

**KENT MORRIS: UNVANISHED**

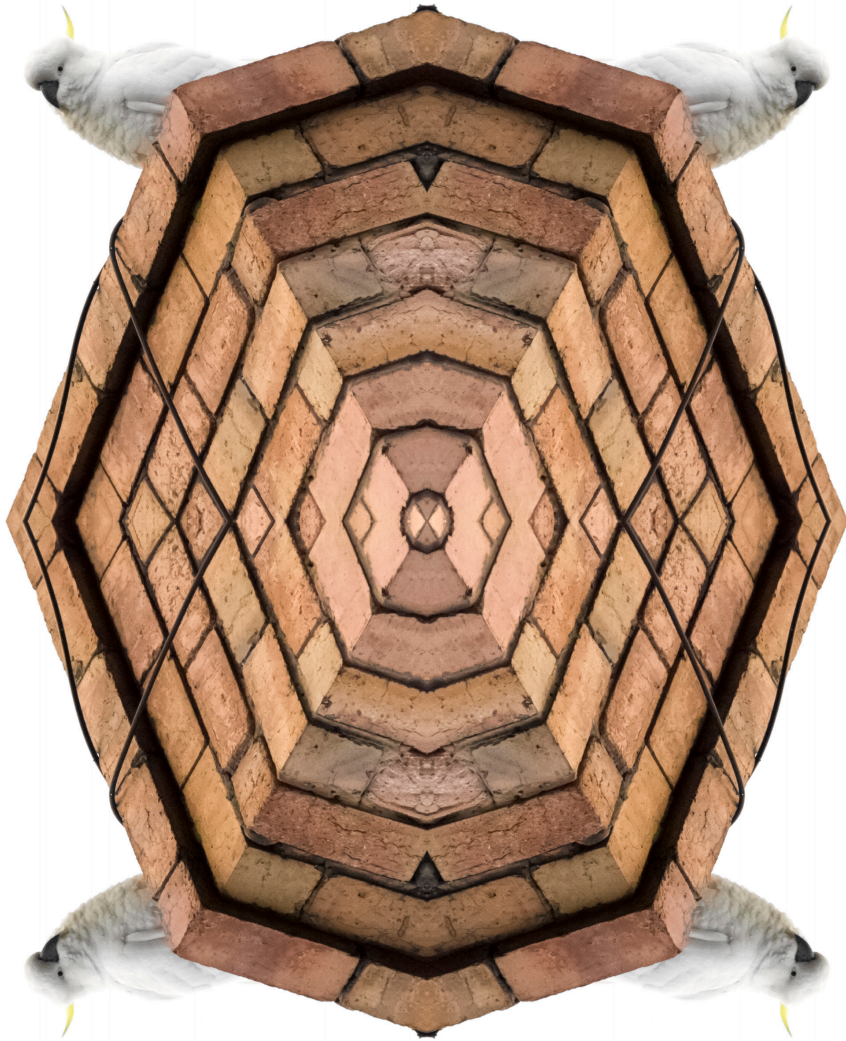
# KENT MORRIS: UNVANISHED

by Clothilde Bullen

Photography in Australia, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, is a relatively recent phenomenon that has been used in powerful ways to shape and frame, not only the representation of self and the Other, but the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Indeed, photography has often been a tool of the oppressor to re-colonize spaces and people. The historical framework of the colonizer's gaze upon Indigenous Australians ethnologized and dehumanized its subjects in order to enact government policies, particularly in the prevailing era of Social Darwinism. The custodial Countries<sup>1</sup> of Indigenous Australians were photographed in romanticized ways, documenting the landscape as devoid of its traditional owners and as spaces to be exploited, procured and capitalized upon.

Today, there is a strongly established tradition among Indigenous Australians of using photography and other digital mediums as a mechanism to reframe self-representation and reclaim agency in the representation of our culture, Countries and kinship ties. In the 1980s, Aboriginal artists pushed to make photography a political tool: getting behind the lens as they began to understand the power of documenting themselves and their communities. In the same decade that white Australia celebrated two-hundred years since the British invasion, Aboriginal photographers became cognizant of the power of the camera, not just to record, but also to bend and illuminate the truth. A wave of young photographers emerged, largely due to the support of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and other cultural institutions. Fueled by the desire to break free from the molds of passive servitude in front of the camera, photographers such as Ricky Maynard (b.1953), Mervyn Bishop (b.1945), Tracey Moffatt (b.1960), Destiny Deacon (b.1957), Brenda Croft (b.1964), r e a (b.1962) and Michael Riley (1960-2004) created a burgeoning movement to expose the crafted and partisan narratives of colonial history.

