



woolloongabba art gallery

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'iboriginal'
The Art of Marshall Bell



Marshall Bell
Still Life, Bowl of Fruit 2006
121 x 183 cm
acrylic on canvas

iboriginal

Marshall Bell is best known for his long and successful career as a political figure. He was never a politician in the conventional sense, but has worked at grass-roots level preparing land claims and making cultural heritage reports to assist traditional owners in regaining their country. For over a decade he has also been a kind of art politician, assisting Indigenous Queenslanders gain their rights as artists as well as landowners. He was particularly active during the 1990s, organising conferences, exhibitions and associations of artists. Until that time there were no opportunities for Indigenous artists in Queensland to have their work exhibited and viewed not as souvenirs, but as contemporary art. The fact that Bell was an artist himself always remained more or less in the background. He says he hasn't painted seriously for ten years, having been fully occupied with clan responsibilities.

In 2002 he had a heart attack, and since then he's reorganised his priorities. This exhibition is his way of registering who he is in a visual, rather than purely political frame of reference. Most people with an awareness of Indigenous Queensland art know very well who Marshall is, but now we have something to look at, to remind us.

He describes himself as a community-trained artist. During the 1980s he would visit the Cherbourg Mission and paint artifacts with the artists there, as part of the process of friendly social interaction. Some of those artists, such as Robin O'Chin, played an important role in establishing a style of painting that was recognisable as Cherbourg art. It was familiar and meaningful to the people who lived there. It was a kind of art that was generally overlooked by the high-powered and high-financed white art world, and it was therefore free to do what it wanted (which, aside from totemic significance, was to give pleasure and make a bit of money out of tourists). Ornamental boomerangs and painted wall racks from Cherbourg were part of Australian popular culture of the 1950s and 60s, as were the ceramic plates and ashtrays decorated with Aboriginal figures that proliferated around the country at the same time. The big difference was that the picaninny pottery was part of white popular culture, and Cherbourg art is the popular culture of Indigenous Queensland.

Marshall Bell's paintings are also art of the people. He's too educated and too astute to overlook the fact that, as Deborah Bird Rose points out, the colourful home décor aspect of his work speaks volumes about the colonial strategy of editing Indigenous people out of the picture by turning them into decorative details. These pictures are pretty, but they're also honest. They reflect the complex pattern of histories, influences, hopes, fears and disasters that produced them.

The kangaroos that fill the pictures make a clan connection with his father. There are other, more subtle, references to traditional culture too, such as the bands of concentric lines that sometimes surround a figure like vibration waves, echoing the parallel lines drawn into the ground for ceremonies. The paintings aren't, however, trying to look Aboriginal. They just are. Another part of Bell's family history is his mother's cake-baking business, and the pastel colours, curving lines and rows of rosettes that the young Marshall carefully applied when helping out in his Mum's shop have their own place in his background as an artist.

Beneath the surface of these exceptionally skilled colour compositions there is sometimes a far less attractive story. Only a close examination reveals what's really happening in the background. The kangaroos are not always arranged in sinuously decorative formations. Aggression and sexual abuse are a hidden part of the picture. Bell refers to the destructive effects of the breakdown of traditional structures in Indigenous Australian society. His paintings are deliberately layered. The sophistication of the optical tricks that cause one layer to dissolve into another is impressive as painting technique, but possibly more important as an expression of the meaning of the work. Disturbing facts are embedded almost invisibly, concealed in elaborate patterns of line and colour. Ironically, the precise chromatic basis of these paintings often recalls the designs used to test for colour blindness.

The dot patterns of desert painting that started to become internationally recognisable 30 years ago were also a form of concealment, used initially to hide information that was secret-sacred. As with Marshall Bell himself, there's more to his paintings than meets the eye.

Tim Morrell



Marshall Bell
Big Fish 2006
183 x 121 cm
acrylic on canvas



Marshall Bell
Preston / Bell 2006
183 x 121 cm
acrylic on canvas

Marshall Bell's Decolonisation of Australia, and Earth

I am sitting on a sandhill in south west Queensland, having visited a 'native well'. Around me on the ground are stone flakes and cores. All through two days of driving the Aboriginal people themselves have been strangely invisible, although I know that Aboriginal people live here in these regions. In a number of places in NSW people announce their presence with pride. Cross the border into Queensland, though, and one could imagine travelling through a deathscape. Through the dingo barrier fence, across Durack country, across the Cooper where Clancy of the Overflow travels in ballad and memory, through drought and green pick, cattle, sheep, emus and kangaroos, Aboriginal people are not readily visible. One sees traces of former presence everywhere, and one knows how tough life for Aboriginal people can be in Queensland, and the story of violence rises up all over the place. This is a story of conquest and death, of Settlers' determination to occupy and displace, often to destroy, as Pamela Watson describes in terrible detail in her book *Frontier Lands and Pioneer Legends*.¹

