



KARLA DICKENS

THE NATIVE INSTITUTE

THE NATIVE INSTITUTE

The Native Institute¹ was born from good intention, those who knew better wanted to create a place to change, mould, and reinvent the natives into a mirror of their own standards, principles, morals and civilised ways. It was Australia's birthplace of white-washing the savage native, a training ground for work skills, a training ground in the ways of white authority, white domestic skills and farming, a crash course in assimilation for those young enough not to resist.

Given my interests in things hand-made I have been pulled towards The Native Institutes's training of young girls in the civilised skills such as needlework. My creating and retelling of the impact and experience based on The Institute started at this point. I considered the tears and grief of the people and lives that the process of civilising had touched and chose first to work with 'the civilised hanky' in four works *Tears To Be Civilised 1–4*. A tool used to dangle and entice the natives were often wholesome products such as tea, sugar and flour, I went with black tea to soak and stain the hankys. The tea wasn't brooded in a billy on an open fire. However, as I stirred the white linens decorated with hand embroidered lace with a stick from the garden in a copper pot, I felt myself feeling very domestic. The chores continued as I hang my stains on the clothes line, I remember my grandmother, her mother, and the importance and ritual that surrounded 'the washing'. The next process gave me a sense of healing as the hankies slowly lost their daintiness, I pushed tacks through their stained quaintness, hoping to speak to the viewer of the pain and loss these young girls and woman endured. The contrast and conflict of pretty handywork and the sharp, potentially painful hardware running parallel with the contrast and conflict of cultures.

I humbly came to the conclusion after reading and researching The Native Institute that maybe it was designed by people who honestly appeared to have good intentions for the natives in mind. Even though I believe this, it hasn't made it any easier to understand. That's when the use of the bibles came into play—with a symbol of goodness and rightfulness, I drilled holes through leather covers and old pages. Again I chose sharp objects to pierce through a symbol of goodness, taking aim at compulsory

1. On a prominent and busy intersection where Rooty Hill Road North meets Richmond Road, a bare site is protected by cyclone fencing and a small lock. Beyond the grassy surrounds the landscape is typical of Western Sydney's urban sprawl. On the gate that keeps the public out is an official "No Trespassing" sign in bold red. Most locals here would be unaware that within the parameters of the fenced off area lies the foundations of The Black Town Native Institute. Established in Blacktown in 1823, after it was relocated from Parramatta, to 'educate' and 'reform' Aboriginal children during colonisation, this potent site on the corner of Richmond Road and Rooty Hill Road North represents the origins of the institutionalisation of Aboriginal people in Australia. The site is a profound symbol of race relations and cross-cultural interaction in Australia. <http://www.sydneybarani.com.au/the-native-institute-exhibition/>

church visits, bible studies and missionaries who were a large part of the civilisation process in The Native Institute. Just as the hankies and tacks draw on contrast and conflict of cultures I worked along the same vein with the bibles. They are uncomfortable to hold in your hand. This time, not only using sharp little tacks that draw blood under foot, I also used porcupine quills and snake skins—acknowledging the denied culture of the first Australians.

After showing the bibles to a friend, I was sent the story of *Piggebillah, the Porcupine* (the story in short):

The porcupine was once a man, the others in his tribe became suspicious as many people kept disappearing, then one night a young woman came across him in the dark, Piggebillah sprang out, and plunged his spear into her body. The old man dragged her off the track, ate her limbs and hid the rest of her body away for a later meal. He had been surviving as a cannibal, after a secret meeting was held it was decided that Piggebillah must be killed. His tribes men gathered silently round him as he was asleep, then they attacked him with spears. Piggebillah laid still but he did not die. He dragged himself into the deeper shadows and fell down the hole of the Trap-door Spider; Murga Muggai. Piggebillah stayed in the hole until his wounds were healed yet there was one thing he could not do, he was unable to pull the spears out of his body. Piggebillah had turned into a Porcupine, the little animal that scratches for ants because he cannot eat other food, and burrows underground to escape from his enemies. This beautiful dreaming story and the use of the porcupine quills in my bibles talked to me of punishment, disappearance, pain, scaring and transformation.