Building on the success of these mentors and forerunners, a second wave of photographic artists emerged in the last decade of the twentieth century. Many Aboriginal people had begun to graduate from university



and art school programs and established Australian commercial galleries invested in their resulting artistic output, including photography. Artists such as Dianne Jones (b.1966), Brook Andrew (b.1979) and Darren Sives (b.1968) gained national attention and were collected by important institutional collections, marking a turning point in the way Indigenous photographic work was perceived and valued.

The rise of digital manipulation and the use of sophisticated editing and printing techniques characterizes the current third-wave of photographic artists. Image makers such as James Tylor (b.1986), Hayley Millar-Baker (b.1990), Christian Thompson (b.1978), Danie Mellor (b.1971), Tony Albert (b.1981), Kristabell Porter (b.1987) and Robert Fielding (b.1969) explore the post-colonial psychology of photographic documentation, employing a range of methods to convey complex temporalities and narratives. It is within this dynamic time period of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander photographic practice that the work of Kent Morris sits.

A Barkindji man living on the land of the Yaluk-ut Weelam clan of the Boon Wurrung people, Kent Morris began his practice as an image maker in the mid 1980s, when he graduated with distinction with a post-graduate Diploma of Fine Art from the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne. The Boon Wurrung are predominantly a saltwater people whose land and waters encompass some 3,000 square miles of territory around Western Port Bay and the Mornington Peninsula. The Yaluk-ut Weelam clan are associated with the coastal land at the head of Port Phillip Bay. Yaluk-ut Weelam means “river home” or “people of the river.” Before the arrival of Europeans, Yaluk-ut Weelam Country was a flood plain surrounded by water near the mouth of the Yarra River. The Barkindji people originate from the Darling River region in the far northwest of New South Wales. The name comes from the word *barka* (*paaka*), meaning the Darling River, and *ndji* (*ntyji*) meaning “belonging to” so the Barkindji are also river people who belong to the Darling River. Their homelands extend along the Darling River from Bourke down to Wentworth and the lower end of the Paroo and Warrego rivers, and include the plains to the east and west of the Darling River.

Place is critical to the understanding of Morris’s practice – it grounds the narrative underpinned in the subject matter. So too is the history of missions and the forced removal of Aboriginal Australians from their custodial Countries to other locations. Morris’s father was born in 1938, a year when Wangkumara, Malyangpa and Barkindji people, including Morris’s fathers’ maternal great aunts and uncles, were forcibly removed at gunpoint from a place called Tibooburra to a mission at Brewarrina.



Boon Wurrung (St Kilda) - Crow, 2017, archival print on rag paper, 47.25 x 31.5 in. (120 x 80 cm), Edition 8 + 2 AP



This was not an unusual occurrence at this time in Australian history. Indigenous Australians were being taken from their places of origin across the entire continent and herded into selected locations, sometimes nowhere near their custodial Countries to be controlled and prevented from interacting with the white population. Europeans utilized the displacement of Aboriginal people to gain access to pastoral land and mining opportunities. Indeed, as early as the first part of the nineteenth century, the Kurnu – the northern Barkindji people and Morris's ancestors – walked onto Toorale Station, thirty miles southwest of Bourke, for sanctuary and survival. While the Kurnu were able to remain on Country, for many Indigenous Australians this dislocation and dispersal from Country and the cultural ways grounded in land tore at the heart of their culture, fractured kinship ties and prevented the transmission of many social customs.

Morris visited Tibooburra, now a tiny, remote town of no more than 150 people in the far northwest of New South Wales a decade ago, to see the place from which his parents' families had been taken. That visit shaped his ideas to come:

