

FORT GANSEVOORT



How to Write Painting: A Conversation about History Painting, Language, and Colonialism with Gordon Hookey, Hendrik Folkerts, and Vivian Ziherl

April 2017

The entwined edifice of history, the archive, and the written word have long been the subject of critique within Western theory. However, what might yet be learned from turning our attention to traditions of oral and image-based history-making in themselves? A lynchpin of these reflections as presented within documenta 14 is the pairing of cycles of history painting by Congolese painter Tshibumba Kanda Matulu (1947–ca. 1981) and Indigenous Australian artist Gordon Hookey (b. 1961).

At the invitation of curator Vivian Ziherl, Hookey visited Amsterdam in fall 2015 to view the painting series “101 Works” by Tshibumba, housed in the city’s Tropenmuseum, that together form a fractured image of the colonial and political history of the province of Katanga in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (since last year, this province no longer formally exists, having been split into the Tanganyika, Haut-Lomami, Lualaba, and Haut-Katanga provinces). Inspired by this encounter, Hookey responded in kind. Produced jointly for Ziherl’s “Frontier Imaginaries” project and documenta 14, Hookey’s “MURRILAND!” series (2016–) comprises a series of monumental paintings that capture the history of the northern Australian state of Queensland via a juxtaposition of Indigenous oral histories and the country’s still-prevalent colonial narrative.

Hookey, a Waanyi Aboriginal artist who grew up in Queensland and currently lives in its capital, Brisbane, often takes a confrontational tone in his highly political painting and sculpture, yet never without a sense of humor and a deep appreciation for beauty. Ziherl, raised in Brisbane and currently working from Amsterdam, is the founder of the roaming research and exhibition platform “Frontier Imaginaries.”

The following conversation, conducted in Kassel on April 12, 2016, explores Hookey’s artistic trajectory, what it’s like to work as an Indigenous artist in Australia, and the evolution of the country’s colonialist psyche, as well as how painting is politicized, how Hookey’s work has always been history painting, and how one can look at that genre anew, beyond the prevailing demarcations of art history.

FORT GANSEVOORT

—Hendrik Folkerts

Hendrik Folkerts: Gordon, you grew up in a rural area of Queensland, in the small town of Cloncurry, then moved to Sydney to go to art school in 1989. Starting out at school then, when people like Gordon Bennett—whose practice was seminal in exposing the complex construction of the exclusion of Aboriginal people from art-making in Australia—were just leaving the academy, what kind of context or legacy did you feel yourself presented with?

Gordon Hookey: An art practice is one of accumulation, where you build on what has been done in the past. Being an Aboriginal, a blackfella, as well as an artist, acknowledging the past is part of the protocol. I am only doing what I am doing and I have only got what I have as a result of those that went before. People like Gordon Bennett, Richard Bell, Kevin Gilbert, Lin Onus, and the members of the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative in Sydney—all those artists that have gone before have broken down barriers and made major inroads into urban-based political art.

Vivian Zihel: Prior to that moment, Aboriginal artists were largely framed as practitioners of a tradition within Australian and international art. So it was really at this moment in the late '80s that great convulsions occurred within the art-historical and political discourses. People like Gordon Bennett brought about a reckoning by insisting that his identity could not be defined by anybody else. He held a complex position, insisting on his Aboriginality, and yet refusing to be labeled an “Aboriginal artist.”

GH At one stage, all the work was about identity. Gordon, who passed away in 2014, was part of that wave. They addressed it and made it passé so we don't have to deal with it, and then we could go on building.

VZ Perhaps that work can be seen as part of a deep, long-standing practice of rebellious culture aimed at achieving cultural sovereignty? Earlier this year I had the honor of working with Richard Bell on a project centered on the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, which was erected opposite Old Parliament House in Canberra in 1972. Richard argues that the Tent Embassy stands as the greatest work of performance art in Australian history, linking the activists behind it to theater practices that were then emerging from the National Black Theatre in Redfern, a suburb of Sydney, and, in the United States, from Amiri Baraka's Black Arts Repertory Theatre in Harlem.

GH Oh, the audacity of that time! And the contradiction of the Indigenous people, us, having an embassy on our own land, in front of this big white parliament house, where in fact it should be the other way around.

