

Bindi Cole  
"Not Really Aboriginal"







The 2008 Next Wave Festival is delighted to present *“Not Really Aboriginal”*, a major new photographic project by Bindi Cole. A deeply personal body of work which also resonates across the broader landscape of Australian culture, *“Not Really Aboriginal”* unsettles prevalent assumptions about race and identity at a pivotal moment in our cultural history.

The exhibition arises from Bindi’s experience of being light-skinned and Aboriginal, and the surprising and somewhat shocking responses she has experienced throughout her life upon the revelation of this fact. The 2008 Next Wave Festival is themed *Closer Together*, and *“Not Really Aboriginal”* subtly but powerfully responds to this theme by revealing some uncomfortable truths about the fundamental disconnection between who we are—the communities and identities by which we shape our sense of self—and how the prevailing culture attempts to place and define us. In revealing this disjunction, Bindi’s work exposes the latent and unspoken power dynamics of Australian culture in the here and now.

In the year of the Federal Government’s landmark apology to the Stolen Generations, *“Not Really Aboriginal”* is a pertinent reminder that ‘black’ and ‘white’ are increasingly redundant terms in addressing the complexity of our national history—and that issues of dispossession run far deeper than skin.

I would like to acknowledge the hard work and support of Next Wave Associate Producer Lionel Austin, who initiated this project and has worked on its development with dedication and sensitivity. Jirra Lulla Harvey has written an incisive and illuminating catalogue essay; and CCP’s Karra Rees and Naomi Cass have been warm and valued collaborators for both Bindi and Next Wave. Funding from the City of Melbourne, City of Yarra and the Australia Council for the Arts has provided vital support to the production of Bindi’s work. Most of all, my sincere thanks are due to Bindi Cole for the inspiring energy, drive and thoughtfulness with which she has created this exhibition.

Jeff Khan  
Artistic Director  
2008 Next Wave Festival

*White Christmas #2*  
2008 25.5 x 20 cm  
pigment print



A Minstrel Legacy:  
Typecast in Indigeneity

An Aboriginal character made an appearance; his name was Native and he was played by a white man in Blackface.

That Blackface is still available is in itself shocking. Bindi Cole found the tins, labelled *Minstrel Black* and *Negro Brown*, at a Melbourne makeup supplier. The survival of these relics is a telling sign that in many ways, the Minstrel plays on.

Minstrel shows were at one point the most popular form of entertainment in the United States of America and by the mid 1800s had become an international sensation. As well as being popular in Australia, Canada and New Zealand, they found a colonial audience in India, Jamaica, Nigeria and South Africa.<sup>1</sup> Each country incorporated its own racism and as the popularity of minstrelsy spread, so too did the cultural stereotypes it projected.

With the advantage of hindsight minstrel caricatures are now accepted to say little about Blackness and a lot about the anxieties of white culture makers. Uncle Tom caricatures attempted the emasculation of proud Black men, Mammi absolved guilt over slavery and the hypersexual tragic Mulatto (with the vices of both races but the virtues of neither) worked to excuse the sexual assault of Black women. That these American stereotypes would be embraced in Australia is not surprising. We too had muscular Black man, working the land with apparent ease. We too had slavery; young girls employed as domestics in well-to-do white families, young girls that mysteriously fell pregnant with light-skinned children. These typecasts, created by white culture makers for white audiences, provide deep insight into the colonial need to differentiate one's white self from the Black Other.

Minstrelsy misappropriated cultural signifiers from across the world; African body language, West Indian dialects, Australian dances – it stole a bit here, and a bit there. In Australian minstrelsy Aboriginal characters were redefined according to this global typecasting. No longer were they Yorta Yorta or Wathaurung, they were simply the Black Other. In being relegated to this position Aboriginal characters (and the people they supposedly depict) become laden with cultural stereotypes from across the ages and the seas. American and British minstrelsy was based on centuries of racism towards people of African and Caribbean descent; when Blackface hit our shores there was a substantial bank of racial stereotypes that aided in the portrayal/betrayal of a newly colonised people.

Henry Melville's *Bushrangers* (1834) is commonly regarded as the first play written and

#### NATIVE

Me want baccy and bredley – me no long time – me got very old blanket.