Hanging as an installation are four works 1. *Good Intentions* and 2. *Blackstown, Ghost Town* these two pieces use hand embroidered linens soaked in tea then stained with coffee, paper collage and tacks that pierce the words *Good Intentions* and on the second piece *Blackstown, Ghost Town*.

The works are darkened with the use of black net, images from Australian history books and shadow figures that take a solid presence. The frames are oversized, intense antiques that I've knocked back with black paint. Sitting alongside these two pieces is the well worn 3. *Work Horse* constructed by weaving together a smelly old collar used to harness work horses and raffia, this work has a more personal response as I acknowledge the women in my family and their experience in the process of being made useful and civilised. It's about the training of young girls and woman in duties on farms and homes by both day and night. Often found listed in farmers' stock catalogues are words similar to "five cows, two horses, one goat and two gins". With Aborigines seen as no more then livestock in need of taming for the propose of duty and labour.

The last piece 4. *Have Mercy* is a painting of Jesus with the words 'Scared heart of Jesus have mercy on us' it was found at my local tip. The work has been painted with love and is unsigned. The timing of finding this painting (along with most things I collect for art making) was indeed serendipitous. I may question missionaries' actions in the colonial history of Australia and their ways of carrying and honouring messages and beliefs. I do not question any culture's foundational figurehead, Jesus

included. I guess I relate to a figure who knew suffering and betrayal.

Since my visit to The Native Institute site I often wonder how the children found comfort before sleep each night. My comfort has come from believing they called on The Dreaming.

Karla Dickens



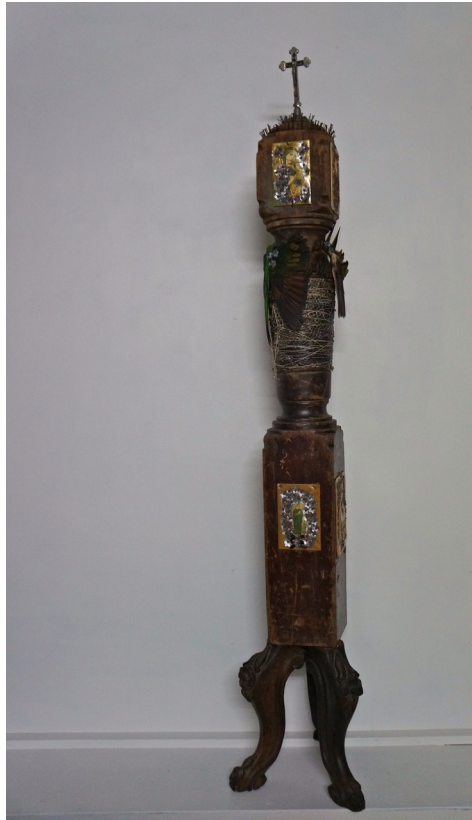
THE NATIVE INSTITUTE 2013–15 (DETAIL)

Mixed media

Polyptych—dimensions variable

\$44,000

Note: The cross in this photo is not a part of the artwork. The cross on the following pages is a part of the work.



ON THE WINGS OF A PRAYER

Mixed media

156 x 30 x 30 cm



ON THE WINGS OF A PRAYER (DETAIL)



ON THE WINGS OF A PRAYER (DETAIL)



ON THE WINGS OF A PRAYER (DETAIL)



(LEFT AND CENTRE) BLACKTOWN GHOST TOWN, GOOD INTENTIONS
Mixed media on board, 70 x 80 cm (each)

(RIGHT) [ARTIST UNKNOWN], HAVE MERCY
Oil on canvas, 76 x 50 cm



WORKHORSE

Vintage horse harness, raffia, acrylic
73 x 54 x 24 cm



(LEFT TO RIGHT) TEARS TO BE CIVILISED 3, TEARS TO BE CIVILISED 4,
TEARS TO BE CIVILISED 2, TEARS TO BE CIVILISED 1
Vintage handkerchief, tacks, acrylic (framed)
43 x 43 cm (each)