HF Gordon, you can be quite confrontational in your work. Take, for example, the painting *Poor Fella U* (2012), at the top of which you write: “Sorry! / Fuck sorry! / Sorry can go git't fucked! / Give's the really lubbly, deadly, big, solid, golden sorry,” or a work in which images of political figures are painted on a punching bag.

FORT GANSEVOORT

GH My work is not only about resistance and protest, it's also about empowerment. If I am dealing with a situation where Aboriginal people are subjugated, dehumanized, or treated unjustly, I subvert the scenario, turn it around to make blackfellas strong, powerful, and victorious. That artwork you mention, *King Hit (For Queen and Country)* (1999), is a cathartic response—putting on boxing gloves and punching away the source of one's pain.

HF Can I ask you, Vivian, as someone who studied political science in Brisbane, and being part of a community that I assume would resist structural racism against Indigenous people: How is it for you relating to some of the issues that Gordon puts on the table, coming from a position of great political affinity but sometimes also having a problem speaking about it?

VZ Growing up in Queensland in the 1980s and '90s, we had no formal education about colonial history in Australia. The public view was that there had been no violent colonization, and that was the stance supported in my family and social life. Speaking personally, it took a dedicated process of coming to terms with certain truths to be in a position where I could work meaningfully in relation to images such as Gordon's. I guess it's this process that I continue through my curatorial work, in the hope that it contributes to a broader social project. It's an honor to now be able to work with an artist such as Gordon, and I'm grateful to have been professionally formed in a cultural space where figures such as Bell, Bennett, Fiona Foley, Vernon Ah Kee, and others have been such strong and locally felt presences.

HF For Indigenous artists in the situation that you are both describing, it must have been imperative to organize and find resistance in collectivity. Is that related to why you joined proppaNOW, Gordon?

GH proppaNOW is a political and artistic collective of Aboriginal artists that I belong to with six others, formed by Richard Bell, Jennifer Herd, Joshua Herd, and Vernon Ah Kee in 2003. The funny thing is that they always regarded me as part of the group, even before I knew about it. I was traveling Australia—Sydney, Melbourne—and they were in Brisbane, so we crossed paths occasionally. I had great conversations with them and things like that. Eventually, I ended up in Brisbane, and the group offered a sanctuary, a place where we could talk. It was so easy to fit in—they keep the numbers small so that it is manageable. We are all friends, and we engage with each other in regards to art. Some of the critiques can be quite brutal—where we are positioned, what we do, what we say. Anything that happens outside our collective is kind of like child's play. We also, as a group—I think Vernon said this—we give each other permission to do whatever we want. There is not a lot of self-censorship. There is quite a lot of banter and teasing, and competition, but it is very supportive as well.

VZ The group's presence in Brisbane is very strong. It shifts the entire institutional ecology compared to southern cities like Sydney and Melbourne.

GH We have a presence at Queensland College of Art, in Brisbane. One of our members lectures there regularly, and sometimes proppaNOW members will go there and just hang out with the students, walk through their studios and look at their work. Dale Harding was one of the students

FORT GANSEVOORT

there. You can see how he has grown from engaging with people like Richard Bell. Tony Albert, who is a younger artist and a part of the group, is also doing really well. They have remarkable confidence.

In Queensland, we as Aboriginal people had to have real resolve in order to survive because the whole political system was so regressive and subjugated us throughout history. The work of those artists that I have mentioned reflects that resilience. I am not saying that Aboriginal people in the other states weren't subject to oppressive state governments, but we have experienced it in a different way. The way the reserve system was perpetrated and perpetuated on us—we often say that it was borrowed by South Africa for their apartheid system.

VZ Queensland has a very particular history, in part from The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act, 1897. That was a set of measures introduced in Queensland that mandated control over all aspects of the lives of Indigenous people there. Communities were quarantined into reserves, wages were withheld, and Aboriginal people were forced to petition the government for very basic things such as a new piece of clothing, permission to visit a relative or to marry, and so on. This condition of “stolen wages” continued into the 1970s, and its broader impact even today is very hard to overstate.