#### ELLEN

Well blackey, you shall have both, if you will dance a corroboree?

#### NATIVE

He, he! Corroboree?

#### ELLEN

Yes! Corroboree. No baccy without corroboree.

Native then sang and danced a dance that had little resemblance to any corroboree.<sup>2</sup> It was early colonial discourse that created Australia's most prevalent racial stereotype—the Black beggar. Despite the free land, cheap labour and stolen wages we have always been represented as a financial burden on white Australia.

Charles Chauvel's assimilationist tale *Jedda* (1955) was the first Australian film in which Aboriginal actors were cast as Aboriginal characters. The sexually charged character of Marbuk was played by Bob Wilson "a true blue-black" said Elsa Chauvel, Charles' wife and working partner, "The darkest shade of Australian native" one who "could climb a tree as swiftly and nimbly as a chimpanzee."<sup>3</sup> Interestingly Half-Cast Joe, the narrator and male lead, was played by a white actor in Blackface.

What particularly interested me is the assumption that white actors have the right to play Black characters, and in doing so have the right to classify Black racial identity. Throughout Australian history white culture makers, politicians and academics have assumed this very right to decide *our* Aboriginality.

The 1886 *Victorian Aborigines Protection Act* is an extraordinary example. This legislation categorised us, divided us and planted seeds of misconception that continue to grow and inform contemporary non-Indigenous ideas of what it means to be *Really Aboriginal*.

The Act expelled all those of mixed racial decent under the age of 35 from state-run missions. It was designed to halve government expenditure and to stop the resistance movement, for the government believed only people with some white blood would be intelligent enough to run successful campaigns<sup>4</sup>.



The Act classified mixed race Aboriginals as *half-castes*. But re-classified them as *Aboriginal* if they continued to associate too closely with others classified as *Aboriginal*, if they were married to someone classified as an *Aboriginal*, or if they were unable to earn their own living as a *half caste*—in other words, if they failed to perform what was viewed as an *almost white* identity they were reclassified as being Black.

The Board for the Protection of Aborigines strictly controlled the marriages of Aboriginal people, because as Reverend Alexander Mackie from Coranderrk station said in 1882 "*If you marry a half-caste to a white the succeeding race will approach nearer to the whites. If you marry a full black to a white you increase the number [of] aboriginals*". The Act also deemed interracial marriage as being between *full-bloods* and *half-castes*, definitions so arbitrary that the age of a spouse and the date of a marriage could define a person's race.<sup>5</sup>

The underlying intention was for light skinned Aboriginals to assimilate and disappear, because the government assumed that the darker skinned population would simply die out. As the Board boasted in 1884, "*all responsibility of the Government... would cease --finality being thus attained*".<sup>6</sup>

What the government didn't count on was cultural resistance. What they didn't realise was that Aboriginality has never been about skin colour. Before colonisation Yorta Yorta people were the colour of Yorta Yorta people. Wathaurung people were the colour of Wathaurung people. We were never Black before white people sailed in. It was a colonial need to reaffirm whiteness that started this preoccupation with skin colour. Kinship, culture, that's what makes us *Really Aboriginal*.

As Bindi Cole's portraits illustrate, there is a persistent expectation for us to live up to the criteria imposed upon us. Some would say the Board's dream was realized; that there is now a race of white Aborigines. We have white skin, we can speak white languages, we even wear clothes designed for white people. This must be terrifying for those who still feel a need to differentiate themselves from the Black Other. How will they categorise this new breed of Blackfella?

They will shrug their shoulder and say, "But you are *Not Really Aboriginal*."

And the Minstrel plays on.

Jirra Lulla Harvey

<sup>1</sup> Gilbert, Helen. "Black and White Re(a)d All Over Again: Indigenous Minstrelsy in Contemporary Canadian and Australian Theatre". *Theatre Journal* 55.4, 2003. p. 683.

