

Adam Hill — Not a proppa Aborigine

DJON MUNDINE

The front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* Thursday 4 November 2010 carried an article titled 'Indigenous Applicant Not Black Enough For the Job' (by the ironically named Deborah Snow). It told of how Canberra University student Tarran Betteridge found she was 'not a proppa Aborigine' when she applied for a designated Aboriginal position in Canberra. Not two weeks earlier, Adam Hill's retrospective exhibition titled *Not a proppa Aborigine* opened at Mosman Art Gallery. The exhibition followed Hill's career from his first mural-type artworks at Western Sydney's Riverstone School in 1998. It was hung with another exhibition: *Contemporary Aboriginal Art from the Ann Lewis Collection*.

Once upon a time the only things branded were livestock, prisoners and slaves. Now we in the artworld are so cool (if a little stupid, mercenary, and shallow to unbelievably depths), and everything, like McDonald's and KFC, is 'branded'. Naming has been historically such an important action. In Adam's case his very name conjures such a powerful, loaded image. The origin of his name is the biblical Adam, the first man. Aboriginal people are often called the first people. 'Hill': a hill is a landform that extends up above the surrounding terrain; a protuberance ambiguously both phallic and breast-like female.

Kempsey, where Adam has his Aboriginal roots, is associated with floods. The town was established in 1834 and in this process of colonisation many of the Dungatti people were massacred and dispersed. 'Blacks-town' (Blacktown, Sydney) where Adam came to live is, of course, named from the Aboriginal population that resided there. A landform and contours still exist in Sydney. A ridge or hill runs through here dividing the Nepean River from Sydney Harbour (really a flooded river valley). We don't know what spirit resides there. These key geographical features appear regularly in Hill's work and in the exhibition (see *Bennelong time*, 2001, and *Looking up/looking back*, 2002, for example).

A TAFE college opened at Blacktown in 1969, the same year as Kmart. Soon after Adam's birth (in 1970), modernity in the form of McDonald's opened in Main St, Blacktown (1974).

'Not really a proper Aboriginal', Kevin Gilbert had received a life sentence for murder in 1957. While in prison he taught himself printmaking and he took up writing. In 1968 he penned the play *The Cherry Pickers*. Gilbert exhibited his artwork at the Arts Council Gallery in Sydney in 1970. The Black Theatre that became established in Redfern in 1971 mounted Gilbert's play there. The play tells the story of the life of itinerant rural Aboriginal seasonal workers and the irony of how outside wider society 'cherry picks' talented Aboriginal individuals, often removing them from the Aboriginal society to its loss (see Hill's *The Cherry Pickers*, 2009, commissioned for a new building on the site of the 1971 Black Theatre).

It was also in 1970 the artists of Papunya began their movement, in painting a mural on the side of the community school. Adam makes a reference to the place in *Alkipi waterhole* (2000). 'White' people first appeared in Australia in the form of Captain Cook in 1770. When Adam was born in 1970, and from then on, 'white' people began to appear in increasing numbers in Western Sydney in the form of government housing commission estates that took over the until then country environment and rural paddocks, only to be 'super-succeeded' by aspiring lower middle-class migrants taking advantage of the cheap land.

Not really proper Aborigines (in stereotype), Hill's peer group population of urban Aboriginal people popped up into government statistics from the late 1960s and 1970s when many rural Aboriginal families moved to Sydney for education and work opportunities. With their housing estates came communities of poverty and despair; places of petty crime, drugs and a car culture (only 30% of Blacktown's residents use public transport to travel to work). Creating art was one way of rising above these setbacks.

'Adam's an activist.' (Adam Hill's father)