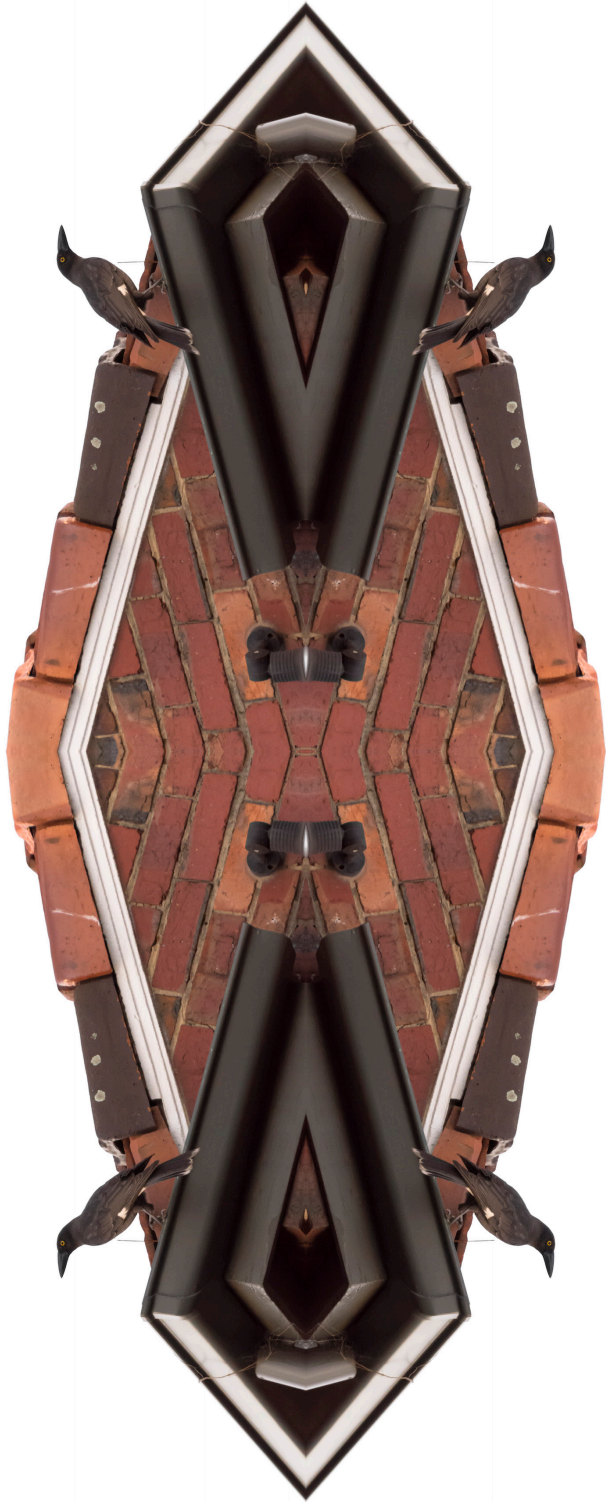
*...What struck me very painfully on my visit was that practically all traces of Aboriginal history and culture had been erased from the town. If it wasn't for the very modest Tibooburra Local Aboriginal Land Council Keeping Place that my nan's sister, Aunty Kate Monaghan, was instrumental in starting, you might not know Aboriginal people lived there at all. The few streets are named after Mitchell and Wills<sup>2</sup> and there is a sculpture at the end of the main street, in Pioneer Park, depicting Sturt's whaleboat, a nod to the 'explorer' who went on an ill fated search for a non existent inland sea in 1845.*

*It was a very painful and disconcerting experience as the Aboriginal history that had been erased included a very significant part of my family history. Before leaving, I was able to see a small collection of belongings at the Keeping Place which had the beautiful linear designs and geometric shapes inscribed by my ancestors...<sup>3</sup>*

In Morris's work the artist captures a single photographic image while walking on Country, which is then re-worked with minimal digital intervention to create an almost kaleidoscopic effect. The images are not



Butchulla (Hervey Bay) - Blue-faced Honeyeater, 2017, archival print on rag paper, 47.25 x 31.5 in. (120 x 80 cm), Edition 8 + 2 AP.



Boon Wurrung (St Kilda) - Currawong, 2017, archival print on rag paper, 47.25 x 31.5 in. (120 x 80 cm), Edition 8 + 2 AP.