<sup>2</sup> Miller, Benjamin. "The Mirror of Whiteness: Blackface in Charles Chauvel's *Jedda*". *JACSAL Special Issue 2007: Spectres, Screens, Shadows, Mirrors*. The University of New South Wales. 2007. p. 142

<sup>3</sup> McQueen, Humphrey. "True Colours". *The Age Review*, Saturday, January 8, 2005. p. 1

<sup>4</sup> Harvey, Kate. "The Flood of Legislation". *Aboriginal Elders' Voices: Stories of the 'Tide of History'*, ACES - Aboriginal Community Controlled Elders Service. 2003. p. 182.

<sup>5</sup> Ellinghaus, Katherine. "Regulating Koori Marriages: The 1886 Victorian Aborigines Protection Act". *Journal of Australian Studies*, March 2001. p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Ellinghaus, Katherine. "Regulating Koori Marriages: The 1886 Victorian Aborigines Protection Act". *Journal of Australian Studies*, March 2001. p. 22.

Cover  
*Warre Beal Yallock*  
2008 130 x 94 cm  
pigment print on rag paper

Inside  
*Wathaurung Mob*  
2008 130 x 94 cm  
pigment print on rag paper

## "Not Really Aboriginal"

Does dark skin make you black or light skin make you white? When Bindi Cole tells people that she is Aboriginal, so many of them respond by saying, "Not really Aboriginal". What is Aboriginal? According to most white experts, it's a black person who lives in a remote community, has social issues and claims benefits that are way above what they deserve. So, being white, fairly socially adjusted and living in an urban area in Victoria, where does Cole fit in?

"I've always been told that I was Aboriginal. I never questioned it because of the colour of my skin or where I lived. My Nan, one of the Stolen Generation, was staunchly proud and strong. She made me feel the same way. My traditional land takes in Ballarat, Geelong and Werribee and extends west past Cressy to Derrinallum. I'm from Victoria and I've always known this. All the descendants of traditional Victorian Aboriginal people are now of mixed heritage. I'm not black. I'm not from a remote community. Does that mean I'm not really Aboriginal? Or do Aboriginal people come in all shapes, sizes and colours and live in all areas of Australia, remote and urban?"

"*Not Really Aboriginal*" explores how black you need to look to be considered Aboriginal and how white Aboriginals cross the cultural divide. Ultimately, it is a celebration of Aboriginality in all its forms.

Bindi Cole

*White Christmas #7*  
2008 25,5 x 20 cm  
pigment prints



## Biography

Bindi Cole is a Melbourne-based, emerging photographer and artist. In 2007, she won the Victorian Indigenous Art Award for Photography and was also a finalist in both the National Photographic Portrait Prize (National Portrait Gallery, Canberra) and the 2007 William and Winifred Bowness Photography Prize (Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne). Cole's recent projects include a solo exhibition of her contemporary Indigenous portraits at the Koorie Heritage Trust, Melbourne entitled *Heart Strong*, and the photography and artistic direction of *Men In Black*, a calendar of elite Aboriginal sports stars.

In 2004, Cole completed a Diploma in Applied Photography at Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE (NMIT), and in 2008 she commenced a Bachelor of Visual Arts (Fine Arts) at Ballarat University. Cole has both Aboriginal and British heritage, and her work often focuses on exploration of identity.

Bindi Cole is represented by Boscia Galleries, Melbourne. [www.bosciagalleries.com](http://www.bosciagalleries.com)

## Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to the following people: my Dad, always my main subject, thank you for your enthusiasm and unending support; my fantastic family who so graciously let me find myself in them, Jasanne, Stephanie, Ashleigh, Carryn and Angelique; my main man and support, Ollie; my closest ladies Adel, Feigh, Joske and Christie who are the best; my sis, Jirra Lulla-Harvey, a shining light in the Melbourne community; and last but not least, Lionel Austin and Jeff Khan from Next Wave, Karra Rees and Naomi Cass from CCP, and Michele and Tony from Boscia Galleries.





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23 May -5 July 2008  
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Centre for Contemporary Photography is supported by the Victorian Government through Arts Victoria and is assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body. Centre for Contemporary Photography is supported by the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, an initiative of the Australian, state and territory governments. CCP is a member of CAOs Contemporary Arts Organisations of Australia.

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ISBN 978-0-9804454-0-4