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The Saturday Paper

Gordon Hookey

Gordon Hookey's epic series MURRILAND! was inspired by Congolese artist Tshibumba Kanda-Matulu's rewriting of colonial history.

By Neha Kale — August 6, 2022



A section of the series 101 Works by Tshibumba Kanda-Matulu, and Gordon Hookey
CREDIT: STATHIS MAMALAKIS / DOCUMENTA 14

Gordon Hookey's paintings skewer Australian history, politics and culture with wit and precision. They possess a freedom that first took root during the Waanyi artist's childhood among a community of Murri families around Queensland's Coppermine Creek. A MURRIALITY – a survey that takes in three decades of Hookey's practice across painting, sculpture, printmaking and video – opens this week at UNSW Galleries, where Hookey attended art school, before heading to Brisbane's Institute of Modern Art.

Hookey has shown work at The National: New Australian Art, the 10th Asia–Pacific Triennial and documenta 14 in Kassel and Athens. At documenta 14, he first presented MURRILAND!, an acclaimed cycle of murals that boldly reimagines the history of the Murri people. It is informed in part by 101 Works, a series of paintings by Tshibumba Kanda-Matulu, a Congolese artist who left an outsized mark on the country's visual culture before he disappeared in 1981.

Tell me about 101 Works by Tshibumba Kanda-Matulu. It was the inspiration for MURRILAND!, an epic cycle of paintings depicting Queensland history and originally commissioned for documenta 14. Kanda-Matulu was part of the first wave of Congolese artists who explored the country's brutal colonial history under Belgian rule. How were you introduced to him?

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Well, I probably wouldn't have come across his work at all if it wasn't for an Australian curator in Amsterdam, Vivian Ziherl. She had seen elements of his work that resonated with mine. She wanted me to do something similar, but Australia is such a big place, with so many different nations. She said, "Why don't you paint the history of Queensland from your perspective."

I don't see myself as a history painter. Tshibumba did. He was a student of history. He was like a journalist, maybe. He read and captured. He went to the museum and library and documented pictorially things that happened in the past. But he was actually living through political upheavals. It was dangerous: there were murders, there were killings, there were factions, there were politics. Belgian colonial interferences were still happening. He would have been negotiating his ideas with what he was reading and seeing and the instability of his political situation.

Vivian showed me Tshibumba's work and said, this is the reason why you should do this – the similarities, the text, the colour, the political statement. I belong to a collective called proppaNOW and my way of working is to look at the contemporary, what's going on with my people now. What Vivian was asking me to do was look back and make pictures of my past, Murri past, First Nations past. Even though history informs our present and our future, I hate reading. I will listen to people and that information has much more validity to me. I wasn't in a position to say "no", because I was living in poverty. I was thinking about getting a real job, not making art anymore. I had two little boys that came along. I had to provide for my family. She pulled me out of retiring from art.

In the 1970s, Kanda-Matulu was commissioned by the Dutch anthropologist Johannes Fabian to make 101 Works. It presents a counter-history to what he learned in his schoolbooks. For example, he celebrates the first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Patrice Lumumba, who was involved in the struggle for African independence. What do you admire the most about 101 Works? There are similarities to your work, but yours is much more conceptual.

I [first] saw Tshibumba's work in books that were given to me and on the screen. And, in my psyche, in my thinking, in my relationship to them, they were big. They held this stature, this gravitas. I had seen them as massive works because they were dealing with massive ideas.

Johannes Fabian donated the works to the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. As part of the commission, I was invited to go over and see the works. They were downstairs in the basement, on rails. And when they came out, they impacted me because they were all little worlds. Not to say I was disappointed! Seeing them in person, the colour was magnificent.

101 Works represents the history of the Congo as a series of paintings, like snapshots. MURRILAND! features the rainbow serpent, the arrival of British colonists and the grim reaper. It challenges the idea of history painting itself. What did 101 Works teach you about painting history?

That was the big struggle for me, seeing Tshibumba's work and seeing all his little canvases. He was confined and I have all these materials at my disposal. A lot of the works that he was painting were made on flour sacks.

My first idea was to make a timeline of the history of Queensland. Our ancestral spirit is the rainbow serpent, which is common to many different nations, not just Aboriginal. The Chinese dragon is an

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ancestral spirit, the Christian religion has the serpent sitting in the tree. To me that was the beginning of our cosmology, our understanding of the world.

History is determined by the invading culture. They hold the terms of reference. There were tapes and tapes of interviews between Johannes and Tshibumba. It was anthropological evidence. My work is so open to interpretation, viewers can read anything into it. Murriland! #1 presents 15 different historical and cultural scenarios. [In 1606] the Dutch ship, the Duyfken [landed on] the Cape York Peninsula and the traditional mob there drove the foreign invader off. A hundred years later, Captain Cook named the peninsula, stuck a bit of rag on an island and claimed the east coast of Australia. Queens Land is England, which is why the whole project is called MURRILAND! There is no chronological order. I look at a situation and don't let historical facts get in the way of doing a good picture, telling my own version of those histories. Tshibumba tried to remain true to what was happening.

Kanda-Matulu was self-taught and painted in a deliberately naive style. Your paintings famously play with the English language and invoke comic books. Murriland! #2 features the Murri freedom fighter Dundalli, who you refer to as a terra-ist. Why do you borrow from popular culture?

We're living now. This is our time. People know where they were when [Princess] Diana passed away. People know where they were when the tsunami happened. They are major events. They enter the psyche of the culture. One of the reasons I borrow from pop culture is this relevance and familiarity. It seduces [viewers], who have a relationship with those things.

The name of my show is A MURRIALITY. Murriality is an example of one Murri person's reality. I can't represent my mob or anyone. [But] there are works that relate to Donald Trump and the war in Ukraine. There are works that relate to housing, because there are no affordable houses. I'm also making a comment on "hoogah-boogah"-ism. One of the main posters is a text that says something to the effect of, you want our spirituality but not our political reality. It's a way to keep us in a time capsule. In a sense, it is a connection with what I've already done.

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