Questions are both vivid and confronting in this beautiful country: how shall we make peace after all this violence? How shall we find a moral presence for ourselves in these places? Decolonisation is an answer to such awful questions, and as I have said before, I mean the word in a strong sense to include the unmaking of colonising regimes of violence and the search for moral relationships with people and country we have damaged.²

Marshall Bell paints answers to these devastating questions. His art incorporates history, myth, creation, indigeneity and colonisation into patterns that connect with his own life history, memories, and visions. These paintings offer a profound and complex sense of how the trajectory of colonising death work can be transformed.

One series works with the Christian story of the crucifixion and brings these themes to life in a way that for me is intensely compelling. The kangaroo is omni-present in Marshall's work and is central to these paintings too. The creature evokes indigenous animals, plants and ecosystems, and suggests immediately the kinship with nature that is the hallmark of Aboriginal cultures throughout Australia. The story is set against the kangaroo skin blanket pattern that Marshall brings into his work as part of his people's history, and it includes the vase and the kangaroo 'flowers' that appear and reappear in Marshall's work as part of his own life history. These kangaroo flowers speak to the captivity of assimilation. Pressed into shapes that iconically signal aboriginality to a colonising consciousness, the kangaroos are displayed in a vase as form of 'home décor'. As Nic Thomas reminds us, 'the business of simultaneously exhibiting and exterminating natives is consistent with the enduring invasive logic of a settler-colonial nation'.³ The apparent triviality of flowers and vase is undermined at every moment by the implicit violence that underwrites it.

The central kangaroo figure speaks to country, belonging, and endurance. In Aboriginal country humans and all the other-than-human living creatures share a moral order based in kinship and connectivity. What happens to one type of living being has effects that flow on to other types of living things. Marshall's kangaroo lives this connectivity, and when we see him or her crucified, head hung low in agony and sorrow, we see the killing work that has been wrought upon indigenous living beings, all of them.

Death is not the final story, not for Christians and not for Marshall. Cruelty calls forth compassion. Kangaroo angels release the suffering Kangaroo, and we see the vase tipping over to release the flowers. This painting links compassion with liberation, giving a strong political edge to the iconicity of caring angels. Marshall presses us to consider how the release from suffering is a social and political project in which all creatures may be able to experience an end to cruelty.

The final painting in this series stuns the Christian story with an Indigenous sensitivity. It offers a vision of reconciliation that includes Australian colonising history and that also speaks to Christianity globally. In this final work, the crucified kangaroo is resurrected, finding new life in the living creatures here on Earth. This is a story of how Earth is decolonised, how the sacred is restored to life on Earth, restored to Nature, to kinship within Nature, and to a moral order of the here and now of our lives as we live them here on this ground.

In the logic of connectivity, the resurrection is a continuing event. Thus the series offers a story that has a beginning, middle and end, and at the same time, like Dreaming stories, is always happening, always here with us. This profound vision offers a mythic foundation through which we could understand that we are called to decolonise our relationships with the natural world, making peace with indigenous plants and animals along with making peace with Aboriginal people.

The implications for Christianity are equally profound. The French political scientist Marcel Gauchet develops the argument that the disenchantment of Earth reaches its fulfilment Christianity. In his view, monotheism opens the way for a progressive separation of the divine from the world. Jesus is the announcement of God's absolute otherness, the logic being that there is no way for God to connect with us other than to take on our shape and being. Jesus, in this analysis, became necessary because of an infinite distance separating Earth from the divine. At the same time that God is shown to be infinitely distant from Earth, Earth is bereft of divinity. Even Jesus, the mediator, died and left Earth to dwell in the infinitely distant Heaven.⁴

Marshall Bell reverses the process through which Earth is emptied of the sacred. He brings the sacred back into Earth, resurrecting the dead here in the world of living beings. Nature is the divine, and gives rise to kinship's on-going creation. In Nature we find our history, our kin, our purpose, our future, and answers to our questions.