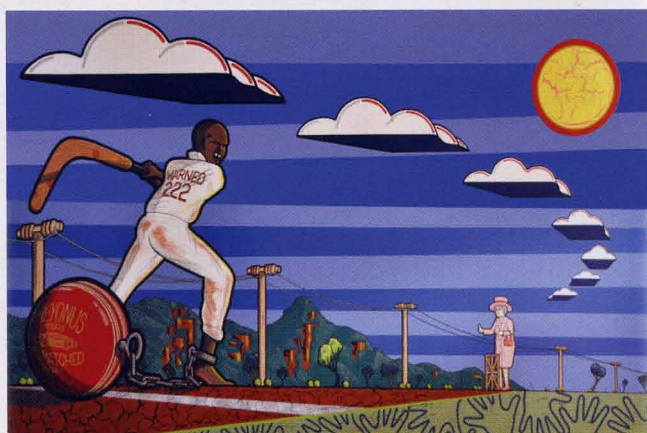
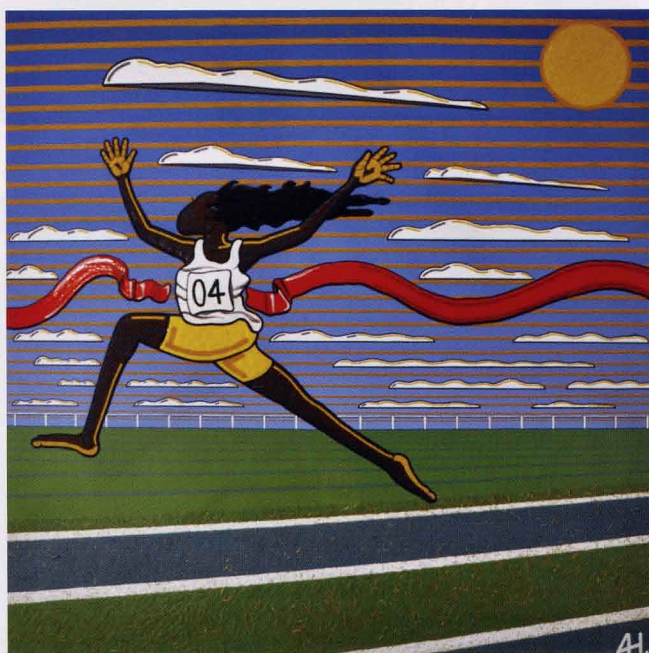
'I'm a Koori.' (Adam Hill)

'Adam's a real lair, a real flash cowboy.'
(An outside observer)

In 1983 as Adam reached teen years, *Rumble Fish*, the Francis Ford Coppola feature film, was released – a romanticised

story of disaffected youths living in a small population centre on the edge of a large city, adopting heroic personas and avatars (Motorcycle Boy and his younger brother Rusty-James) to escape the dullness and pain of their bleak economic lives. The same year, in perhaps a not-so-romantic story, Parklea Prison opened in the region.

Many artists such as US painter Jackson Pollock began their careers from government-sponsored mural projects. Although definitely not Pollock, Hill's career began with a mural of two very prominent features of his world, the Nepean River and the Three



Sisters Aboriginal sacred site in the nearby Blue Mountains to the west. Mounted at the beginning of the Mosman exhibition space, these two were painted in 1998 in acrylic 'house paint', a material he has continued to use, preferring its density, consistency, durability and affordability.

Although initially self-taught, Hill attained a BA in Graphic Art in 1994 at the University of Western Sydney that was itself only established in 1989 and tragically closed its visual arts faculty in 2009.

I s'pect I just growed. Don't think nobody never made me. I was raised by speculators.

(Topsy, Chapter XX, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1852.)¹

When I first met Adam Hill at Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative around the mid-1990s he wore a rich mustard yellow shirt and blood-red tie and 'black as black' trousers – Aboriginal colours. I thought, 'Man, is this guy Italian or something?' A pop-out personality, Adam's a real 'lair'; a flash cowboy, a real dandy – like the *Rumble Fish* characters; a pop-out figure you can dress in many costumes, many personalities and guises but always striving to be very visibly Aboriginal.

A number of Aboriginal male artists popped out of the western suburbs of Sydney from the 1970s and 1980s, and, in a crowded Aboriginal art market that in some ways (social and physical distance) conspired against them, they strived to grab and hold attention: Brook Andrew, Danny Eastwood, Adam Hill, Jake Soewardie, and now Jason Wing. They used graphic art imagery and primary colours to make bold and powerful political statements. Unlike Harriet Beecher Stowe's Topsy they knew where they came from. They all strongly believed and expressed their Aboriginal histories. They deeply thought, and wanted to say: 'I am Aboriginal – I could pass as a "white person" but I refuse to.' A receptive art environment existed for this exciting, bold group both in Western Sydney and, growing in time, outside.

Adam Hill's sparse, back-of-line, urban, debris-littered landscapes allude to the countryside behind the frontline where most of the environmental and social crimes and corruption occurs. A small, newborn, often naked, vulnerable Aboriginal child (possibly himself) sits in this land, the target of various actions and questionable 'gifts'.