But Gordon, the phrase you just used, “perpetrated and perpetuated”—it reminds me of the text in your piece *Hoogah Bhoogah* (2011): “They want our spirituality but not our political reality / The peddlers of hoogah bhoogah / The perpetrators and perpetuators of cultural colonialism.” Has exploiting slippages in the English language always been an important part of your work?

GH Australia was colonized by the English, but English Australia has been colonized by the United States. Andrew Denton, an Australian comedian and TV personality, said: “The U.S. is the only country that colonized the world and stayed at home.” I grew up reading Dr. Seuss books and enjoyed the language play—it gave me a device to take hold of English and twist it, shake it, turn it inside out by making up my own words, by misspelling things, and just making it part of my art, as if the forms were a color or an object that can be moved around. The wordplay has to be unique and relate to whatever the picture is saying overall, and the verbal elements have got to be an integral part of the composition visually. I labor on putting a word in a painting; it has to fit in perfectly.

In a sense, language offers a foot in the door for people to enter a work, viewers who perhaps can't read images as well as I can. They get brought in and taken around and experience it that way.

HF In an artist talk you did in Athens in April 2016, you said something to the effect that you don't speak your first language. That seems to relate to what you are saying now.

GH Often people ask me why I use text. I reply by saying English is my second language; I don't know my first, as the English colonizer took it away. Therefore, I have license to use English any way I want. With many Aboriginal languages, only certain words remain, though I think traditional languages do exist more fully in communities. Sometimes when we speak English, we put those

FORT GANSEVOORT

words in, which is a sort of infiltration.

VZ The dissident use of language does seem a complement to the way you inhabit visual vocabularies. As Bennett's work insisted, entering into Western image-making requires inhabiting existing icons or forms. You often use the icon of the boxing kangaroo, for example. In "MURRILAND!" (2016–), you use the World War II image of the planting of a flag at Iwo Jima to model an icon of the declaration on Possession Island, where Captain James Cook claimed Australia for the English crown in 1770.

GH It is kind of a postmodernist thing, appropriating something but reinventing it and regurgitating it. I use icons or other familiar things to make people engage or feel something. The painting *Terraists Colonialism* (2008)—that was based on the composition of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), an album cover that's lodged in the psyche of a certain generation. People get seduced by familiarity, and without even realizing it they've experienced my perspective, while bringing their own meanings to it also.

HF I am really taken by a coinage of yours, *terraists*, or *terraism*, which takes a word that reverberates in the world on a daily basis and transposes it.

GH After 9/11, during the Iraq War and continuing into the present, there's been a constant pointing the finger, referring to all Islamic nations as terrorists, or anyone with a turban. It's a term that's bred fear into communities and has been used to push through racist legislation. The government doesn't let refugees in because they are afraid that perhaps a terrorist will come in amidst them. They use it as a control mechanism.

Anyway, the word *terraism* I took from the doctrine that the British used to colonize us, *terra nullius*. *Terra* is a Latin word meaning "land," and *nullius* means "void" or "belonging to nobody." So that meant that they saw Australia as uninhabited; basically they saw us as animals. Therefore, it was okay to colonize us. I took *terra* and just put an *-ism* behind it.

VZ Which does something very powerful. Not only does it cast the colonial powers as aggressors, it labels their violence as violence vis-à-vis the land itself.

You depict the moment that *terra nullius* is decreed on Possession Island by Captain Cook in the first "MURRILAND!" canvas. But you overlay that scene with other temporal markers. This is an important difference from the paintings by Tshibumba Kanda Matulu that you're working in dialogue with. Tshibumba tells the history of Katanga province in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) through a sequence of episodes rendered on separate canvases—actually repurposed flour sacks. The scenes commence with a depiction of the ancestral couple, feature key events of the military and diplomatic decolonization process, and end at Tshibumba's vision of the future from his time of painting in the mid-1970s. Your paintings, Gordon, on the other hand, are these ten-meter-long, two-meter-high images that move backward and forward in time in a contrapuntal way, swarming with events large and small. There's not a methodical tempo of one event being progressively followed by the next.

