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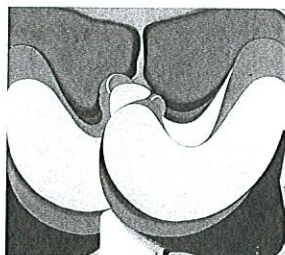
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Letters are welcome.



Marie Hagerty, *Duopoly II*, 2009, oil on linen, 170 x 190cm. Image courtesy the artist and Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne: www.kwgallery.com

Marie Hagerty is showing in the 2010 Capital Arts Patrons Organisation (CAPO) Auction, National Archives, Canberra, 27 November 2010. The auction is CAPO's major annual fundraiser, the proceeds of which are channelled into grants for ACT artists including the new Reading Room CAPO London Exhibition Award for an emerging artist (a six-week exhibition in Soho's Reading Room gallery). This year's artworks for auction may be viewed at: www.capo.org.au/capo-auction-galleries/



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# Living Deadly: haunted surfaces in contemporary art

JOHN CARTY

*LIVING DEADLY: HAUNTED SURFACES IN CONTEMPORARY ART*, exhibited at Melbourne's Monash Gallery of Art, was a unique experience in recent gallery-going: a show absolutely brimming with *ideas*. So many exhibitions are conceived and curated prosaically around a theme, a medium, a period, an artist, it is easy to forget that ideas – however awkward, inarticulate, unresolved – are the lifeblood of art. Through an eclectic array of Australian artists (Brook Andrew, Anne Ferran, John Gollings, Ruark Lewis, John Mawurndjul, Rod McNicol, eX de Medici, James Morrison and Robyn Stacey) *Living Deadly* ranges across mediums, cultures and categories in pursuit of an idea.

Art has an uncanny ability to re-animate the forgotten and the dead. Throughout the history of Western and non-Western traditions, art is often used to summon ghosts and memories, giving them a physical presence through palpable artistic sensations of colour, form and texture.<sup>1</sup>

*Living Deadly* explores the relationship between optical effects in art and the 'haunted' aspects of our reality. The exhibition was inspired by the way contemporary Aboriginal artists from Arnhem Land employ the *rarrk* technique of finely painted cross-hatching. Through a painstaking process of applying lines with fine brush of human hair, geometric or figurative ancestral designs are in-filled or surrounded by cross-hatching, the visual effect of which is to make the surface of the painting shimmer brilliantly.<sup>2</sup>

(T)he surface of the painting appears to move; it is difficult to fix the eye on a single segment without interference from others, indeed in some paintings the image seems unstable, almost threatening to leave the surface of the painting.<sup>3</sup>

For the Yolngu, and for Kuninjku artists such as John Mawurndjul, the effect of this shimmer is interpreted as a manifestation of ancestral power, of making the audience – whether in ceremony or art gallery – *sense* the presence of the ancestors. Cross-hatching, and the optics thereof, is not exclusive to the artists of Arnhem Land, but they have harnessed the aesthetic impact of that technique through *rarrk* in ways that illuminate the human impulse to animate surfaces, to make art, and to reveal the invisible aspects of our lives.

