



GALLERIES PROGRAM 2012
COLOUR BY NUMBER
 DALE HARDING
 19 SEPTEMBER-6 OCTOBER
 CURATED BY TONY ALBERT

!Metro Arts

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Cover *Unnamed* (2012) Lead and steel wire. 35 x 26 x 3cm

1 / *Blakboy, blakboy, the colour of your skin is your pride and joy* (2012)
 Cotton thread, cloth, found timber frame. 26 x 34 x 2cm.

2 / *Inclinations of a receptive boy* (2012)
 Found tablecloth, cotton thread, timber, wax. 210 x 70 x 35cm

3 / *Breaking boundaries* (2012)
 Timber pegs, acrylic paint, surveyors tape. Dimensions variable

All images courtesy of the artist

THANK YOUS

Dale would like to thank Tony Albert for his unending generosity as a mentor and a friend, Dion and his family and friends. He would also like to acknowledge and thank the community of artists under whom he served his apprenticeship.

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2 /

DALE HARDING COLOUR BY NUMBER

'I am the new blak' Dale Harding declares in one of his mounted cross-stitch works. Art school trained and urbane, living in Brisbane, but with roots that run deep to Bidjara and Ghungalu country in central Queensland, Harding is part of a new wave of Aboriginal artists, inspired by the achievements of an earlier generation of artists also working in metropolitan centres from the latter part of the 20th century. One of these artists, Destiny Deacon, is accredited with coining the term 'blak', recalling growing up in Melbourne being called a 'black c____' and deciding to take the 'c' out of black. A work with the title *Blak lik mi* (1991) by Deacon was first shown at an Aboriginal artists cooperative in Sydney. Boomalli, established in 1987 by ten artists, means 'to strike, to make a mark'. It is this spirit of defiance and innovation that characterises the work of contemporary Indigenous artists, a spirit which courses through the work in this exhibition.

Harding served his apprenticeship with some of these cultural harbingers, including Richard Bell, Jennifer Herd and Tony Albert – all members of Brisbane's ProppaNOW collective. Albert, who has curated Harding's graduate exhibition 'Colour by number', exemplifies the role these artists play in cultivating emerging practitioners.

'Colour by number' examines the policy of the Australian government to attach numbers to Aboriginal children and to grade them on the tonality of their skin. Harding's grandmother was given the new name W38. In *unnamed* (2009), this ID is carved into a lead facsimile of a 'king plate'. The 'W' signified the community of Woorabinda and 38 was the identification number assigned. These numbers were used as identification in official records documenting the determination of whether the child was adopted out to a white family or housed on a mission or contracted out to domestic services. The following testimony – which features in *Of one's own country* (2011) – graphically describes the fate to which these girls and young women were consigned.



3 /

Annual Reports from the 1920s show that demand for Aboriginal children and women contracted into domestic service outstripped supply so the government continued to send youngsters to friendless positions. It knew employment exposed them to the dangers of unscrupulous men: it knew compliance with regulations was largely a matter of trust because there were so few checks on girls dispatched to country areas. The so-called Protection Acts provided little deterrence to assaults on Aboriginal women and girls who had reached puberty. Yet it continued to feed the demand – described as strong for 'young girls fresh from school – and for young mothers with babies, at a discount.'⁽¹⁾

Harding's incisive homilies deftly intertwine the lives of his matrilineal family on the frontier with his own contemporary experience. In employing a medium and vernacular commonly associated with the 'CWA set' Harding, like Destiny Deacon, subverts the sanctity of the domestic. Oversized needles pointedly critique the exclusive entitlement to home comforts enjoyed by the employers of a generation of enslaved domestics, while the tightly coiled ball of crinkly steel evokes the sexual exploitation that often went hand in hand. Harding reminds us that, in living memory, generations of our people were denied the basic human right to a home and family – 'in one's own country'.

HETTI PERKINS

Resident Curator, Bangarra Dance Theatre
Sydney, August 2012

(1) Rosalind Kidd,
Trustees on Trial: recovering the stolen wages,
Aboriginal Studies Press, 2006