TEARS TO BE CIVILISED 2
Vintage handkerchief, tacks, acrylic
43 x 43 cm



THE NATIVE INSTITUTE (DETAIL)

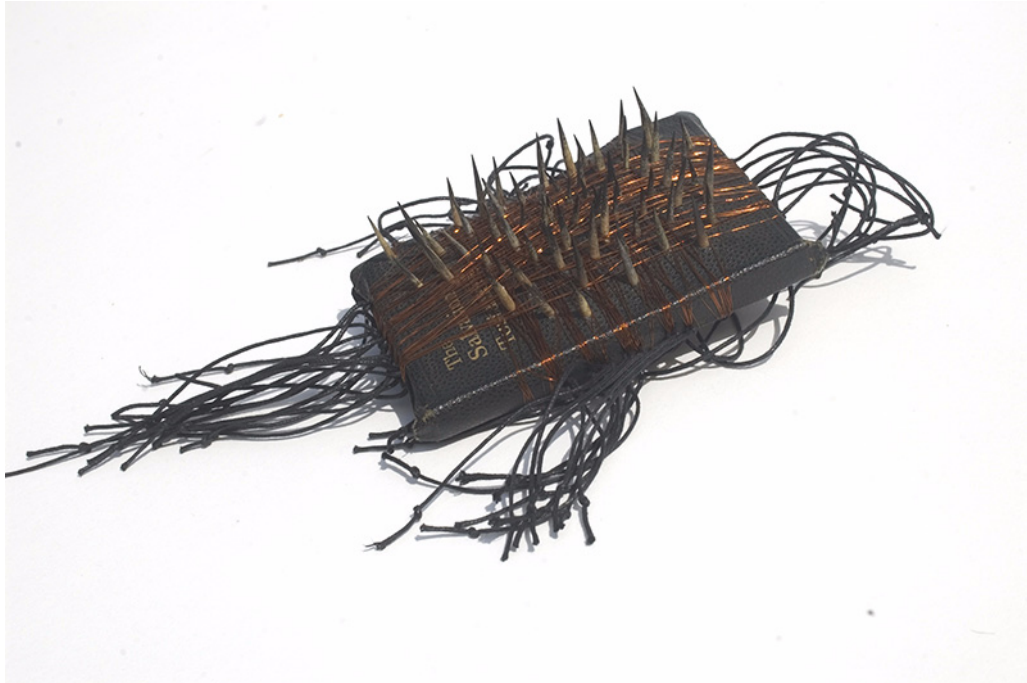
Note: The display cases on this page on the following two are not a part of the artwork.



THE NATIVE INSTITUTE (DETAIL)



THE NATIVE INSTITUTE (DETAIL)



AGONY IN THE GARDEN
Mixed media



CRUCIFIED
Mixed media



CRUCIFIED (DETAIL)
Mixed media



A COMMON PAIN
Mixed media



HYMNS TO THE SILENCE
Mixed media



SECOND COMING
Mixed media



CROWN OF THORNS
Mixed media



TEMPTATION
Mixed media



KISSING JUDAS (RIGHT)
Mixed media



NATIVE INSTITUTE (DETAIL)
Mixed media



NATIVE INSTITUTE (DETAIL)



NATIVE INSTITUTE (DETAIL)



NATIVE INSTITUTE (DETAIL)

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

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 *Bungaree's Farm*, The Tanks/Mosman Art Gallery, Sydney

Blak Nite Screen 2015, City of Melbourne, Treasury Gardens, Melbourne

2014 *TarraWarra Biennial 2014: Whisper in My Mask*, TarraWarra Museum of Art, Healesville, Victoria