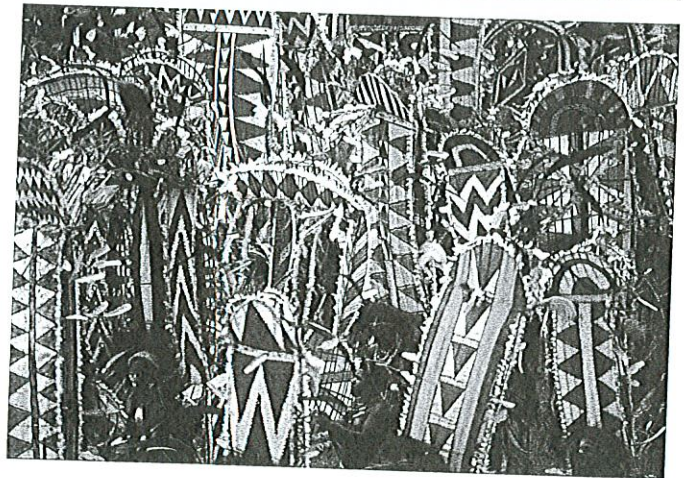
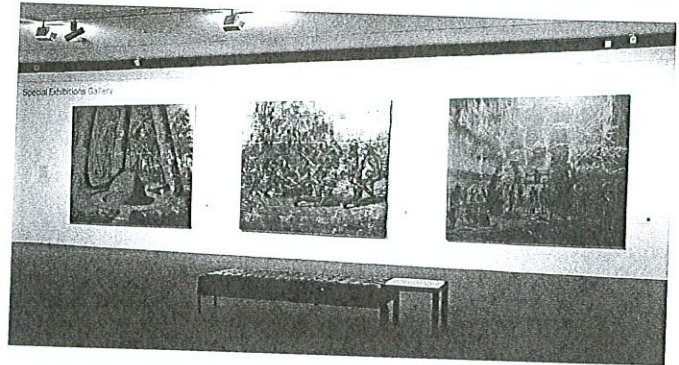
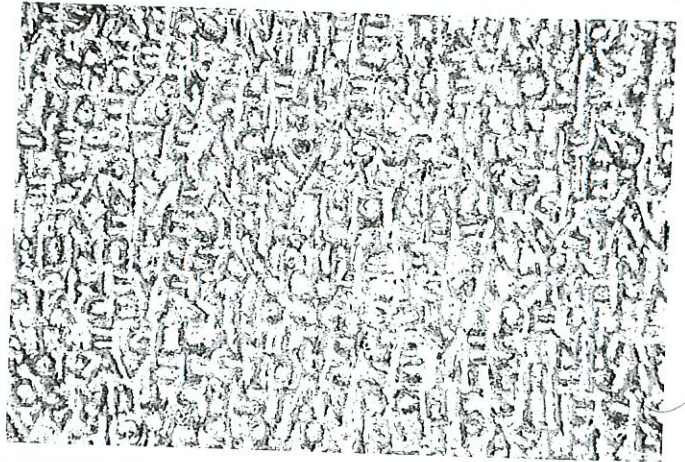
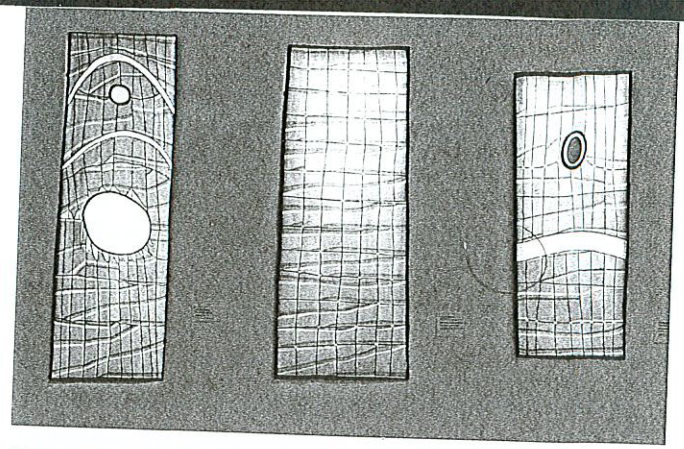
John Mawurndjul is the most celebrated exponent of *rarrk* in modern bark painting, the one who has experimented, abstracted and expanded its effect and affect most successfully into the arenas of contemporary art. *Living Deadly* sets his paintings up to act as a kind of Rosetta stone for the other artworks, the other shimmering surfaces, in the exhibition.

The show is not about Mawurndjul, nor is it about *rarrk* or cross-hatching. It is about, among other things, the



ways in which artists manipulate surfaces, exploiting the tensions between the visible and invisible, to capture and reorient our perceptions of the world. While Mawurndjul's sublime barks direct the audience to seek common depth in disparate surfaces, we are also invited to imagine and experience broad resonances, both with Mawurndjul's work and between the other artists in the show. You move around plenty of exhibitions in a certain direction, and find yourself at the end, where the story ends. But *Living Deadly* encouraged an unscripted, hummingbird-like transit between works; noticing the cross-hatching on the barrels of eX de Medici's drawn guns in *Tooth and Claw*, and then darting back to Mawurndjul's works in the previous room to meditate on the disparate cross-cultural geneses – in European drawing and engraving, and Yolngu body painting respectively – of that particular aesthetic device in human history.

