Do Rocks Listen?

an exhibition by
Karrabing Film Collective

14.10.2021
18.12.2021
ABOUT THE ARTIST

Formed in 2004, Karrabing Film Collective is an Indigenous media group who use filmmaking to interrogate the conditions of inequality for Aboriginal people in Australia and to retain connections to their land and ancestors. Composed of some thirty extended family members whose ancestral lands stretch across the saltwaters and islands of the Northern Territory and the Italian Alps, Karrabing together create films using an “improvisational realism” that opens a space beyond binaries of the fictional and the documentary and the past and the present. Their award winning films have been screened and exhibited at festivals and museums all over the world.

Meaning “low tide” in the Emuypengal language, karrabing refers to a form of collectivity outside of government imposed strictures of clanship or land ownership. Shot on handheld cameras and phones, most of Karrabing’s films dramatize and satirize the daily scenarios and obstacles that collective members face in their various interactions with corporate and state entities. Composing webs of nonlinear narratives that touch on cultural memory, place, and ancestry by freely jumping in time and place, Karrabing exposes and intervenes into the longstanding facets of colonial violence that impact members directly, such as environmental devastation, land restrictions, and economic exploitation.

How We Make Karrabing series

1. The Riot, 2017
   Video (single channel, color, sound); 27’02”
   Commissioned by the IFA Galerie, Berlin and Stuttgart.
   In The Riot, members reflect on the origins, meaning, and purpose of the Karrabing Film Collective. Karrabing emerged from the trauma of violence, following riots that erupted when the Australian government passed the Northern Territory National Emergency Response in 2007, which is commonly referred to as the “Intervention.” Under the guise of responding to a report of child sexual abuse, the government took unprecedented control over Indigenous lives in northern Australia. It negated on its promise of secure housing, imposed lifestyle restrictions, abolished development programs, increased police presence and powers, and drastically increased the incarceration of Indigenous people for minor offenses. The Intervention further allowed for the government to resume control of land that had only recently been returned to Indigenous owners through land rights legislation of the 1970s and 1990s. In 2009, while still homeless, Karrabing members were displaced by the riots who began making short films as a method of self-organization and social analysis.

2. How we make Karrabing, 2018
   Video (single channel, color, sound); 2’19”
   Commissioned by Dazibao, Montreal.
   Just because you can’t see it... is a serious, sometimes humorous, reflection on the Karrabing Film Collective’s understandings of the ancestral present—that their totems and ancestors are not in the past, but are an ongoing relationship they are obligated to maintain for their own health and wellbeing and that of their more-than-human lands, seas, and worlds.

3. The Road, 2020
   Video (single channel, color, sound); 21’52”
   Commissioned by the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus.
   Karrabing Film Collective was invited along with other international filmmakers to capture “the zeitgeist in your own backyard.” Their films were limited to two minutes in length, to be shot in one day, and with sound that is native to the footage. The COVID-19 pandemic and months of protests in response to police violence against Black communities at the time led many filmmakers to reconsider their original concepts.
   The Road documents and expands upon their memorable and eventful bushwhacking sessions to clear a road to a distant, remote beach as part of the Karrabing Art Residency for Ancestors and Karrabing Mapping the Ancestral Present projects. Taking a different approach to time and “native” sound, the film layers current and historical events, while ancestors circle around, creating a cinematic statement on the ancestral resilience that informs current generations of Indigenous peoples’ resistance to the enduring effects of settler colonialism.

4. Roan-roan and connected, that’s how we make Karrabing series
   Video (single channel, color, sound); 1’57”
   Commissioned by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

5. Keeping Country open, 2020
   Video (single channel, color, sound); 2’48”
   Commissioned by Dazibao, Montreal.

6. How we make Karrabing, 2020
   Video (single channel, color, sound); 6’14”
   Commissioned by Dazibao, Montreal.

Roan-roan and connected, that’s how we make Karrabing is a video series made during the COVID-19 pandemic. Across an internationally mediated interview with Karrabing members, a discussion took place about their vision of staying together, with each other and the more-than-human world, through connections to their ancestors and land. Comprising iPhone interview footage, old camcorder recordings of trips to Bamurru-Mabaluk, and clips from some of their recent films, a montage aesthetically enacts the multiple registries of difference and connectivity that characterize Karrabing.

Staying with the ancestors and Keeping Country open discuss their practice as an obligation to the members’ ancestors through reference to two films, Wuthar Saltwater Dreams (2016) and The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland (2018). In these and other films, Karrabing do not merely re-enact their lives but engage with their ancestral presents and futures. Predominant concerns with the differences between fiction and nonfiction give way to the multiplicity of smooth and rough practices that keep Karrabing connected to their ancestors and obligated to their lands.

