THE HONEY AND THE BUNNY 2011
One channel video, Edition 10
2:00 minutes (looping)
$1,100
THE HONEY AND THE BUNNY 2011
Mixed media, edition 3
Size variable (comes in a 4 x 32 x 24 cm Solander box)
$2,200
THE HONEY AND THE BUNNY 2011 (DETAIL)
What's up, Karla?

"It's a bloodthirsty business", says Karla. She could be talking about the NRFL, rugby league, with the South Sydney Rabbitohs football team a key component of this exhibition. Not just the high-contact physical nature of the competition but the whole gamut: the cut-throat business of the game, the buying and trading of players; the racism and sexism; the media scrutiny; the crash-and-burn celebrity, role models fallen from grace. This of course is a very one-sided view of the game and its culture. The upshot of being 'bloodthirsty' is that there is a lot of passion and tribalism at stake which can be fundamentally positive and life-affirming. Karla was in fact referring to the bloodthirsty business of the artworld; it is the more unifying and empowering sense of football culture, and of the South Sydney team in particular, that lies at the heart of this exhibition, Home Is Where The Rabbits Live.

So, what is it with rabbits these days? They seem to be everywhere, the subjects (at least in title) of recent publications such as Sarah Winman's debut novel When God was a Rabbit (2011) and Juan Pablo Villalobos's Guardian short-listed novel Down the rabbit hole (2011) (taking a leaf from Carroll's Alice in Wonderland no doubt), and of numerous works of contemporary art. Surely, it's more than timing, this year's Chinese Year of the Rabbit. Karla's artistic approach to the rabbit is quite unlike any other I've seen; usually these range from the decorative and nostalgic (rabbits generally make good, benign pictorial copy, with lots of classical, literary associations) to the environmental and ironic - as either the sweet and fluffy 'other' of man's destructive bent, or as introduced pest. For Karla there is only one rabbit, in this exhibition at least, and it takes two forms: the official Rabbitohs' football team logo, a swift-looking bunny not to be messed with, and the big-eared, big-smiling, larger-than-life mascot in the Rabbitoh's green and red stripes.

Karla is a 'born and bred' South Sydneysider, in the domain, the home country of the Rabbitohs football team. 'The football game was always a part of my life', she writes, 'with Redfern Oval our place of worship'. Although she doesn't claim to be a rabid Rabbitoh fan, and in adult life has only watched a few games 'with serious interest', the football team and its key signifiers are a ready reminder of where she comes from and of the spirit of belonging. As Karla writes, 'This can happen spotting a little white rabbit on the back windscreen of a car in downtown Casino [for the past few years Karla has lived outside Lismore], red and green socks on a school boy waiting at a bus stop in Liverpool, or hearing the game score revisited on the nightly news'.

As a team the Rabbitohs symbolise a working-class, underdog identity which reflects the original demographic of the South Sydney area. As Karla informs, the name of the team is said to derive from the call of the rabbit vendor making his way by horse-and-cart through South Sydney streets spruiking 'Rabbit-ohs, rabbit-ohs!' It's quite a different origin than the connection, say, of the Parramatta team with their mascot, the eel. The name 'Parramatta' derives from the original Aboriginal clan for this area, Barramattagal, meaning 'place where eels dwell'. And it's quite different to how much of South Sydney typifies gentrified inner-city living today where rabbit, once frowned upon in so-called polite society, is
now more likely to be served as a confit or roulade in its upmarket restaurants. Perhaps the rabbit vendors of yesteryear were more often than not Aboriginal. Aboriginal society was and remains a prominent feature of this area, particularly in Redfern, where it also carries underdog status in the broader Australian society. Aboriginality is certainly a strong feature of Karla's own identity, through her Wiradjuri mother, and a rich vein of awareness and inspiration in her longstanding art practice, which dates from the early '90s.

