

## MARGARET PRESTON AND THE HISTORY WARS

In his most recent exercise in cultural cross-dressing, Christian Thompson has turned to Australian native plants for inspiration. Red kangaroo paw is woven into a headdress that the artist wears. A thick brush of blue gum leaves covers his eyes and forehead. A handful of blossoming gum is thrust into the opening of a hoodie he wears. Beneath the flora, Thompson's face is more or less visible, but his expression is deadpan, ineloquent. For all of the oddness or quirkiness of what we are looking at, it is not played for laughs or even any psychological insight. The juxtaposition of the human and the vegetable is not commemorative, as in the case of Michael Parakowhai, or surreal, as in the case of Simryn Gill.

Indeed, if we were to select a genre to which the work belonged, it would be flower painting or still life. If we can put it like this, Thompson's face serves as the vase or setting of the flowers, that blank surface against which they are displayed. If there is any art here, it is to be found as much as anything in the arrangement of the flowers: the threading together of the kangaroo paws, the even hoop of the waratahs, the stiff assemblage of the grey gum. There is an implicit equivalence made between the creativity involved in arranging the flowers and that involved in recording them. In a way, the photographs simply serve to capture the natural beauty of the flowers. It is, of course – or at least conventionally – a *feminine* space Thompson inhabits in this work; and if we look closely, we can see that Thompson, as well as wearing a range of haute-couture “Aboriginal”-themed dresses, is also made up with subtle foundation and lip gloss.

It is in fact a form of *drag* that Thompson is engaged in here, but it is not Tracey Moffatt he is playing, as in his *Gates of Tambo* series, but Margaret Preston. This idea of making a work of art out of the arrangement of Australian natives by Thompson is undoubtedly meant to recall – if in travestied form – Preston's similar project of “national” still lives that ran throughout the 1920s and '30s. In Preston, the indigenous is declared not only in her choice of flowers – she painted, amongst others, banksias, proteas and strelitzias – but also in the Aboriginal-based pots and shields against which she set them, as seen for example in her well-known *The Brown Pot* (1940) and *Aboriginal Still Life* (1940).

Preston wrote prolifically about her intentions in taking up still life, which already in advanced art circles in Australia at the time was a slightly unfashionable practice. For her, the putting together of native flora and what she called “Aboriginal design” was a way of avoiding the “wretched kookaburras and wattle blossoms done on cushions in a Kensington school-of-art manner”. It is an ambition that has been endlessly discussed and reinterpreted by art historians, seemingly every generation or so.<sup>1</sup> In the 1970s at the time of a lingering modernism and at least a political avant-gardism, Humphrey McQueen emphasised the universality of Preston's project, the way that “Preston was protected from producing a hybrid ... because she sought only the underlying principle in everything”. In the post-modern and post-colonial 1980s, against any idea of the assimilation of Aboriginal culture, Nicholas Thomas makes clear the way in which Preston distinguished between the Aboriginal-derived elements of her work and its floral subject matter: “What Preston did was explicitly *quote*, rather than more-or-less surreptitiously incorporate, her tribal sources”.

Subsequent essays and exhibitions of Preston's work continue to revise our understanding of it, bringing out such aspects as her femininity, her time spent overseas, even the religious subtext of her later work. (And who would not predict a return to the "assimilationist" reading of Preston in the climate of the current "intervention"?) It is certainly in this culturally contested space that Thompson aims to participate. After all, how else could these arrangements of Australian flora be seen except in the shadow of Preston? Except that we might say that today we must read Preston in the light of Thompson. In these new settings of Australian native flowers – of all that which would speak, apparently straightforwardly, of a national identity and a national art – Thompson is making the point that these flowers are arranged on the otherwise invisible face of the Aborigine, or even as a way of covering up an Aboriginal gaze. One thing is for sure: Thompson reminds us in *Australian Graffiti* that there is nothing less natural than nature itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as the various dresses that Thompson wears, which also incorporate "Indigenous" motifs (in no matter how sublimated a version), make clear, Preston's project still animates many aspects of the production of Australian identity. The appropriation of Aboriginal culture by such designers as Linda Jackson and Jenny Kee in the 1970s and '80s was the subject of Thompson's exhibition *Blak Palace* in 2004.