How we make Karrabing is perhaps the Karrabing Collective’s most powerful manifesto yet. It describes their vision of a form of collectivity that is one “mock-in-difference” that must continue to confront the dividing machinery of contemporary settler capitalism and state derived “recognition.”
As a group of Indigenous adults argue about whether to save their government housing or their sacred landscape, their children struggle to decide how the ancestral Dreaming makes sense in their contemporary lives. Listening to music on their iPods, walking through bush lands and boating across seas, they follow their parents on a journey to re-enact the travel through bush lands and boating across seas, they follow their parents on a journey to re-enact the travel — which entity might rightfully be considered “the ancestral present.”

The Jealous One, 2017
Video (single channel, color, sound); 29’29”
Produced with funding by the Indigenous Language and Arts Grant, Canberra, and Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven

The Jealous One unfolds along two plot lines that meet in a dramatic final encounter: the first, a story of an Indigenous man weaving through bureaucratic red tape to get to a mortuary ceremony on his ancestral land; and the second, a flight between a husband consumed by jealousy and his wife’s brother, who excludes him from community ceremonies. Based on the ancestral stories of the Sea Monster and Dog Dreamings that connect the traditional lands of Karrabing, the film asks who is the contemporary jealous one—the land, the men, or the settler state?

Day in the Life, 2020
Video (single channel, color, sound); 32’10”

Day in the Life moves through five vignettes—Breakfast, Play Break, Lunch, Cocktail Hour, and Takeout Dinner—dramatizing and satirizing an ordinary day in the lives of a small rural Indigenous community. As much an audio, as well as visual, landscape, the film layers multileveled perspectives and compresses past, present, and future, as the families navigate coexistence with their ancestors and settler forms of governance.

Aiden confronts two possible futures and pasts. The Mermaids is an exploration of Indigenous survivance amidst the brutality of extractive capitalism, climate change, and settler state abandonment. If toxic landscapes become the place where settlers are excluded, what is it to be sovereign over a wasted earth? The film makes specific reference to the “Stolen Generation”—Indigenous children who, until the 1970s, were taken from their families by the Australian government.

When the Dogs Talked, 2014
Video (single channel, color, sound); 34’08”

As a group of Indigenous adults argue about whether to save their government housing or their sacred landscape, their children struggle to decide how the ancestral Dreaming makes sense in their contemporary lives. Listening to music on their iPods, walking through bush lands and boating across seas, they follow their parents on a journey to re-enact the travel — which entity might rightfully be considered “the ancestral present.”

Windjarrameru, The Stealing C*nt$, 2014

A group of young Indigenous men hide in a swamp after being falsely accused of stealing two cartons of beer, while all around them miners are wrecking and polluting their land. Their families worry that they’ll be harmed if they remain in the toxic swamp or incarcerated if they emerge.

Windjarrameru casts Karrabing members, not just as the criminally accused and victims of environmental degradation, but also as the police, government bureaucrats, miners, as well as doctors who must collude with the miners. Their cynical performance of these compromised roles reflects a deep familiarity with extractive capitalism and the carceral state, while a disorienting Dreaming scene manifests another mode of existence that further interpretst these multiple layers of trespassing. Who should be punished and for which transgressions—which entity might rightfully be considered “the stealing c*nt$?”

Wuthar, Saltwater Dreams, 2016
Video (single channel, color, sound); 29’06”

Across a series of flashbacks, an extended Indigenous family argues about what caused their boat’s motor to break down and leave them stranded out in the bush. As they consider the roles played in the incident by their ancestors, the regulatory state, and Christian faith, the film explores the inescapable vortexes of contemporary Indigenous life. To fulfill their obligations to their ancestors in the context of late settler liberalism, they must violate the law of the state or the demands of their country. They cannot avoid punishment either way.

With Wuthar, Saltwater Dreams, the Karrabing Film Collective began shooting almost exclusively with smartphones and created what has become a signature aesthetic throughout most of their films. Compact framing combined with aggregate layering of images, ensnared with the landscape, figure transtemporal frameworks and entangled relations amongst the multiple worlds and tellings of the same story.

Night Time Go, 2017
Video (single channel, color, sound); 31’22”
Commissioned by Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin

On September 19, 1943, a group of Karrabing ancestors escaped from a war internment camp and walked over 300 kilometers back to their coastal homelands in Northern Australia.

Night Time Go is an exploration of the settler state’s attempt to remove Indigenous people from their lands during the Second World War, and the refusal of the Karrabing ancestors to be detained. The film begins by hewing closely to the actual historical details of this ancestral journey, but slowly turns to an alternative history in which the group inspires a general Indigenous insurrection driving out settlers from the Top End of Australia. Combining reenactments with modified archival footage, what begins as a restaging of the past slowly turns into a speculative, alternative history that oscillates between drama and humor, fact and fiction.

