



art

& Australia

Good, better, best

THE ART OF DANIE MELLOR

Djoun Mundine



The Scottish clan that I belong to or would belong to if it were now anything more than a sentimental myth ...

John McPhee¹

IN JOHN MCPHEE'S ACCOUNT of life on the small Scottish island of Colonsay, the narrator describes how seemingly every square inch of the island is seen, experienced and has a name. People are only described as 'local' if they have a family line of over 200 years of continuous residency.

For Aboriginal people the world begins with a creative spirit who meaningfully meanders across the ocean and land to see, experience and name in song and dance the various flora and fauna and forces of climate encountered, animating them and bringing them into existence. The chanting rituals practised today are to remember this action and reinvigorate those places and creative spirits. Naming is a serious moment in most societies and a prime feature of the colonisation process to re-order the world in the coloniser's own image. Aboriginal people see naming as bringing into being, as creating the world.

In the Australian art world today a newer generation of artists of mixed Aboriginal descent is striving to project, and to exact, an honesty in addressing their Aboriginal heritage. Recently a new series of paintings has come from the hand of dynamic Mackay-born, Sydney-based artist Danie Mellor. This follows on from Mellor's preoccupation with the impact wrought by Europe's Age of Enlightenment, which enveloped the eighteenth-century arrival of the British on the Australian continent. The Enlightenment is also called the Age of Reason, when westerners began to challenge the existence and authority of God. It was also the time of western exploration, of colonialism and the slave trade. A time perhaps when humankind forgot God and adopted greed and inhumanity on a grand scale. When the British came to Australia seeking an Arcadia, an unspoiled harmonious wilderness, they instead found a number of curiosities to blemish their view of purity. How to deal with this? Murder and stealing and erasure.

A friend recently pointed out to me that the French word *meilleur* means 'best' or 'better'. As an artist Mellor appears to

create a benevolent binary of ideas: of those dealing with the earth and environment, and human knowledge and life; of two societies, colonial West and Aboriginal, and two secret societies of men, each holding esoteric knowledge and selectively transmitting it to the next generation.

Conducive to this transmission, Mellor's images are engaging, enjoyable and pleasurable in their reading. They are ordered, nostalgic and embedded with narrative. Mellor's work could be described as meticulous, extremely detailed and obsessive. But what in reality is the obsessiveness about – is it a search for 'the lost'? Is it the artist's personal loss or a form of the western 'paradise lost'? Can Mellor's 'loss' have meaning beyond the personal?

Part of the make-up of Mellor's art can be traced to the British arts and crafts movement of the late nineteenth century, to the ideas of John Ruskin and William Morris about simpler handmade forms. Yet Mellor's compulsive and sincere attention to detail, craftsmanship and refinement has led him in pursuit of his personal history and identity in a brutally honest way. Urbanisation can remove us from the landscape, limiting our view to a visual rather than 'holistic' sense. Cultural knowledge isn't an external event – it's tied up with language and identity and therefore with country.

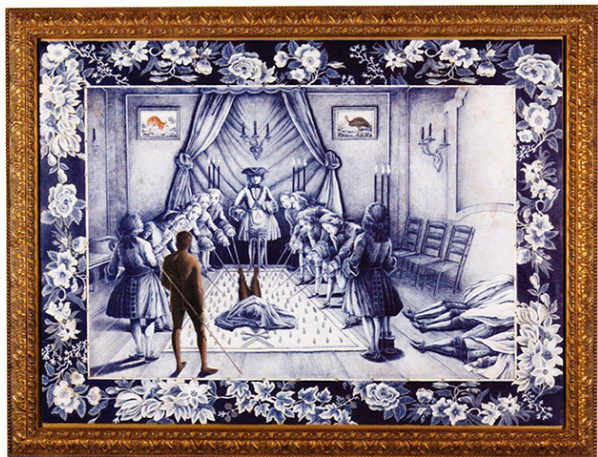
From initial visits around a decade ago, Mellor now regularly journeys to the country of his grandparent's people in the North Queensland rainforests to reconnect to his family history and to rediscover himself. His statement, 'When I saw that waterfall I had no fear', comes out of a revelatory time when Jirrbal elder Ernie Grant took Mellor to a waterfall, Bandy Bandy (Davidson Falls), the sacred creation place for Jirrbal people.

Country exists as a taxonomy that encompasses the personal, the temporal and the physical. It is the embodiment of living people. As Simon Schama writes in *Landscape and Memory* (1995), borders 'acted as a kind of visual prompt to the attentive [audience] that the truth of the image was to be thought of as