FORT GANSEVOORT

GH I think history is linear, but it also goes in other nonlinear ways. In “MURRILAND!,” it cannot move simply chronologically, because at different points in time different things appear important. The way that I have been operating is to connect things across time. For example, on the west side of Cape York Peninsula, in June 1606, the Dutch captain Willem Jansz mapped some 360 kilometers of coastline aboard the *Duyfken*. Then in 1770, Captain Cook landed on the east side aboard the *Endeavour* and named the peninsula after the Duke of York. Those two bits of history are painted together. They’re connected by the cape, but it’s not linear.

HF The beauty of your project is that it allows one to reevaluate what history painting means, not only as a genre in itself but also in terms of how to mark history on canvas. It’s a subject you engaged with directly when you entered into a relationship with Tshibumba’s works: he was commissioned by the Dutch anthropologist Johannes Fabian in the 1970s to represent the history of Katanga and the Congo, which had been subjected to seemingly perpetual colonial, military, and dictatorial upheavals. He did the job in four months, which is remarkable. Could you two both talk a bit about your encounters with Tshibumba’s work and how “MURRILAND!” emerged from that?

GH Vivian and I met for the first time at the State Library of Queensland. We sat down, and Vivian described “Frontier Imaginaries” to me, then she showed me some images of Tshibumba’s paintings on the computer. I couldn’t wait to get the books so I could take a closer look. I got immersed in how he had articulated both history and his own experiences as well, because at times he included himself in the works. That is kind of the way that I have been making art, responding to the moment you are in just as events are happening, almost straight away. The similarities in aesthetics, I suppose, were another major factor in pursuing the project. It was also important to me to see the work firsthand in Amsterdam, and then to meet Johannes Fabian.

HF When I first encountered Tshibumba’s paintings in the collection display and vault of the Tropenmuseum, where they’ve resided since Fabian donated them to the museum, I thought that the cycle was very linear, each painting representing an event. For me, this felt fairly traditional. It was only when I experienced it through your work, Gordon, that I started to see the paintings not as separate elements but as one painting altogether. I understand your canvases as spaces on which you mark points of history amid a variety of traditions of telling those histories, then allow these points to connect, intersect, or diverge.

GH Johannes Fabian doesn’t like it when curators show Tshibumba’s paintings separately: it misses out on the full narrative. I think when I first started, I saw them as separate paintings. There are many occasions with Tshibumba where it is almost like he had a camera—they are composed like snapshots.

I started out trying to paint the history of Queensland in the same way Tshibumba painted the history of the Congo; that did not work. It is only when I kept consulting with Vivian and a number of other people that I started approaching it the way that I make art myself. I had the canvas, and I actually divided it into squares, intending to cut it up when I finished and put the pieces all in separate frames. But then I started getting rid of my preconceptions. Tshibumba’s

FORT GANSEVOORT

work is about using art to illustrate historical events. I'm trying to connect scenarios so that the composition flows.

VZ The term that comes to mind for this work is “summoning.” In a way you’re summoning history itself through these images, bringing it forward as something that an audience must confront in situ. But I also think of “summons” in its legal use, where there is a sense of attempting to reach justice or to have some kind of ethical confrontation. It recalls the way precedents are drawn upon each time a legal judgment is made, calling moments from the past into the present in order to establish right and wrong.

Even further, “summoning” has a mythic register, which is important to the formative mode of history as a present myth that generates its own futures. For example, Australia tells itself a narrative about ANZAC, the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps of the World War I period. This enables the nation—in part—to skip over histories of colonial dispossession and bloodshed prior to that time and in so doing secure a particular future.

HF Your project, Gordon, seems to speak of a history that existed very much before that particular origin. To be able to tell that history—your history—is that also to return to an origin? In the “MURRILAND!” paintings, one of the recurring images is a serpent—within Aboriginal oral histories the serpent has a mythological dimension and represents origin stories. Are you juxtaposing two origin stories, the colonial and the Indigenous?

GH For us there is really just one origin story: the creation of time. It is just kind of within us, and it is told in many guises. I couldn't paint that creation in a little square, because it is a big concept. It had to be big, too big in a sense, and that set the standard for the whole painting.