For both Mawurndjul and de Medici, their respective practice emerges from designs inscribed on the most elemental of 'surfaces', the human body; the latter as a tattoo artist and the former as a ceremonial leader. This corporeal pretext of contemporary art resonates across the exhibition in the work of John Gollings and James Morrison in particular. Gollings, perhaps best known as an architectural photographer, is represented here through a series of photographs of 'sing sing' festivals taken in Papua New Guinea in the 1970s. Captivated by the aesthetic transformation of individuals into collective, pulsating ancestral presences, Gollings eschews documentary distance to capture the vital essence of the performance through immersed compositions. The photos selected here are animate surfaces unto themselves, trained neither on individuals nor the total performance, neither the part nor the whole; rather the lens captures jumbled swathes of bodies, painted, plumed and pulsating in a unitary energy.



screenprints, *The Island (I, IV, VI)*, are based on small 19<sup>th</sup> century etchings of Aboriginal people originally commissioned as part of William Blandowski's state-sponsored explorations of Victoria in the 1850s. Recovered from historical boxes in foreign museums, these colonial records of Aboriginal peoples and cultures return to us at a monumental, unsettling scale. Printed on coloured foil over linen, the reflective images become unstable, impatient; not only brought into the present but, through the effect of their flaking foil surfaces peeling into the room, made *present*.

Contrasted beside these images are the fantastical papier-mâché sculptures of Morrison's mythic tableau, *Worm Blood Dripping*. Just as *rarrk* or tattooing or ceremonial plumage empower human bodies, so too does Morrison seek to animate his figures – a devil, a primordial man – by obsessively inking their bodies into life. The crawling skins of these sculptures, the detail between the devil's toes, evince some compulsive creative force. But for all their exotic allusions, the terminal fact of those forms, the lone man with his detailed devil for company, is a stark presence in the gallery space beside the heaving communion exhibited in the Papuan performance. While in Gollings's photos the individual form is subsumed within the communal performance, embedded by a communal conviction, there are no such consolations in Morrison's figures. His devil, suspended from the ceiling and hovering over the human form, seems, with his suggestively raised figure, to be mutely reminding us of something.

That something finds myriad voice in *Living Deadly*, though perhaps most explicitly in Rod McNicol's photographs of grave stones, collectively titled *Memento mori* (which translates from Latin as 'remember your mortality', or 'remember you must die'). Again, it is through the aesthetics of surfaces that the artist plumbs these morbid depths. McNicol's images, cropped to frame the names and dates of the dead etched in perpetuity, suggest flesh-like textures in these portraits of stone. Mottled by mould and wind and sun and rain, even eternity here is subject to the weathering hand of time.

*Memento mori* alludes to a long tradition of meditating on mortality in Western art, as does the related genre of *vanitas* painting re-tailored by eX de Medici in her work *Tooth and Claw*. Common in northern European schools in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, *vanitas* paintings used images of skulls, timepieces and rotting fruit or flowers (among others) to signal the ephemeral emptiness (*vanitas*) of earthly existence and the certainty of death. Sitting adjacent to *Tooth and Claw* in the exhibition space, we are invited to imagine James Morrison's papier-mâché sculptures, empty and obsessively decorated, as contemporary kind of *vanitas*. Yet it is eX de Medici who explicitly references and regenerates these traditions, through tattooing aesthetics and contemporary symbolism, into her own elaborately inked surfaces. Wreathed in flowers and ribbons, flitting swallows, (military) stars, and skeletons, the barrels and bodies of guns gleam like polished skulls; seductive and sobering icons of another order of decay and sublimated social violence.

The very contemporary disquiet in *Tooth and Claw's* tangled surfaces is equally present in the work of artists such as Brooke Andrew and Anne Ferran who are dealing, ostensibly, with matters seemingly 'past'. Andrew's suite of



Andrew's works resonate with the glinting historical memory of Anne Ferran's *Lost to world* photos which are printed on reflective aluminium. Ferran's work has long been concerned with the missing pieces, in particular the haunted spaces left by women and children, in the Australian historical narrative. In the photographs exhibited in *Living Deadly*, Ferran documents the site of a 19<sup>th</sup> century women's prison and factory complex in central Tasmania. Now little more than a paddock, ambiguous puddles and mounds captured by the camera are all that remain to suggest the lives of forgotten women and the children they raised there.

These images were intriguingly displayed beside Mawurndjul's barks. While Ferran's content and form seem removed from the finely cross-hatched, ochre-on-bark of the Kuninjku tradition, as works of art they are strangely sympathetic; a grass mound in Ferran's photo evokes the hidden architecture of our past, of lives no longer visible, of histories grown over and yet still palpable in the story of the land. The metallic surfaces of Ferran's (and Andrew's) imagery work in the same way cross-hatching works in Mawurndjul's *rarrk*, giving rise to experiences of *affect* as opposed to simple optical effects; you don't grasp the 'meaning' of such artworks so much as the meaning grasps you. These animate surfaces allow their imagery to 'shimmer' out of prosaic representational functions to capture, disorient or 'haunt' the viewer.