Manga is a Japanese comic and print cartoon-type artform read by adults as much as children in Japan whereas such things are seen as more for teenagers and children in the West. As an artform *manga* begins back in the time of James Cook, around 1798, but in its present form really came into prominence after World War II and covers a broad range of subject matter and stories. Young Aboriginal artists are more likely to be influenced by *anime* Japanese films (animated film versions of *manga*) that became available and popular in Australia in the mid-1990s. Hill's own work is informed by his research into historical records of Aboriginal resistance. His graphic art is more directly overtly political. In composition and style, it's somewhere between Indian advertising banners and Christian moralising didactic comics.

In a 2002 interview US 'black Caribbean' singer and actor Harry Belafonte, in attacking the policies of the George H. Bush administration, referred to Secretary of State Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice as 'house niggers': the acceptable, trustworthy black who lives in the master's house. Commentator John von

Sturmer suggested a line that some Aboriginal artists were in fact a type of 'house nigger'; others are 'field niggers' and not allowed into the house of Western art. They are only allowed to make murals and other community or public art that is possibly not seen as serious art. It's surprising who is in fact accepted quickly into the house.

In 2003, though not winning a prize, Adam's painting *Hand Christian and her son* was short-listed and hung in the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award in Darwin. Later that year his Cathy Freeman tribute, *Despite Her Race She Was a Winner*, was acquired by the NSW Parliament House collection. He has possibly entered the 'white' house of Western art.

Australian artist Margaret Preston lived in Mosman in the 1920s. When she took the then revolutionary step of painting Aboriginal-style images, she informed her audience by using ochre colours and outlining her figures in strong black lines. The bark painters of Arnhem Land also commonly outline their figures, often in brown or black. Adam said he uses black lines in his work to indicate a black shadow (soul) of Aboriginality. Some figures he outlines in white to indicate a 'white' persona despite the colour of their skin.

In 1815 Governor Macquarie presented Bungaree, the so-called 'Chief of the Broken Bay Tribe', with fifteen acres for a farm on Georges Head in what is now the suburb called Mosman. According to the Australian Census there are a modest twenty-nine Aboriginal people living in the Mosman shire. New Mosman Art Gallery Director John Cheeseman (formerly Director of Blacktown Arts Centre) wanted to bring Aboriginal art to Mosman, but further he wanted to show someone who wasn't a 'proppa Aboriginal'. Cheeseman announced on Adam Hill's opening night that funding had been established for his *Bungaree's Farm* art project to happen over 2011-2012. A number of contemporary Western Sydney artists including Adam have been invited to propose art projects talking to this subject both inside the gallery and outside.

I. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, first published by the Washington-based *National Era* newspaper as a serial, and by John P. Jewett and Company (in two volumes), Boston, 1852.

Adam Hill - *Not a proppa Aborigine* was shown at Mosman Art Gallery, Sydney, 4 September to 14 November 2010. *Contemporary Aboriginal Art from the Anne Lewis Collection*, toured by Moree Plains Gallery, was shown at Mosman Art Gallery 16 October to 14 November 2010. <http://mosmanartgallery.org.au/>

Djon Mundine OAM is an independent Sydney-based Indigenous (Bandjalang) curator and writer. He is a Ph.D student at the College of Fine Arts, Sydney. Current projects include *Beauty, Vanity and Narcissism*, an exhibition in collaboration with Cross Art Projects, and *Shadow Life*, an exhibition of Indigenous photomedia-based art, co-curated with Natalie King and supported by Asialink.



P21: *Lookin up/looking back*, 2002, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, diptych: 90 x 240cm. Collection: Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils.

P22: 1/ *Alkipi waterhole*, 2000, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 90cm. Collection: Dr Peter Mouser.

2/ *Despite her race she was a winner*, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 150cm. Collection: Parliament of NSW (finalist, Parliament of NSW Indigenous Art Prize).

3/ *Unfair dismissal*, 2009, synthetic polymer paint on board, 150 x 250cm. Collection of the artist; Highly Commended, 2009 Cricket Art Prize.

Robert Campbell Junior, *Let's be friends (learning from each other's culture)*, 1988, acrylic on canvas, 122 x 227 x 2.5cm.

Collection: Australian National University Collection.

Image courtesy the artist's estate and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney. Mundine locates Hill's work within a figurative tradition, drawing comparison with fellow Kempsi-born artist, the late Robert Campbell Junior (1994-93). 'Possibly the 'human figure' was the historical compositional form of the south-east. Roy Kennedy and Elaine Russell both work in a similar way to compose nostalgic cultural memories of the positive times of 'mission life'; or Robert Campbell Junior's generic 'everyman' figures, now more likely engaged in toil, or struggle, and similar kinds of oppression within his compositions.' Unless otherwise indicated all works by Adam Hill; images courtesy the artist.