens it up to a plurality and the possibility of a poetic kind of relation."

Mr. Boyd, 41, who lives and paints in Sydney, Australia, has a pluralistic heritage himself, tracing his roots to a number of First Nations Australian and South Pacific island peoples: the Kudjala, Ghungalu, Wangerriburra, Wakka Wakka, Gubbi Gubbi, Kuku Yalanji, Yuggera, Bundjalung, and the ni-Vanuatu. His ancestors were part of the Stolen Generations — Aboriginal children who were, under the directive of the Australian government, forcibly removed from their families and placed in institutions, or with non-Indigenous families, in an attempt to blot out their culture and color. Because of this history, Mr. Boyd grew up disconnected from his ancestors' traditional practices.

This loss works its way into his paintings of First Nations Australian people and landscapes, some of which will be shown at the fair with Station gallery and Kukje Gallery. From a distance, his blend of black space and semitransparent dots form a clear picture. That's because the human brain fills in gaps based on assumptions, just as it projects presuppositions onto unfamiliar people and places.



Mr. Boyd created an interactive installation for Art Basel Hong Kong, which will encourage people to think about the projections they place on others. Credit: Joshua Morris, via STATION

"But when you're up close, things are kind of obliterated, and they become more abstract," Mr. Boyd explained. When a viewer moves toward these paintings, the black space between the transparent, lenslike dots expands. This obfuscation evokes aspects of the past that have been pushed into the shadows, as well as the incomprehensible void between different people's experiences of the world. As Mr. Boyd put it, "It's about dark matter and the unknown, and how we contend with those things that we don't understand."

During the fair, Mr. Boyd will also present an interactive installation, about a mile away from the convention center, at Pacific Place, a high-gloss mixed use space. Windows covered with a perforated black film will allow spots of sunlight into the space and onto people walking inside, creating a dynamic illustration of the projections that people place onto others. In a moving image work and on a mirrored stage, constellations of light and reflective spots will dance across darkness, like millions of intermingling perspectives.

Mr. Boyd aims to inspire viewers to reconsider the narrow lenses through which they view the world, and to make space for mystery and difference.

In this complicated shimmering of unique outlooks, Mr. Boyd sees a kind of poetry: “It’s a way to think about human relations and the beauty in the complexity or chaos of human experience,” he said.