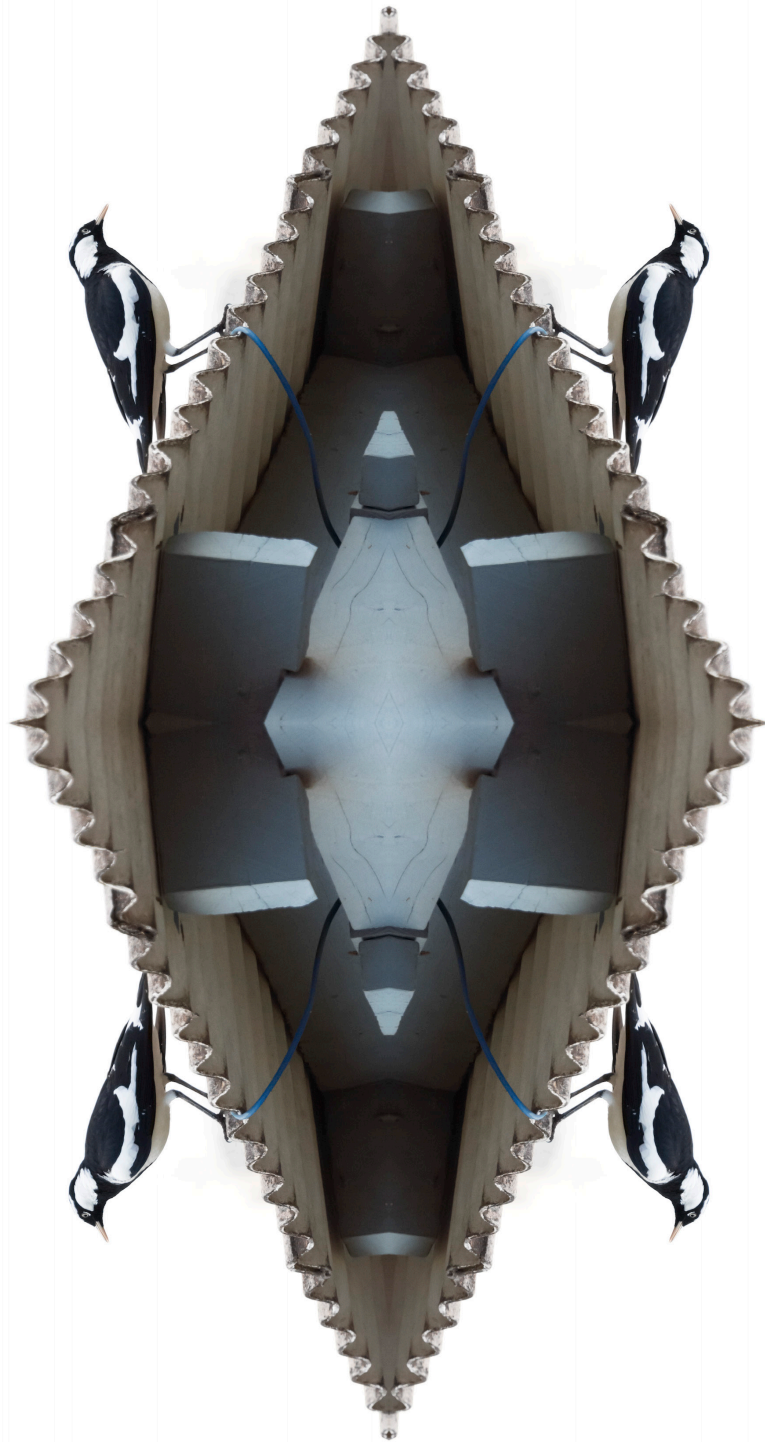


photographs of virgin landscape, but are most often pictures of the aftertaste of the colonizer: roofs of houses, electricity lines, fences delineating ownership. The shield designs, which had so struck Morris, quickly became a grounding metaphor and physical semiotic that allowed him to frame the images of built environments he had taken in particular ways. The shield shapes, a masculine object within Morris's work, often carry the linear designs of traditional Barkindji shields but are overlaid with other images, or pulled outwards to frame the central subject matter.

Morris describes the use of the shield forms as a signifier of protection, resolve and strength. In utilizing shield shapes to embed and extend the frame of the image outward, Morris makes a statement about Barkindji identity that offers a way to control and reshape the foreign built environments. In order to be able to continue to connect with Country, and to "take back space," sense must be made, not only of the past interactions with the colonizer, but of how Aboriginal people must live now, as code-switchers and translators of experience, language and history. Morris's grid-like structures offer the artist and the viewer a way to make sense of trauma and create safe spaces that are predictable and under the direction of the artist's hand.

The survival of native birds and their adaption to the built environment on Country become another significant semiotic for the artist within his work. In Australia, similar to Aboriginal people, birds are the great survivors and adaptors to their circumstances and surroundings. With the abrupt and profound changes to their natural habitats, a variety of native birds have responded to

“ The images are not photographs of virgin landscape, but are most often pictures of the aftertaste of the colonizer: roofs of houses, electricity lines, fences delineating ownership. ”



Barkindji (Bourke) - Magpie-lark, 2017, archival print on rag paper, 47.25 x 31.5 in. (120 x 80 cm), Edition 8 + 2 AP.

“ Photography acts as a form of remembrance, focusing inward and connecting Barkindji culture to the roots of its existence while simultaneously outwardly reflecting the ways in which black cultures currently operate in contemporary discourse. ”

manufactured and reassembled spaces by accepting and utilizing what is available in order to endure. Morris includes the many different kinds of birds he photographs along his journeys, usually recreating one type in a series of mirrored images across the span of the image. With minimal differentiation between foreground and background, the birds act as a symbol of the continuity of connection and culture that exists for Barkindji people.