Hereby Make Protest, Carriageworks, Sydney

The Native Institute, Blacktown Arts Centre, New South Wales

2013 *The Art of Sound*, Grafton Regional Gallery, New South Wales

	<i>The Native Institute</i> , Blacktown Arts Centre, New South Wales
	<i>Parliament of New South Wales Aboriginal Art Prize</i> , Sydney
2012–15	<i>Bungaree: The First Australian</i> , Mosman Art Gallery, Sydney; Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery, New South Wales; The Glasshouse, Port Macquarie, New South Wales
2012	<i>Home</i> , Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
	<i>Feminage: The Logic of Feminist Collage</i> , The Cross Art Projects, Sydney
2011	<i>People We Know—Places We’ve Been</i> , Goulburn Regional Gallery, New South Wales
	<i>Thank you for the days: My Teenage Years</i> , Lismore Regional Gallery, New South Wales
	<i>Pink Sunrise</i> , Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative, Sydney
	<i>Freedom Riders</i> , University Art Gallery, The University of Sydney, New South Wales
	<i>Fairytales in Fairyland</i> , Grafton Regional Gallery, Grafton, New South Wales
2010	<i>Safari: Biennale of Sydney Fringe</i> , MOP, Sydney
	<i>Parliament of New South Wales Indigenous Art Award</i> , Parliament House, Sydney
	<i>Articles of Interest</i> , SCI Next Art Gallery, Lismore, New South Wales
	<i>Lest We Forget</i> , Dacou, Alstonville, New South Wales
2009	<i>Parliament of New South Wales Indigenous Art Award</i> , Parliament House, Sydney (touring New South Wales regional galleries)
	<i>Connections</i> , NPWS Art, Northern Rivers Community Gallery, Ballina, New South Wales
2008	<i>Messages of Peace</i> , Gallery XX, Settembre, Italy
	<i>Fisher’s Ghost Art Award</i> , Campbelltown City Art Centre, New South Wales
	<i>Confidential Business Project</i> , Casula Powerhouse, Sydney
	<i>Australian Values</i> , Next Art Gallery, Southern Cross University, Lismore, New South Wales
	<i>Premier State</i> , Campbelltown City Art Centre, New South Wales
	<i>Identity</i> , Grafton Regional Gallery, New South Wales
	<i>The Year of the Apology</i> , Northern Rivers Community Gallery, Ballina, New South Wales
2007	<i>Parliament of New South Wales Indigenous Art Award</i> , Parliament House, Sydney (touring New South Wales regional galleries)
	<i>Past, Present, Future</i> , Grafton Regional Gallery, New South Wales
	<i>3 in 10</i> , Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative, Sydney
2006	<i>Chrysalis: The Emergence of Northern Rivers Artists</i> , Lismore Regional Gallery, New South Wales
	<i>The Pink, The Black and the Beautiful</i> , Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative, Sydney
	<i>Our Spirit Our Country</i> , <i>Bungjalung Art Award</i> , Lismore Regional Gallery, New South Wales
2005	<i>Group of Eleven Artists—NAIDOC Week</i> , Waverley Library, Sydney
2004	<i>Nice Coloured Dolls</i> , 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
- 1999 *Perspecta: Love Magic*, S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney
Arone Meeks & Co., Cooee Aboriginal Gallery, Sydney
- 1998 *National Indigenous Heritage Art Award*, Old Parliament House, Canberra
Co-existence—Sorry, Hogarth Galleries, Sydney
- 1997 *Stars on the Net*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
- 1996 *Never the Less*, John Paynter Gallery, Newcastle, New South Wales
- 1995 *Portia Geach Memorial Award*, S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney
- 1994 *Festival of Fisher's Ghost*, Campbelltown City Art Gallery, New South Wales
Recognising the Republic, Michael Nagy Fine Art Gallery, Sydney

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
- Behrendt, Larissa. Hereby Make Protest review—a historical reflection on Aboriginal activism, *The Guardian*, 18 June 2014
- 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
- Mundine, Professor Djon OAM (editor). *Bungaree: The First Australian* [ex.cat.], Mosman Art Gallery, Sydney; Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery, New South Wales, 2012, p. 11 and pp. 38–39

Mundine, Professor Djon OAM. 'Conversations with a Crow', *Art Monthly Australia*, Issue 212, August 2008, pp. 40-42

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

Parker, Luke and Stephen, Ann (editors). *Freedom Riders: Art and Activism 1960s to Now*, University Art Gallery, The University of Sydney, Sydney, 2011

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

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