Karla's new work may be seen in context with other Aboriginal artists who have taken football as their primary subject. Peter McKenzie, for example, photographed rugby league games as part of documenting his 'Lapa' (La Perouse) community in Sydney. Aussie Rules is more the code of choice in the work of several well-known Top End artists including the late Ginger Riley (c. 1937-2002), Dinni Kunoth Kemarre from Utopia in Central Australia, and Tiwi artist John Pilaku's carved solitary football players caught in a mark-taking moment are a novel form of the Tiwi pukumani (funereal) pole sculptural tradition. Karla however does not overly concern herself with the intricacies of the game or at the level of individual players. Notice how her photographs of the team are taken at a training session, not an actual game; notably it seems to be the Juniors in training. Players are shown at a distance, from behind, in twilight semi-silhouette, or blurred in motion. Just as important in these shots are the details of location, Redfern Oval (upgraded in 2009 and the Rabbitohs' preferred training ground) with the unmistakable housing commission blocks rising up in the background, illuminated in one shot by the glow of the setting sun. As if to emphasise that this photo-narrative is about the wider human story of connection and belonging, one image seems to focus on the brand text on the football as it hangs in mid-air, spelling 'Mother'.

Images of football players in training form a small part of this exhibition. The Rabbitohs' bunny logo is definitely the star of the show, captured in various locations around South Sydney in its trademark darting profile with its single eye looking determined, almost menacing. Karla has built bodies of work around particular animals before: In Loving Memory (2008, Lismore Regional Gallery) centred on motifs and meanings related to the crow; Where Eagles Hover (1998, DQ on Oxford St, Sydney) responded to an informal residency in Cape York rock art country with spirited paintings featuring eagles and dingoes. The rabbit though is closer to home, its varied appearance on car windows, traffic signs, street poles, laneways and letterboxes reinforcing concepts of urban and communal affiliation as well as Karla's own nostalgia for the place of her upbringing.

The Rabbitohs' bunny also finds its way into Karla's paintings; several in this exhibition evoke a mandala-like field of rabbits on hand-painted, collaged fabrics. Painting and collage have been at the core of Karla's practice over the past two decades so it's understandable that she would continue her theme through this medium. The fabric paintings are characteristically rich in decorative appeal, the slightly faded vintage look of some of the prints echoes the overall works' nostalgia. Bunnies run in rings or radiate out from the painting's centre, in some ways freed from their inner-city and football
associations. They are allowed to roam larger in the sphere of Karla's imagination where details are more colourful, more patterned, ripe with the song and scent of birds and flowers.

As an artist Karla is always pushing herself, always finding new themes that have personal significance and that resonate beyond her own experience. This exhibition is no exception, and sees Karla's talent emerging in experimental ways. She talks about her piece for the large front window space of First Draft, an installation comprising photo-collaged fabric houses, vinyl stickers and lighting which, like any site-specific work, can only really be resolved in the process of its installation, and only appreciated once it's up. Photography is a new medium for her, having first shown some examples (also related to the Rabbitohs theme) earlier this year at the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative Mardi Gras exhibition, Pink Sunrise. Film is an even newer medium; here she collaborates with film-maker Nils Crompton on her own film, The Honey and the Bunny, and also gives him space in the exhibition to show one of his own.

The Honey and the Bunny is a love story told via film and a series of photographs that also appear in the film as still images. Honey (an Aboriginal drag queen) and Bunny (the Rabbitohs' Reggie Rabbit mascot) are, to say the least, an unlikely couple despite their shared fondness for fur, the colour red and big hair (well, big ears in Bunny's case). We follow them strolling through Redfern under a moonlit sky until they end up hand in hand under a terrace balcony emblazoned with the word 'love' in a string of fairy lights. The film makes more connections with the game of football and Redfern Oval but the overall narrative is the same. At first viewing the photos and the film appear full of tongue-in-cheek humour, a kind of piss-take on the ultra macho world of rugby league. There's so much more to them though than this. In the style of a poignant, queer fable, they speak about hope and love in the concrete jungle, and the enduring dreams of the underdog.

If Karla played football like she made art, she'd probably be a winger, dancing and sidestepping down the field full of pace and quick, stylish moves. Then again, she might make a better team doctor. Her art, after all, is a vital medicine - for herself and for anyone else who cares to reach into its depths.

Maurice O'Riordan, 2011
KARLA DICKENS

Born 1967, Sydney
Heritage Wiradjuri

EDUCATION
2000 Bachelor of Fine Arts, National Art School, Sydney
1993 Diploma of Fine Arts, National Art School, Sydney

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS
2015 Black Dogs, Love and Crutches, Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane
2012 Field and Game, The Hughes Gallery, Sydney
2011 Home is Where the Rabbits Live, Firstdraft, Sydney
2010 The Black Madonna, Casula Powerhouse, Sydney; Grafton Regional Gallery, New South Wales
Beloved Mother, Dacou, Alstonville, New South Wales
2009 In Loving Memory I Found the Black Madonna, Museum of Brisbane, Queensland
2008 Karla Dickens, Iain Dawson Gallery, Sydney
Loving Memory, Lismore Regional Gallery, New South Wales
2005 Home, Next Contemporary Art Space, Southern Cross University, Lismore, New South Wales
2004 Our Lady of Triana, Black Fellas Dreaming, Sydney
Urban Aboriginals, Black Fellas Dreaming, Bangalow, New South Wales
2003 Love, Luck & Lust, A-Space on Cleveland, Sydney
2002 Sheilas Downunder, Pine Street Gallery, Sydney
2001 Unwind, A-Space on Cleveland, Sydney
2000 Now Nowhere Here, DQ Gallery, Sydney
1998 Cross Works, Guardella, Italy,
No Limits, Hogarth Galleries, Sydney

JOINT EXHIBITIONS
2014 The Honey and the Bunny (with Monica Oppens), Southern Cross University Library, Lismore, New South Wales
2011 Mother of All (with Ishta Wilson), Tweed River Art Gallery, Murwillumbah, New South Wales

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
2015 Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards 2015, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
Bungaree’s Farm, The Tanks/Mosman Art Gallery, Sydney
Blak Nite Screen 2015, City of Melbourne, Treasury Gardens, Melbourne
Cementa 15: Biennial Contemporary Arts Festival, Kandos, New South Wales
Hereby Make Protest, Carriageworks, Sydney

2013
The Art of Sound, Grafton Regional Gallery, New South Wales
The Native Institute, Blacktown Arts Centre, New South Wales
Parliament of New South Wales Aboriginal Art Prize, Parliament House, Sydney

2012–15
Bungaree: The First Australian, Mosman Art Gallery, Sydney; Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery, New South Wales; The Glasshouse, Port Macquarie, New South Wales

2012
Home, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
Feminage: The Logic of Feminist Collage, The Cross Art Projects, Sydney

2011
People We Know—Places We've Been, Goulburn Regional Gallery, New South Wales
Thank you for the days: My Teenage Years, Lismore Regional Gallery, New South Wales
Pink Sunrise, Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative, Sydney
Freedom Riders, University Art Gallery, The University of Sydney, New South Wales
Fairytales in Fairyland, Grafton Regional Gallery, Grafton, New South Wales

2010
Safari: Biennale of Sydney Fringe, MOP, Sydney
Parliament of New South Wales Indigenous Art Award, Parliament House, Sydney
Articles of Interest, SCI Next Art Gallery, Lismore, New South Wales
Lest We Forget, Dacou, Alstonville, New South Wales

2009
Parliament of New South Wales Indigenous Art Award, Parliament House, Sydney (touring New South Wales regional galleries)
Connections, NPWS Art, Northern Rivers Community Gallery, Ballina, New South Wales

2008
Messages of Peace, Gallery XX, Settembre, Italy
Fisher’s Ghost Art Award, Campbelltown City Art Centre, New South Wales
Confidential Business Project, Casula Powerhouse, Sydney
Australian Values, Next Art Gallery, Southern Cross University, Lismore, New South Wales
Premier State, Campbelltown City Art Centre, New South Wales
Identity, Grafton Regional Gallery, New South Wales
The Year of the Apology, Northern Rivers Community Gallery, Ballina, New South Wales