The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland, 2018
Video (single channel, color, sound); 26’41”

Set in a dystopian future-present, in which land, air, and water have been poisoned by Industry, European settlers can no longer survive outdoors—while Indigenous people are curiously able. Aiden, a young Indigenous man who was stolen as a baby to be part of a medical experiment to save the white people, is released back into an unfamiliar world to his uncle and brother. As they travel across a ravaged landscape, nevertheless filled with ancestors and other survivors of the more-than-human world, Aiden confronts two possible futures and pasts.
### Monday (11:00–20:00)

- **Read But Got Story**
  - 11:00–11:31: Night Time Go
  - 11:32–12:02: The Jealous One

- **Future Present**
  - 12:10–12:36: The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland
  - 12:37–13:10: Day in the Life

- **Intervention Trilogy**
  - 13:20–13:35: The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland
  - 13:32–14:14: Day in the Life

- **Real But Got Story**
  - 14:17–14:50: Wutharr, Saltwater Dreams

### Tuesday (11:00–20:00)

- **Read But Got Story**
  - 11:00–11:31: Night Time Go
  - 11:32–12:02: The Jealous One

- **Future Present**
  - 12:10–12:36: The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland
  - 12:37–13:10: Day in the Life

- **Intervention Trilogy**
  - 13:20–13:35: The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland
  - 13:32–14:14: Day in the Life

- **Real But Got Story**
  - 14:17–14:50: Wutharr, Saltwater Dreams

### Wednesday (11:00–20:00)

- **Read But Got Story**
  - 11:00–11:31: Night Time Go
  - 11:32–12:02: The Jealous One

- **Future Present**
  - 12:10–12:36: The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland
  - 12:37–13:10: Day in the Life

- **Intervention Trilogy**
  - 13:20–13:35: The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland
  - 13:32–14:14: Day in the Life

- **Real But Got Story**
  - 14:17–14:50: Wutharr, Saltwater Dreams

### Thursday (11:00–20:00)

- **Read But Got Story**
  - 11:00–11:31: Night Time Go
  - 11:32–12:02: The Jealous One

- **Future Present**
  - 12:10–12:36: The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland
  - 12:37–13:10: Day in the Life

- **Intervention Trilogy**
  - 13:20–13:35: The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland
  - 13:32–14:14: Day in the Life

- **Real But Got Story**
  - 14:17–14:50: Wutharr, Saltwater Dreams

### Friday (11:00–20:00)

- **Read But Got Story**
  - 11:00–11:31: Night Time Go
  - 11:32–12:02: The Jealous One

- **Future Present**
  - 12:10–12:36: The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland
  - 12:37–13:10: Day in the Life

- **Intervention Trilogy**
  - 13:20–13:35: The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland
  - 13:32–14:14: Day in the Life

- **Real But Got Story**
  - 14:17–14:50: Wutharr, Saltwater Dreams

### Saturday (11:00–16:00)

- **Read But Got Story**
  - 11:00–11:31: Night Time Go
  - 11:32–12:02: The Jealous One

- **Future Present**
  - 12:10–12:36: The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland
  - 12:37–13:10: Day in the Life

- **Intervention Trilogy**
  - 13:20–13:35: The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland
  - 13:32–14:14: Day in the Life

- **Real But Got Story**
  - 14:17–14:50: Wutharr, Saltwater Dreams

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**Schedule Details**

- **Online Screening**
  - **14 October – 17 December**
  - **19 December – 26 November**
  - **27 November – 11 December**

- **How We Make Karrabing**
  - The Flot (22 min)
  - Just because you can't see it (2 min)
  - The Road (2 min)
  - Staying with the Ancestors (3 min)
  - Keeping Country open (3 min)
  - How we make Karrabing (6 min)

- **Future Present**
  - **18 December**
  - **15 November – 18 December**
  - **26 November – 4 November**

- **Intervention Trilogy**
  - Real But Got Story
  - Future Present
  - Sleep Out

- **Real But Got Story**
  - The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland (35 min)
  - The Jealous One (30 min)
  - Wutharr, Saltwater Dreams (50 min)
Do Rocks Listen? and related events are presented as the first season of the biennial artistic research program Another Knowledge Is Possible (2021–23) organized by the ICA at NYU Shanghai. From Fall 2021 through Spring 2023, we explore what other knowledges have been neglected and repressed, and ask if it is possible for a deep decolonization of thought to reclaim these ways of knowing?

CREDITS & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Design by The Exercises / Lu Liang and Selina Landis.