A central preoccupation of *Living Deadly* seemed to be this relationship between optics and mortality. Optical effects are, simply put, a product of the eye's limitations. With *rarrk*, we experience a shimmering precisely because human vision has trouble differentiating colour and form in a field of variously hued striations (why TV news presenters should never wear pin-striped suits). Human vision can't grasp all kinds of visual information – we can't see colour in the dark, contours blur if things are too far away, and so on. These experiences of visual redundancy are, in effect, experiences of our own mortality. They point to the fact that vision, and visual comprehension, are limited by their materiality. Enter the human obsession with art. Art, among other functions, allows us to remember, to *see*, those things daily perception obscures: the dead beneath McNicol's headstones, the colonial history beneath Ferran's grass, the decimated cultures documented in Andrew's recovered etchings, the enduring spirits in the land of Mawurndjul's ancestors – they are all still there, here, manifest in the haunted surfaces of contemporary Australian art.

Beyond the optics and arguments and art, *Living Deadly* is – at its thematic core – a show about death in life, and the particular role that art has come to play in navigating our mortal shores. It is also a show philosophically concerned with the very notion of 'contemporary art' itself; there are many still who would not consider a bark painter from Arnhem Land to be a contemporary artist, yet nor would a commercial photographer like John Gollings normally fit the bill. *Living Deadly* isn't about this issue, but a sensitivity to

the debate clearly informs its choice of artists and artwork. The curator, Stephen Zagala, seems more interested in constructing contemporary art than simply displaying, describing or subscribing to it. It follows that these are not necessarily the best works by these artists, nor even their most recent (Ruark Lewis's work was produced in 1997, a Gollings's in 1973/4). They are works selected on criteria unconcerned with artist, oeuvre or categorical definitions; they serve an idea – not about what art *is*, but about what *does*, and why we need it done – that transcends, or maybe even haunts, the very notion of the contemporary. ☘

*Living Deadly: haunted surfaces in contemporary art*, curated Stephen Zagala, was exhibited at Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne, 21 July to 19 September 2010.

1. *Living Deadly: Haunted Surfaces in Contemporary Art*, exhibition leaflet, Monash Gallery of Art, 2010.
2. For an analysis of this effect in Arnhem Land art more broadly, see Howard Morphy's seminal article on Yolngu aesthetics: 'From Dull to Brilliant: the Aesthetics of Spiritual Power Among the Yolngu', Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton (eds), *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, England, 1992, pp. 181-208.
3. Howard Morphy, *Becoming art: exploring cross-cultural categories*, Berg, London 2007, p. 92.

**Dr John Carty** is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Art and Environment, Nevada Museum of Art, and is based at the Research School of Humanities and Arts, ANU. He is co-curator of *Yiwarra Kuju: The Canning Stock Route*, an exhibition currently on display at the National Museum of Australia, until 26 January 2011.

P9: Anne Ferran, *Untitled* from the series *Lost to worlds 2*, 2008, inkjet print on aluminium 120 x 120cm. Monash Gallery of Art, City of Monash Collection, acquired with assistance from the Robert Salzer Foundation 2009. Image courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne.

P10: Clockwise from top left: 1/ *Living Deadly* installation view, with (foreground) *Ja Morrison's Worm blood dripping*, 2009–10, paper-mâché and ink in three pieces courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery; and (right) John Gollings's *Goroka*, 1974 pigment inkjet prints on cotton paper 2008. All installation shots this article courtesy Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne. Installation photographs by Katie Tremseck.

2/ *Living Deadly* installation view of works by John Mawurndjul, left to right: *Dileb*, 2009; *Milmilingkan underneath Wak Wak*, 2009; *Milmilingkan underneath Wak V*, 2009; all natural ochres on eucalyptus tetradonta, all approx 180 x 70cm. Image courtesy the artist, Maningrida Arts and Culture, and Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne.

3/ Ruark Lewis, *Yellow water drawing*, 1997, oil on canvas. Image courtesy the artist and Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne.

4/ *Living Deadly* installation view of works by Brook Andrew: *Island I, IV, VI*, 2008, mixed media on linen, each 250 x 300 x 5cm. Image courtesy the artist and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne.

5/ John Gollings, *Goroka*, 1974, pigment inkjet print on cotton paper 2008, 59 x 85.9cm. Monash Gallery of Art, City of Monash Collection donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by John Gollings 2009. Image courtesy the artist.

P11: eX de Medici, *Tooth and claw*, 2008–9, pen, ink and mica on paper, 11 x 52.1cm. Image courtesy the artist and Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne.