

GALLERY4A

SPEAKEASY

VERNON AH KEE
DANIEL BOYD
FIONA FOLEY
GORDON HOOKEY
GARY LEE
GINER RILEY MUNDUWALAWALA
JASON WING + MARK BROWN
ZHOU XIAOPING

26 SEPTEMBER – 31 OCTOBER 2009

Gallery 4A's upcoming group exhibition profiles Asian-Australian history entangled with an Aboriginal history of Australia.

SPEAKEASY, draws its title from the illegal and underground bars which operated during the prohibition period in 1920s America – out of sight, below the radar, yet part of a vital cultural dialogue. In this exhibition, the title refers to the longstanding contribution of Indigenous and Asian history, often overlooked in Australia's colonial history. This exhibition delves into previously untold stories in Australia and marks a fundamental shift in thinking about intercultural relationships, politics and geography.

In 2008, Gallery 4A hosted a symposium in which the artist and co-curator of this exhibition, Vernon Ah Kee presented a paper where he saw his own Chinese-heritage belonging within a 'Black History' of Australia. Following this trajectory, Ah Kee reverses a history of Australia which assumes all cultural difference in relation to a European (or white) imperative, making this exhibition potentially confronting.

The exhibition charts a range of relationships between Indigenous artists and Asian people and culture, through the familial, the political, the pre-colonial and periods of trade.

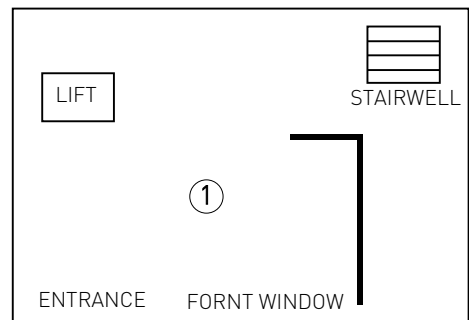
The project has been supported by Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning, University of Technology, Sydney and Art and About.

GALLERY4A

ROOMSHEET

Ground floor

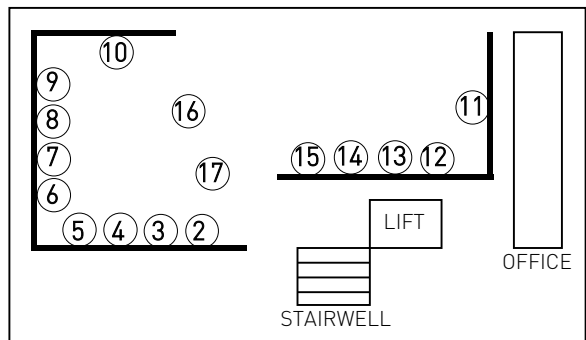
- ① *Whole persons, 2009*
Vernon Ah Kee
Digital print / plan print



Ground floor

First floor

- ② *Opium Dens, 2006*
Fiona Foley
Oil on linen
- ③ *Opium Permits, 2006*
Fiona Foley
Oil on linen
- ④ *Opium Opium II, 2006*
Fiona Foley
Oil on linen
- ⑤ *White Trash, 2006*
Fiona Foley
Oil on linen
- ⑥ *Rodney, 2006*
Gary Lee
Digital print on cotton rag (archival) paper
- ⑦ *Shannon as Billiamook, 2006*
Gary Lee
Digital print on cotton rag (archival) paper
- ⑧ *Gus, 2006*
Gary Lee
Digital print on cotton rag (archival) paper
- ⑨ *Stephen, 2006*
Gary Lee
Digital print on cotton rag (archival) paper
- ⑩ *Garimala, Wet Season, 1989*
Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas



First floor

- ⑪ *Untitled History, 2009*
Zhou Xiaoping
Bark/rice paper
- ⑫ *History, 2009*
Zhou Xiaoping
Painting and object
- ⑬ *Curry Murri Martial Arts Chop Sticks, 2009*
Gordon Hookey
Acrylic on wood, metal
- ⑭ *Sacred Object, De-con-text-you'll-eyesed, 2009*
Gordon Hookey
Hand painted digiredoo in guitar case
- ⑮ *Kenny Boy, 2009*
Daniel Boyd
Oil on Canvas
- ⑯ *Wave (Japanese whispers), 2009*
Jason Wing + Mark Brown
Sand, wood, speaker, perspex
- ⑰ *Did 'Y' giddit, 2009*
Gordon Hookey
Mixed Media installation

GALLERY4A

Speakeasy by Vernon Ah Kee

My first name is 'Vernon'. A relatively uncommon name to be sure but unremarkable nevertheless. My last name is 'Ah Kee', an equally unremarkable name. I am Aboriginal. It could be said that I could more accurately describe myself as a mix of Asian and Aboriginal backgrounds, or simply say that I am Aboriginal-Chinese; I am Chinese on both sides of my family. I could justifiably call myself Aboriginal-Chinese or Chinese-Aboriginal. The problem is that I feel such a description would be inaccurate in the context of my life and my family's history in this country. It could describe me; it just wouldn't describe me well.

I was born into the name 'Ah Kee' but my family is Aboriginal. It is my family's Aboriginal history that forms my identity, my sense of self. The dark skin and black hair I was born into bears testament to our identities; those of my parents, my grandparents and the broad ever-expanding fabric of cousins, uncles and aunts that is my extended family.

But my identifying as Aboriginal is not in any way a denial of my Chinese-ness, or 'Asian-ness' (I am also Malay on my father's side). It was merely established very early on, and indefatigably so, that the Australia of the 1970s, specifically the Queensland 'Far North', was never going to consider me as anything other than Aboriginal. I was reminded of this daily through the social interactions with the town in which I was born and raised, and in the never-ending barrage of name-calling I was subjected to. What is surely the most telling aspect of these experiences is that none of the name-calling or social behaviour directed toward me was designed to single out or to even test my Chinese-ness. Clearly, these early formative experiences were to be determinedly and exclusively Aboriginal ones.

So, while I am aware of it, to me my Chinese-ness is more an arbitrary part of my family background than it is a culturally intrinsic part of my character and thinking. The way I position myself politically, historically and socially is not because of my Chinese-ness. Nor is it based on any perceived 'lack' of Chinese-ness.

My 'state of being' regarding my Chinese-ness vs my Aboriginal-ness is not something I am often conscious of. There are many families in North Queensland that are Aboriginal and Chinese, or Asian. But because of the many similar experiences to mine, the Asian-ness (Chinese/Japanese/Malay/Indonesian-ness) of those families is less a defining or strengthening aspect of their lives than their Aboriginal-ness. Australian society and its relationship to Aboriginal people is of course a determining factor.

Conversation between Aaron Seeto and Vernon Ah Kee on *SPEAKEASY* exhibition (23 September 2009)

A: What do you think of the title *SPEAKEASY*?

V: I think *speakeasy* is a good title. It presents the rationale for the exhibition and a good access point for the viewer to this discourse. This show is not about comparing or contrasting experiences but rather to talk about things that are unspoken.

A: Where did this project come from and what does this mean to you?

V: Four or five years ago you asked me whether I was interested in giving a talk in a forum to discuss Asian-Australian identity. At the time I didn't think I was really Australian or Asian and this, as you suggested, could be a point of discussion. This show presents me the opportunity to think differently and to see myself connected in different ways.

A: *I think your position in looking at your family's Asian heritage as black history can be potentially confronting.*

GALLERY4A

V: My family's Asian heritage, specifically Chinese, is a matter of fact but the historical and social treatment of my family as Aboriginal people overwhelms every other identification I have particularly Australian.

A: *What I find interesting about Jason Wing's works is that it explores the process of working through his experience of being Chinese and Aboriginal.*

V: I certainly think his inquisitiveness and sense of curiosity is compelling.

A: There are political implications derived from the history of trade that predates colonisation. We know about this but what impact does this have on the Asian-Australian binary?

V: It should change the way we look at Australian history. Perhaps one of the implications could be a shift in the way we view the notion of first contact. In the context of Chinese and Makasan trade, first contact does not mean anything. The gold rush did cause an influx of Chinese trade but there is no reason to assume that this was the beginning of Chinese history in Australia. Therefore, first contact is not a subject that should or can be discussed as finality.

A: *The works by Zhou Xiaoping are particularly interesting because they are Chinese paintings that look at the trading relationship at the commodity end when sea cucumbers began to be traded in China. They depict a market scene that reflects the interactions between the Makasan and the communities in Arnhem land. Zhou does not present himself as the collaborator but he opens up our understanding of what Chinese painting tradition might be.*

V: This relationship predates all discussions about multiculturalism and collaboration. Collaborations are hardly equal partnerships. There is a lot more scope to this relationship than just meeting in a studio.

A: *In the context of Ginger Riley's works, I heard a story of a particular serpent that he painted which looked very much like a Chinese dragon. There was a reason to believe that the characteristic of this serpent drew reference back to China.*

V: The presence of Asian tradition and languages observed and learned by the Aboriginal people is an aspect of the trade history that people don't really want to talk about. I think Australia is comfortable with its binary mindset.

A: *This subject can be related to Fiona Foley's interest in the history of modernity of this place or history of exclusion. In particular, the government's restriction of Indigenous and Asian relationships in order to maintain labour forces. It is much more cynical than just about controlling an understanding of the nation but it is also about economic exploitation.*

V: I think the tightly controlled system such as the Immigration Restriction Act 1901 created Australia's isolationist viewpoint whereby it doesn't see itself as part of the Asia Pacific region. It is only when you travel internationally that you will come to realise it.

A: I suppose one of the things that artists do is make it funny.

V: Gordon Hookey won't paint anything unless it's funny. He is relentlessly humorous.

A: In this show he creates a tower that illustrates the way people deal with things that are not spoken or understood because the joke goes over their head. So maybe it is a difficult show for Aboriginal artists to see themselves involved in.

V: I think so. For me it is a bit of a leap but I am at a point in my life where I am able to question what else is outside my Aboriginal identity. I'd like to see where this leads me and what I can do with this.

GALLERY4A

A: We can talk about Gary Lee's work like that as well. It is not just about presenting Aboriginal people as powerful, healthy, and beautiful Aboriginal men. At the same time these portraits are very confronting not because of their physique but because the subject looks straight at the viewer and inverts your expectation of what an Aboriginal man should be.

V: For him this is an important opportunity to look at his family outside of the existing context especially when you don't get any opportunities to do so.

A: It is also interesting to see how this show is going to be perceived from the other end of the spectrum particularly the Asian communities in Sydney.

V: I am curious to find out as well. This exhibition is not about the representation of the individual, nor about making a point or informing the community. It opens up the space for wider conversation and the opportunity to interrogate cross-cultural relationship in the context of the Indigenous-Asian-Australian dichotomy.

GALLERY4A

Ginger Riley's Serpent

The serpent figures in many of Ginger Riley's artworks. It is a very significant part of his (father's mother) grandmother's Dreaming. Bundian the serpent-creator is the alpha and omega of the Mara people (South-eastern Arnhem land).¹ The serpent-creator metamorphoses into several forms – the ancestor-serpents Garimala, the fire-breathing Bulukbun, and the rainbow serpent Wawalu. Each of these manifestations serves a particular purpose or represents a significant event.

Unlike most of the Judeo-Christian winged serpents (dragons) representing evil that deserved to be killed, Ginger Riley's are much closer to the Asian dragons. Western dragons are malevolent. Christian religions often use the dragons and serpents to represent dark and malevolent forces. The painting of St. George slaying the dragon represents a triumph of good over evil adorns Christian churches everywhere. The bible represents the serpent as Satan incarnate, which enticed Adam to commit sin.

The serpent is inextricably woven into Riley's belief system as Asian dragons are in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Riley's serpents represent a very old belief system more than the Asian dragons that date back possibly to 5,000 years.

Bandian is beneficent as Asian dragons are, albeit Bulukbun is sometimes portrayed as malevolent, punishers of the unworthy. Some Buddhist dragons are represented as malevolent – too much water causes flood, as in the case of the Chinese dragon Yinglong.

Riley's, Burmese, Japanese, Indian and Chinese dragons are primarily portrayed as protectors of the weak, benefactors of the needy. For example, the rainbow-serpent Wawalu is associated with the wet season, as the Chinese Yinglong dragon has control over water. Bandian and Asian dragons dispense wisdom to mortals. Chinese emperors invoked their sovereign authority as descendants of the Dragon. Many Chinese use the dragon as a symbol of their ethnic identity.

Ruben Allas

¹ Judith Ryan, "Ginger Riley Munduwalawala: A Seeing Artist. [Artlink](#), volume 21, number 4.

GALLERY4A

Japanese Whispers

Japanese Whispers is a recasting of a Torres Strait Islands' myth involving a Japanese princess.

The Torres Strait Islands is composed of about 100 small islands. Many of these islands are mangroves, rocky islets, and small sand keys. Nineteen are inhabited, which includes Goode Island, Murray (Mer) Island, Hammond Island, Horn Island, Palm Island and Thursday Island.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, it was perhaps one of the truly multi-cultural communities in Australia where various nationalities, such as Aborigines, Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Malays, etc. worked and lived together. They were considered 'blacks' by the English. Many Japanese and Filipinos migrated to the Islands to work in the pearling industry. Many children were born from mixed cultural backgrounds, such as Ali Drummond, whose father was a Dayak (Malay) from Sarawak (Borneo) and Mother was a Torres Strait Islander. Fishing and pearling were two of the major industries in the Torres Strait. One of the more significant investors in the pearling industry was a Filipino.

Thursday Island plays a significant role in this myth.

In 1940 Australia-Japan relations deteriorated because of the latter's imperialist intentions: Japan had joined Germany in its war against the West. Axis's expansion was left to Japan. To prepare for the war, Australia built fortifications and defence structures around Australia. Islanders were conscripted to build these structures and to defend Torres Strait Islands. Islanders expected that Torres Strait Islands will be bombed by the Japanese. Gun emplacements were built on Goode Island and Thursday Island. A barricade was constructed on an airstrip, which the Islanders also built, on Horn Island.

On the 24th February 1942, midday, the Japanese bombed Horn Island, not once but several times. They also bombed Darwin. Thursday Island was spared. Thereafter, a rumour started to circulate that out of respect for a Japanese princess that was buried on the island the Japanese bombers spared Thursday Island. "It might also have been out of respect for the many Japanese divers buried on Thursday Island."

Ruben Allas