The term 'redemptive history' has acquired negative connotations in these disenchanted times, and yet it seems to gesture toward Marshall's work. Looked at in terms of redemption, we see that his Christian series both inscribes a form of redemption, and at the same time challenges Christian or millennial notions of redemption. In millennial thought, whether sacred or secular, the world will be redeemed through some event that overturns the existing order and brings about a reformed, refashioned, renewed humanity and Earth. The trajectory is linear, the future is the goal, and violence is implicit in the process of overturning the existing order.

Marshall Bell's profound gifts include an escape from the linear dynamic of future oriented redemption. In his non-linear dynamics, the possibilities for changed relationships are around us all the time. The project may not be so much about redemption as about re-creation – about making peace, and learning reverence. This is a message that has special pertinence for reconciliation in our Settler society. For us, to learn reverence for the country we have come to call home requires us to acknowledge violence and to find ways to make peace. It is in this context of peace making that I am immensely grateful to Marshall Bell for his gifts: his talent, his vision, his resilience and his generosity.

Deborah Bird Rose

1. Watson, P 1998, *Frontier Lands & Pioneer Legends: How Pastoralists gained Karuwali Land*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

2. Rose, D. 2004 *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney.

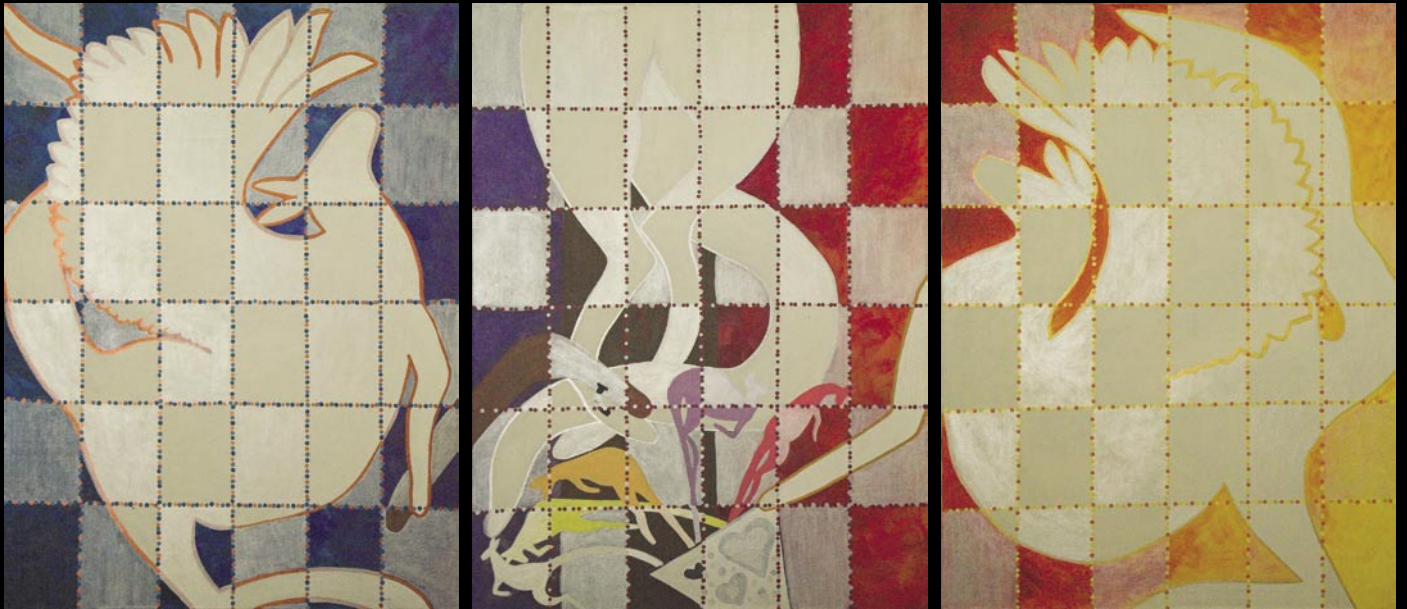
3. Thomas, N 1997, 'Home Décor and Dance: The Abstraction of Aboriginality'. In R. Coates & H. Morphy (eds),

In Place (Out of Time): Contemporary Art in Australia, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, pp. 24–28, quote on p. 28.

4. Gauchet, Marcel, 1999 *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.



Marshall Bell
Twilight 2006
151 x 91 cm
acrylic on canvas



Marshall Bell
The Da Vinci Code 2006
121 x 91 cm x 3
acrylic on canvas