It is interesting what you said, Vivian, about the ANZAC legend. World War I is glorified and constantly propagandized—there's a constant bombardment by the media of how legendary and important it is, so much that people actually believe it. They focus on that and not on the wars that actually happened in Australia. It is silly, because they still think that Australia has been settled peacefully.

One thing I enjoy doing: I like putting my little boy's Aboriginal flag shirt on him and then just letting him loose on the playground. He is just the most beautiful little critter. You can sense an unease or guilt.

VZ In Tshibumba's paintings, he depicts only the province of Katanga, in what was then Zaire. The work is specific and regional in a way that does not quite pertain to the nation-state. In Queensland, Aboriginal folk—as well as settler and other immigrant populations—have had a unique experience. This is related to The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act, 1897, as well as to labor politics in Australia and the state's geography—its proximity to the Pacific and Southeast Asia, and its position within the history of expanding European influence.

GH These state boundaries are arbitrary colonial borders, of course, so Aboriginal nations traverse them. My nation, Waanyi, goes over the Queensland border into the Northern Territory.

FORT GANSEVOORT

But I am quite happy to work with those boundaries in art, because they mean something. They mean something when people look at the shape of a state as an emblem. Aesthetically it works for me also. I like to play with Queensland's outline when I insert it into my compositions.

VZ It's also important to note that Tshibumba was painting in 1973 and 1974, after formal decolonization in 1960, and the assassination of the first legally elected prime minister of what was then known as the Republic of the Congo, Patrice Lumumba, in 1961. Even though he was living in a dictatorship, he was painting after formal decolonization, which is quite different from the case of Queensland.

HF You need to decolonize first in order to speak postcolonially.

GH You can look at prefixes to the word *colonialism*, a *pre-* or a *post-*. But to us, it is still the same old colonialism, which has been perpetuated constantly, right through.

HF When I hear you two speak, and from my own visit to Queensland, it's very apparent to me that the dominant discourse of peaceful settlement that is still part of the Australian media and political narrative contains within it fear and anxiety. As soon as the myth of peaceful settlement is discredited, it's like a Pandora's box. It reminds me of something you said, Gordon, during your talk in Athens: The colonial settlement is along the coast, not in the heartland. As a symbolic but also literal act, this colonization almost exclusively along the sea line of the continent is very meaningful. It is almost as if the settlers were afraid of the land.

GH It is funny how Australia builds its identity and projects it to the world. Australia always puts forward images of the bronzed surfer, rugged bushman—all male. And sports have become a way of portraying identity. Our government spends millions upon millions of dollars to make Australia's medal count come in just below those of the superpowers, so to speak. They see themselves as something that they are not—as in *Crocodile Dundee* (1986), which was quite popular around the world. Australia presented the image that this is who we are—a bushman at home with the land who can make water buffalos sleep, crocodiles are scared of him, and all that. It is a bit of a white Tarzan in a black Africa scenario.

HF Do you think that the *Crocodile Dundee* fiction is a cultural catharsis with regard to a land that one is in fact afraid of, in order to make it one's own?

VZ The settler psyche, I would argue, involves a profound cognitive dissonance produced by the paradoxical nature of the frontier. The settler is drawn towards the frontier because of its sense of boundlessness and opportunity, yet at the same moment always turns away from it as a space defined by a perceived threat from the outside. This threat exists in the immediate sense of the land but also in terms of an outside of modernity itself; of that which is native, which is barbaric, which is outside the disciplining of history. The threat is perceived as physical but is also deeply psychic. One might become mad in this place, untethered from "civilization."

FORT GANSEVOORT

As a result, settler society tends to refuse to be present in the place in which it dwells. This is an unstable situation that obstructs politically sophisticated forms of democracy. Take the decision making around, for example, the Carmichael coal mine, which is set to be the biggest open-cut black coal mine on the face of the planet. Located in Queensland, and owned by an offshore company, the mine will surely be destructive in terms of climate change, not to mention the bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef, which is nearby. A society in the paradoxically oriented condition that we are discussing struggles to make good collective decisions when it comes to the planetary systems on which it depends and vis-à-vis time scales beyond the accrual of financial profit.

