

EXHIBITION PROGRAM 2014
THE BLAKTISM
MEGAN COPE
21 MAY - 7 JUNE

Metro Arts

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IMAGES

- Cover *The Blaktism* (video still), 2014.
- 1 / *The Blaktism* (video still), 2014.
- 2 / *The Blaktism* (video still), 2014.

PROJECT PARTNERS



**Queensland
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**NEXT
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THE BLAKTISM - RACE POWER AND THE CONFERRING OF RACIAL IDENTITIES

Megan Cope's latest work *The Blaktism*, parodies a sacred ritual and thereby exposes the latent tensions that beguile many Indigenous Australians and their continuous struggles to assert their own identities as Aborigines and/or Torres Strait Islanders in their own country. Cope exposes the inherent dynamics of contemporary race power in Australia through the metaphor of the rite of baptism to expose the racialised nature of identity politics. In doing so, Cope thereby illuminates the asymmetrical relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians through the hegemonic racialised authority of white colonialism and its power to bestow and confer Indigeneity. Just as the rite of baptism represented a person's initiation to the church based on their purification of character, *The Blaktism* mimics this rite to make explicit how the Australian state applies its authority to legitimate and validate Indigenous identities within the Australian state.

This is not to suggest that the latent power of the state to confer the identities of Indigenous persons is necessarily unconditionally accepted by Indigenous peoples. Instead, by lampooning the rite of *The Blaktism*, Cope prosecutes this issue as a contested space and thereby infers that the parameters of racialised state power can be delimited. Whilst Cope deploys *The Blaktism* as a satirical response to race and identity politics, the idea that the white racial state can continue to entertain the idea of assigning racial identities remains perverse and raises questions as to the exercise of individual liberty of the racialised Other and the vagaries of state power.

The role of the state in managing and administering Indigenous lives is well documented. The popular idea that Indigenous people were a 'dying race' in the middle to latter parts of the twentieth Century became the catalyst for a comprehensive research effort whose objective was to capture as much information about Indigenous peoples and their cultures before they disappeared altogether. Consequently, the efforts of the anthropology, sociology, archaeology and linguistics disciplines in particular, provided the foundations for the knowledge base of the Australian state in relation to Indigenous peoples. Over time we have seen both the inception and debunking of eugenics, skin pigmentation and blood quantum theories as the definitive frameworks for constituting and validating claims to Indigeneity. Such theories were underpinned by notions of indicators or markers of Indigeneity, informed by the bulk of field research undertaken primarily through methods of ethnography.

These markers essentially provided the epistemic basis for assessing who was considered to be Indigenous which is then constituted as knowledge of the racial other. The significance of the ethnographic approach is the supposed invisibility of the researcher, in particular the historical positioning of the researcher in relation to the research objects as detached, objective, neutral and passive. This proposition is no longer plausible as we now understand better how the racial and gendered positioning of the researcher influences what questions get asked and how they're answered –and conversely, what doesn't get asked. Much of what white Australia thinks it knows about Indigenous peoples and their cultures today is ostensibly the direct legacy of the research effort conducted by a racially unmarked white academy.

It is hardly surprising that these artefacts continue to hold currency today. In this sense, that these markers continue have salience to non-Indigenous Australia produces the effect of upholding a form of social control associated with the dynamics of racial domination. It reiterates that Indigenous peoples do not have an inalienable right to self-define because the state has the unfettered power to intervene and contest these rights. While the Commonwealth Government applies formal criteria for establishing and resolving claims of Indigeneity, issues relating to Indigenous identity continue to re-appear in public discussions, especially where white people believe they have an inherent right to contest and challenge Indigenous claims of Indigeneity that deviate from commonly held misconceptions of what counts as a legitimate racial identity. In essence, this amounts to applying racially defined tests of racial authenticity to Indigenous claims of Indigeneity. Often the basis for these protestations has been prompted by the conferral of some form of benefit to Indigenous peoples that is perceived to be extraordinary and usually with economic benefits such as a redistribution of resources. This is likely to be deemed by whites to be unjust with the associated inference that such assistance is undeserving because the prevailing neo liberal ideology of colour blindness dictates that race and need should not be conjoined nor be the basis for unfair claims on the state.

The 'inherent' right reserved for white people to define the identity of racial others is rarely interrogated by themselves. Apart from representing these forms of unequal power relations as the natural order of the social/ racial, only one party in this racial binary – Indigenous Australians - is raced, white Australians remain unraced.

A two dimensional concurrent power exists for white Australia – the power to not be racially defined while possessing the power to racially define others. Often this is masked in pleas to end any form of racial differentiation in order to achieve true equality for all Australians. Yet this abstracted form of egalitarianism subtly directs attention only to the perceived 'special treatment' afforded to Indigenous peoples. The systemic privileging of white Australians is overlooked and ignored while any forms of redress to arrest the perpetuity of Indigenous disadvantage is highlighted by whites as unfair and problematic. Despite the overwhelming quantitative evidence, the enormity of Indigenous disadvantage is rendered unremarkable as a natural state of affairs. Predictably, Indigeneity is positioned as a liability and is therefore promoted as the root cause for Indigenous problems. To be Indigenous in Australia is to be inevitably positioned as a problem of deficit vis an Indigenous person is being always considered something less in capability compared to white Australians. These attitudes impact on the political, economic, social and cultural dimensions of Indigenous Australia. The dismantling of colonial ideologies is a necessary step in addressing the perpetuity of Indigenous disadvantage in this country. In this sense, *The Blaktism* says so much in its brief but powerful performance and accordingly, Megan Cope is someone to watch and listen to going forward.

PROFESSOR STEVE LARKIN
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