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The Minimalism, Hessian and Steel of Dale Harding.

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Dale Harding's *Of One's Own Country* (2011) is a ball of old fashioned steel wool, designed to unravel from the wall over the course of its exhibition, a single strand falling onto a narrow plinth below. There is not much to this humble performance, one that is easily lost amidst the general noise and scale of contemporary exhibitions. The work, according to Harding, has its roots in some of the darkest parts of Australian history. The ball of wool is designed to look like pubic hair, and commemorates the experience of Aboriginal women in domestic service in Queensland. Harding's mother, grandmother and great-grandmother worked under the infamous *Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of Sale of Opium Act* of 1897, an act that was not much short of genocidal in its treatment of Aboriginal people.

In *Breaking Boundaries* (2012) a row of partly burned surveyors' pegs sit like giant matches along the wall. Here too the artist speaks of his work as both personal and historical. The pegs refer to Harding's childhood on a farm, and their place in marking out the land for profit. *Bright Eyed Little Dormitory Girls* (2013), a series of miniature hessian sacks with collars sewn into them, could well be mistaken for oversized dolls clothes, their petite forms showing off Harding's craft skills. Here too the artist uses the work as a means of explaining his own family history, and Aboriginal history more generally. His grandmother was forced to wear a hessian sack as a punishment for resisting the sexual advances of a whitefella. Harding has attempted to redeem this horrific experience in the work, by sewing soft, feminine collars onto this tough material.

What sense can we make of this disjunction between these artworks and their explanation? How is it that these works appear to sit so easily within a contemporary art context, while their artist's reasoning proves both so crucial to understanding them and disruptive of their easy place within

contemporary art? One reason comes from the artist himself, who explains that:

These histories and these pieces of inherited knowledge often don't extend beyond the family unit and the wider Aboriginal community and I consider it a privilege to be able to use my Nanna's stories to be able to try and lessen some of that burden on the Aboriginal community and our families. They are really nasty, often hurtful stories and so I consider it is quite important work to try and unearth these stories and share them with the wider community and make sure they aren't just carried on the backs of us.'

Certainly there is a sensitivity at work in Harding's translation of these histories. Soft wool is sewn onto the hessian collar of *Bright Eyed Little Dormitory Girls*, as if the artist and grandson is trying to atone for the horrors of the past.

Yet there is also something all too self-contained about Harding's explanation, as there is for much of the reasoning behind Aboriginal art. For there is more at stake in an aesthetic experience than the redemption of history, more at play in creation than either the personal or the political. The disjuncture between an artwork and its information goes back at least as far as the 1950s, when the New York School of painting marked out the end of Anglo-American modernism. Who could say what a Jackson Pollock, let alone a Barnett Newman or a Clyfford Still painting is really about? Coming in their wake, conceptualism and minimalism took advantage of the vacuum in artistic meaning that the New York School created. Their strategies for installation and information, their use of everyday materials and language, put the impetus for interpreting art into question.

Conceptualism and minimalism remain two of the more dominant languages of contemporary art, but they remain apolitical

languages. In his work, Harding uses their strategies to introduce new issues, new problems to the institutions that exhibit them, without falling into ambivalence. Harding's significance lies in the way that he turns the conceptual/minimal paradigm into Aboriginal art, and conversely, politicises conceptual and minimal strategies for art making.

In Australia, two events were pivotal in both inaugurating and separating Aboriginal art and the sophisticated kind of installation art are familiar with today. In 1968, the National Gallery of Victoria featured a radical display of abstract geometric painting in its exhibition *The Field*, a display that would introduce Australia to American style radicalism in art. Three years later, in 1971, the Papunya painter Kaapa Tjampitjinpa shared the Caltex Art Award with another, non-indigenous artist in Alice Springs. These events effectively marked the institutional beginnings of two art movements that would come to dominate the Australian artworld over the coming decades, and yet remain distinct from each other in every other way.

Harding's work does not synthesise these different movements, or resolve the rift between them, but instead emphasises their distance from each other. The way that he creates a disjuncture between clean installation works and Aboriginal information begins to unravel the doubled pretence by which contemporary art came into being in Australia. The journey to visibility in the artworld was much harder for Aboriginal artists than those following in the footsteps of 'The Field'. For by the 1970s in both New York and mainstream Australia, art had come to be considered to be a harmless occupation. In New York in 1970, Hans Haacke installed a polling booth in the seminal 1970 conceptual exhibition *Information* at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). The booth protested the conservatism of Nelson Rockefeller, who was not only running again for Mayor of New York, but was also a billionaire trustee of MOMA itself. Yet by this stage, art

had lost its avant-garde qualities, its ability to stage political dissent. For while in the 1930s, Rockefeller had censored and then destroyed a Diego Riviera mural that featured a picture of the revolutionary Vladimir Lenin, by 1970 Rockefeller was no longer concerned about art's powers, and let the Haacke installation sit.

The equivalent of Rockefeller's censorship in Australian history took place in 1974, when the Honey Ant mural that sat on the walls of the school at the Papunya settlement was painted over. The destruction of this collaboration by the old men of the settlement symbolises the way that desert iconography was still regarded as politically dangerous by white Australia even as late as the 1970s. Since this moment, information has been of the utmost importance in the Aboriginal art movement. Papunya Tula Artists began to disseminate what are now known as certificates of authenticity, documenting the meaning of the paintings they sold, in order to preserve the political valence of their imagery. Kaapa's painting *Gulgardi* (1971), winner of the Caltex Art Award, became known as *Men's Ceremony for the Kangaroo, Gulgardi*. The politics of Aboriginal art became located not so much in the artworks themselves, which were often visually unparseable to white viewers, but in the information accompanying the artworks. And this information came with a moral authority, from people who had experienced the brunt of settler violence and their families.

It is through this multiple history of contemporary art, which appeared in Alice Springs, New York and Sydney at about the same time, that it is possible to think through Harding's work. For he is one of many young Aboriginal artists who have been through the art school system, who have learned the visual languages of a post-conceptual era of contemporary art, and uses these languages to point back to Aboriginal information. For Harding this information is the history of his family, and the history of Queensland. In Harding's earlier *Unnamed* (2009) this

information is more visible in the art itself. Here he recreates a breast plate or king plate that was worn by Harding's grandmother until her late teens at the Woorabinda Government Settlement. Harding's great-grandmother also wore one. These women were known by a code that was written into these plates, and on *Unnamed* the artist has beaten W38, his grandmother's code, into the metal.

Yet even here, despite its thorough Aboriginality, Harding's work is not unlike that of the very non-Aboriginal New York practices of the 1960s. The minimalists Carl Andre and Donald Judd used bricks and metal in homage to the industrial base of the American economy. These artists recognised that art should be sufficient to the silos, skyscrapers and smoke stacks all around them. Harding is also embedded in a history of materials, using hessian, metal and wire that runs through the labour and race history of settler Australia. The vintage steel wool in *Of One's Own Country* recalls the experience of scrubbing and servitude, while the hessian of *Bright Eyed Little Dormitory Girls* is tied to children and sheep, colonial schools and shearing sheds. Yet these works also carry with them the ambivalences of minimalism, and remind us that galleries themselves are still cleaned by people who work with steel wool, people whose labour is not discontinuous with the Aboriginal labour of the 19th and 20th centuries. Just as the minimal revolution in American art aspired to the brute magnificence of American industry, so Harding's work commemorates working lives in the margins of Australian society.

¹ Interview with Dale Harding. GOMA TV. <<http://tv.qagoma.qld.gov.au/2013/05/29/dale-harding-artist-interview/>>. Accessed 30 January 2014.



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Dale Harding.
Unnamed, 2012.

Lead and steel wire, 26 x 35 x 3 cm.
Queensland Art Gallery Collection.
Courtesy of the artist.

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bright eyed little dormitory girls, 2013,
approx. 190 x 35 x 3cm.
Hessian sack, mohair wool.
Image courtesy of the artist