GH The interior is viewed as resource, not as land, not as a living entity. Right from the start, those colonizing Australia had always tried to transplant England, from the animals to the fences, the hedges: we are away from home, let's bring home here. To me, they still haven't gotten over that. They are still trying to replicate Europe, or the United States in many cases, never looking at the land itself and coming to terms with it.

Not coming to terms with the land and the environment is also another meaning for *terraism*, with the land striking back in the form of drought, flood, fires, all these things that Australia fears. When there is a flood or a drought, they go into almost a state of war.

HF I think that's very meaningful what you say: to see land not as something living but as a resource; that it's something that will strike back at you. It expands the political dimension to an ecological one. To bring it back to your practice, Gordon, how do you relate to the land as an entity or political body in your own work?

GH Regardless of scenario or whatever political comment that I am making, land and country is always in the background, or in the periphery, of any art that I make. It goes without saying for an Aboriginal artist, because to be a blackfella in Australia, often there is a tract of country that you are from—even though you may not have ever been there, you still have a strong connection to it. That connection comes through your blood. And people as well, kin.

More concretely, in the paintings there are flat vast surfaces that drag you in, from green to red to yellow—I think one of the things that I do best is grade color one into another. There are symbols that belong to certain geographic places. One of the icons I use is kangaroos, because the kangaroo belongs to Australia more than a lot of non-Aboriginal people, or the introduced species. Often to symbolize the way non-Aboriginal people are disconnected from the land, I use bricks in the work. Bricks are land, but it's land that has been burnt, everything living inside it destroyed, and then that is what's used to build.

HF During our meeting with documenta 14's Artistic Director, Adam Szymczyk, you said something along the lines of "If a white man can make up history, a black Aboriginal man certainly can." There is, again, the act of shifting—the act of replacing images, replacing language, replacing narratives, and using fiction as a powerful weapon.

FORT GANSEVOORT

GH When does fiction become fact? When it is written down in black and white. A painting needs to run the gauntlet of critical response, then gets reproduced over and over and achieves critical mass and then eventually is validated. Then it kind of becomes a fact. Pictures do it in a slightly different way than writing, since pictures have so many different meanings depending on who is looking at them.

HF Something I am disturbed by, in terms of narrative being construed as fact, is that in recent years representations of Aboriginal artists in large-scale international exhibitions are often placed within a strictly postcolonial or even an ethnographic frame, or within terms that just don't seem suitable sometimes for what is actually going on. I think this type of differentiation is insidious, dangerous even. I think work needs a proper context, which is why I am really thrilled to be having this conversation. It is our responsibility as curators to create that context.

GH History in Australia is horrific and ugly. I grieve every time I look at something so horrific. I find it hard to represent those realities, and I have dealt with the situation by subverting them. To deal with the massacres in Queensland's history; for example, the history of Aboriginal women and children getting killed in brutal ways. The way that I have to deal with that pictorially is to turn it around and to show a lot of white people lying there the way that Aboriginal people were. It is the only way that I can do it without hurting myself too much.

VZ That is part of how I understand your practice—as producing rebellious images that do cultural work. They stand in defiance of certain prevailing conditions and insist on others.

GH Every time I finish a painting, I step back, look at it, and ask myself how I feel. Do I feel like a victim? Do I feel subjugated? Do I feel weak? If so, I cannot let it leave the studio. Right now I'm doing a painting of Aboriginal women with chains around their naked hands and legs, standing there in dresses made of flour bags. I have to counteract that image by representing them with a strong posture and a piercing gaze to reach the viewer despite the subjugation. My spirit, my soul, has not been colonized.

One of the works that I loved during art college was by an Aboriginal artist named Karen Casey called *Black dog—white dog II* (1989). It is an etching of a white dog beating up this black dog—the black dog on the ground and the white dog on top of it. At first, I thought it was very powerful because it showed the brutality, but I could not live with that image. I could not look at it. Works that reek of being a victim, I cannot come to terms with them anymore. We don't think that way anymore in the Aboriginal movements. We talked about the idea of legacy: I am able to do what I do because of those artists that have gone before me. If Aboriginal artists all of a sudden do a victim type of work—we call it “poor fella me,” feeling sorry for yourself—it kind of knocks down the buildings that we have built.