2007
Parliament of New South Wales Indigenous Art Award, Parliament House, Sydney (touring New South Wales regional galleries)
Past, Present, Future, Grafton Regional Gallery, New South Wales
3 in 10, Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative, Sydney

2006
Chrysalis: The Emergence of Northern Rivers Artists, Lismore Regional Gallery, New South Wales
The Pink, The Black and the Beautiful, Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative, Sydney
Our Spirit Our Country, Bungjalung Art Award, Lismore Regional Gallery, New South Wales
2005  Group of Eleven Artists—NAIDOC Week, Waverley Library, Sydney
2004  Nice Coloured Dolls, 24HR Art Northern Territory Centre for Contemporary Art, Darwin
2003  Hung, Drawn and Quartered, Tin Sheds Gallery, University of Sydney, New South Wales
2001  Aboriginal Ways of Knowing, Macy Gallery, Columbia University, New York, NY, USA
1998  Arone Meeks & Co., Cooee Aboriginal Gallery, Sydney
1997  National Indigenous Heritage Art Award, Old Parliament House, Canberra
1996  Co-existence—Sorry, Hogarth Galleries, Sydney
1995  Never the Less, John Paynter Gallery, Newcastle, New South Wales
1994  Portia Geach Memorial Award, S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney
1993  Festival of Fisher’s Ghost, Campbelltown City Art Gallery, New South Wales

AWARDS
2013  Winner, New South Wales Parliament Art Prize, NSW Parliament, Sydney
2009  Runner-up, NPWS Northern Rivers Region Aboriginal Art Award, Northern Rivers Community Gallery, Ballina, New South Wales
2007  Winner, NPWS Northern Rivers Region Aboriginal Art Award, Northern Rivers Community Gallery, Ballina, New South Wales
2006  Winner, NPWS Northern Rivers Region Aboriginal Art Award, Northern Rivers Community Gallery, Ballina, New South Wales

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY
Anon. 'Freedom Riders', Sydney University Museums News, Art and Aboriginal Rights Special Feature, Sydney, June 2011
Anon. 'Remembering 'Humanity Lost': Karla Dickens and Aris Prabawa', Art Monthly Australia, Issue 244, October 2011, pp. 66–67
Anon. 'The medicine of creation', GPSpeak, October 2011
Balodis, Janis. 'The healing art of transformation', Health Speak, Summer 2015
Fraser, Virginia. 'Bungaree, the First Australian interrupted', Art Monthly Australia, Issue 262, August 2013, pp. 9–12
Geczy, Adam. 'The Native Institute', Art Monthly Australia, Issue 263 September 2014, p. 56
King, Natalie, Mundine, Djon and Cruikshank, Alan. 'Whisper in my mask', Contemporary Visual Art+Culture Broadsheet, Issue 43.2, 2014
Leane, Jeanine. ‘Karla Dickens: Continuing the Dialogue’, Art and Australia, May 2104, 51.4
O’Riordan, Maurice. ‘Where Eagles Hover’, Artlink, Volume 18 Number 1, March 1999
O’Riordan, Maurice. ‘What’s up, Karla’, Karla Dickens: Home is Where the Rabbit Lives [ex. cat.], Firstdraft/Arts NSW, Sydney, 2011
O’Riordan, Maurice. ‘In My Painting, At My Window’, Karla Dickens: Loving Memory [ex. cat.], Lismore Regional Gallery, 2008
Taffel, Jacqui. ‘Story of Bungaree explored on the site that was once his’, Sydney Morning Herald, 5 February 2015

Collections
National Museum of Australia, Canberra
Black Fellas Dreaming Museum, Sydney
Campbelltown City Art Centre, New South Wales
Grafton Regional Art Gallery, New South Wales
Lismore Regional Art Gallery, New South Wales
University of Technology, Sydney
UBS Warburg Collection, Sydney