Bird songs, movements and the stories about their creation continue to be important in Barkindji culture, but the way they exist in the cultural universe of Morris's work has shifted to reflect the dynamism of Indigenous culture: its ability to move and change and respond with time and circumstance. Multiple hierarchies of time exist in the work of the artist, and temporality exists only as a holder of knowledge, rather than a marker of forward or backward chronological

movements. Time before colonization and time following play out in the two-dimensional spaces of Morris's images. For Morris, photography acts as a form of remembrance, focusing inward and connecting Barkindji culture to the roots of its existence while simultaneously outwardly reflecting the ways in which black cultures currently operate in contemporary discourse.



Barkindj (Broken Hill) - Little Corella, 2017, archival print on rag paper, 47.25 x 31.5 in. (120 x 80 cm), Edition 8 + 2 AP.



Morris's work stamps itself firmly in the lived experience of the artist and his family and community. It profoundly and decisively resists sentimentality in favor of a positive portrayal of agency by Indigenous Australians, who understand better than many how to live with feet in two worlds. With each image's inclusion of contemporary aspects of society, it ironically makes visible the cultural and historical exclusions experienced by Barkindji people. The underlying paradigm of the subject matter framed by objects of defense – shields – and the repeated motifs of native birds invite the viewer to consider their own cultural frames of reference.

If there is a message in Morris's work, it could be that "the future, at least, has not been colonized, and for this reason is a potent and productive space in which to reside."<sup>4</sup> Morris's practice resides here, holding space for his ancestors and for those to come.

**“We are here, we were always here  
but often we and our history are unseen.  
We have not vanished...”**

**- KENT MORRIS**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The concept of Country for Indigenous Australians encompasses more than just the idea of land or ownership in a capitalistic sense, but is centered around the notion of belonging to and being born from a particular place in a particular genealogy, and inherent within this is the custodianship of knowledge, lore and identity intrinsic to that place. It is an idea not bound by geography as such but by matriarchal or patriarchal lineage and kinship ties. The capitalization is a crude way of denoting these concepts.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Mitchell (1793-1855), William John Wills (1834-61) and Charles Sturt (1795-1869) were white explorers who undertook expeditions throughout New South Wales and Victoria, mapping and claiming land as well as killing Indigenous people at that time if they proved “troublesome.”

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication with artist.

<sup>4</sup> Helen Hughes, “James Tylor: un-resettling,” *Memo Review*, April 15, 2017. <https://www.memoreview.net/blog/james-tylor-un-resettling-vivien-anderson-gallery-by-helen-hughes>



## ABOUT KENT MORRIS

Kent Morris is a Barkindji artist who lives in Melbourne. He holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Monash University and a post-graduate Diploma in Fine Art from Victorian College of the Arts. In 2013 he completed the Indigenous Arts Leadership Program at the National Gallery of Australia and his work was featured in the 2017 Tarnanthi Festival of Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art. His work has been included in many exhibitions, such as the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards, and is in numerous major public collections, including the National Gallery of Victoria, Koorie Heritage Trust and the Parliament House Art Collection. Kent is also curator and the CEO of The Torch, a not for profit organisation that provides art, cultural and arts vocational support to Indigenous offenders and ex-offenders in Victoria through its Indigenous Arts in Prison and Community Program.



## ABOUT CLOTHILDE BULLEN

Clothilde Bullen, an Aboriginal woman from Western Australia, commenced as Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Exhibitions and Collections at the Museum of Contemporary Art in January 2017, after a decade as the Curator of Indigenous Art at the Art Gallery of Western Australia in Perth. Clothilde has also curated a number of shows independently including *Darkness on the Edge of Town* in 2016 at Artbank, Sydney, and *When the Sky Fell: Legacies of the 1967 Referendum* at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art in 2017. Clothilde has been published extensively, and was the co-editor of the 2018 Indigenous edition of *Artlink* magazine, which focused on decolonizing curatorial and institutional practices. She is a Board member on *Artmonthly* magazine, and has recently been appointed to the international British Council Advisory Panel for Art Connects Us.

# KENT MORRIS: UNVANISHED

JANUARY 17 - MAY 5, 2019

## OPENING RECEPTION

Thursday, January 17, 5:30 - 7:30 pm

## KENT MORRIS GALLERY TOUR

Saturday, April 13, 10:30 am

## KENT MORRIS ARTIST TALK

Thursday, April 18, 6:00 pm

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