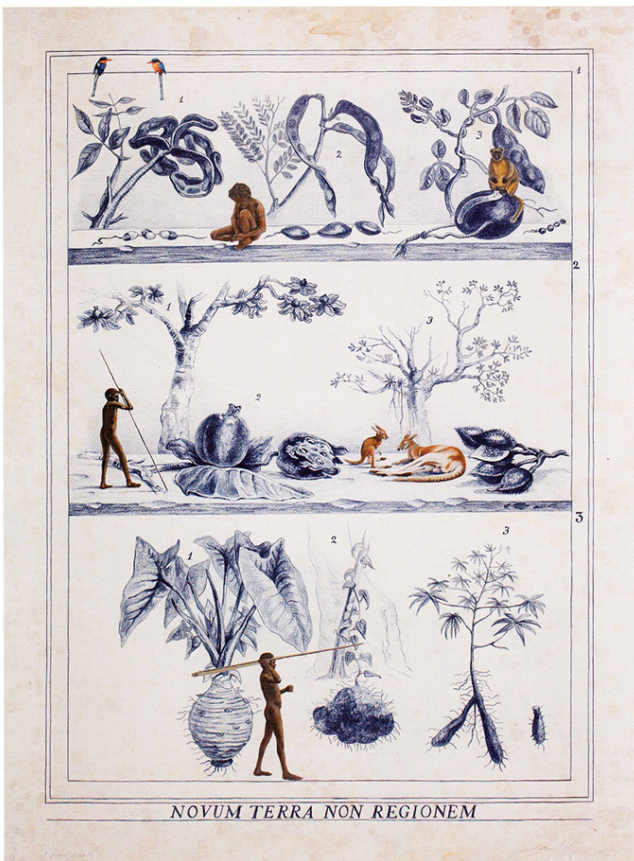
Materially cultured (an allegorical scene of a bastard history), 2009
Slipcast earthenware with taxidermy and neon sign, dimensions variable
Collection Shepparton Regional Art Gallery
Courtesy the artist

pages 122–3
Paradise generations, 2012
Pastel, pencil, glitter, Swarovski crystal and wash on Saunders Waterford paper
97.5 x 148 cm
Courtesy the artist





opposite
 A new earth, 2012
 Pastel, pencil and wash with glitter, and Swarovski crystal on
 Saunders Waterford paper, 98 x 76 cm
 Courtesy the artist



poetic rather than literal; that a whole world of associations and sentiments enclosed and gave meaning to the scene'.²

Landscape is interpreted, idealised and physically framed. All of Mellor's images are designed to reclaim and repossess. Says Mellor: 'I create an environment – it's about transformation – from "country" (Aboriginal) to "landscape" (colonial), urbanised through architecture'.³ His use of animals is tongue-in-cheek but also adheres to a type of 'truth' about Aboriginal people through language, to the idea of Aboriginal people being in harmony with nature.⁴ While koalas and kangaroos predominate in Mellor's work, they are there as interlopers. There are also parrots and emus but, given his north Queensland Aboriginal heritage, strangely no crocodiles.

Following the end of the Second World War, and well before Mellor's birth in 1971, the Woodlands movement of eastern Canada evolved as something distinct from other types of native art being produced such as western-coast woodwork, Inuit prints and sculptural pieces. The so-called spiritual 'woodlands' artwork was marked by compositions of animistic figures, transformative in vibrant colours, including blue.

Linguists tell us that they have failed to find a word for the colour 'blue' in any Aboriginal language. We know this colour exists – it is the colour of the sky and the ocean and a number of very important totemic bird species. But perhaps a different aesthetic view of the world exists here. Writer John von Sturmer suggests that the Aboriginal names for colours as recorded by colonial anthropologists may have actually been for the materials rather than the electromagnetic waves of the colour spectrum.

In past centuries, members of the fraternal Freemasonry organisation would mark their tracings on tavern floors where they would meet and carry out their rituals before the establishment of permanent lodges. The chalk they used was blue. These drawings would then be erased, a practice similar to the rituals of other

secret societies, including Aboriginal ones. Mellor sees the use of blue by the West as indicative of change and transformation for Aboriginal people as a result of colonialism. And yet, ironically, Mellor's association with blue comes from his use of eastern-inspired ceramics as much as anything else.

The aim of Mellor's expression is to give a sense of the complex narrative of history that contains deep within it an appreciation of how Aboriginal cultural knowledge is embedded in 'country' and our recognition of that. It is through our understanding of, and identification with, country, that we create our identity.

In Mellor's 'country' the people and, most of all, the animals are depicted as realistically as possible. They are the only reality as the landscape has changed all the time under colonising eyes.

- 1 John McPhee, *The Crofter and the Land*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1976, p. 3.
- 2 Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1995, p. 11.
- 3 Mellor in conversation with the author, 2012.
- 4 Before the 1967 referendum, Aboriginal people came under the Flora and Fauna Act.

pages 126–7, clockwise from top left

A subject of initiation (an unguarded moment), 2010
 Pencil, pastel, glitter, Swarovski crystal and wash on Saunders Waterford paper
 142 x 185 cm
 Courtesy the artist

Welcome to the lucky country, 2009
 Pencil, pastel, glitter, Swarovski crystal and wash on Saunders Waterford paper
 142 x 185 cm
 Courtesy the artist

Paradise garden (different country, same story), 2012
 Pastel, pencil, glitter, Swarovski crystal and wash on Saunders Waterford paper
 153 x 206 cm
 Courtesy the artist

Still waters run deep, 2012
 Pastel, pencil, glitter, Swarovski crystal and wash on Saunders Waterford paper
 153 x 225 cm
 Courtesy the artist