

DALE HARDING

Through a lens of visitation



Published by Monash University Museum of Art and Powered by Power

**Bidjara Garingbal Karingbal**

**Carnarvon Gorge Section, Carnarvon Gorge  
National Park, Queensland, Australia**

**A spiritual homeland**

**Many generations of caretakers**

**Many Aboriginal families have upheld and  
maintained reverence for this place and its  
many stories**

**I openly and wholeheartedly acknowledge that  
there are many Aboriginal people who claim  
their birthrights to the place we now call  
Carnarvon Gorge**

**Many Aboriginal people and their families who  
I have not met, and do not know of**

**I acknowledge you**

**I express my respect to your families**

**I offer my care for your ancestors**

**Groups of Aboriginal families who I have  
met, and Countrymen who have been doing  
the work**

**I acknowledge you**

**I express my respect to your families**

**I offer my care for your ancestors**

**The creek is nourished by many sources**

Kate Harding's parents were Bidjara and Chungalu Elders and she maintains her Garingbal matrilineality. Harding works in a wide variety of textile media, specialising in embroidery techniques including silk ribbon embroidery and stumpwork. Recently, she has been invigorating the ancestral practices of basketry and bag forms, in particular the pituyuri bag. Harding's work was exhibited in *Tradelines* at Bundaberg Regional Art Gallery in 2019 and a suite of her contemporary bag forms foregrounded Dale Harding's 2018 exhibition *The drive home* at Milani Gallery, Brisbane. Harding has been central to her son Dale Harding's material working processes for exhibitions including the 11th Gwangju Biennial in Korea in 2016, and the National Indigenous Triennial at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra in 2017.

Dr Nancy Underhill established the Department of Art History and The University Art Museum at the University of Queensland. She has been a Visiting Fellow at the Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, Canberra and Research Associate at the Menzies Centre, Kings College, London. Her books include *Sidney Nolan a life* (2015), *Nolan on Nolan: Sidney Nolan in his own words* (2007), *Letters of John Reed*, co-edited with Barrett Reid (2001) and *Making Australian art 1916-49* (1991).

Dr Deborah Edwards was Senior Curator of Australian Art, Art Gallery of New South Wales from 2002 to 2016. She has also been a curator at Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art and a tutor at the University of Sydney. She has written major monographs on a number of Australian painters and sculptors, including Margaret Preston, and is now a consultant curator with research interests in modernism, twentieth-century sculpture and Indigenous art.

Dr Ann Stephen FAHA is Senior Curator, Art at Chau Chak Wing Museum, University of Sydney, with responsibility for the university's public art commissions. She has curated many exhibitions, including those accompanying the publications *Bauhaus diaspora and beyond: Transforming education through art, design and architecture* (with Goad, McNamara, Edquist, Wunsche), Melbourne University Press (MUP) and Power Publications, 2019; *Jacky Redgate: Mirrors* (with Robert Leonard), Power Publications, 2016; *Modern times: The untold story of modernism in Australia* (with Goad and McNamara), MUP, 2008; and *On looking at looking: The art and politics of Ian Burn*, MUP, Melbourne, 2006.

Dr Jackie Huggins AM FAHA is a Bidjara and Birri Gubba Juru woman from Central and North Queensland. She is a historian, author and advocate who has spent four decades working in Aboriginal Affairs, particularly reconciliation, women's issues, history and literacy. She was Deputy Director of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Unit at the University of Queensland (1997-2010) and has been a member of several important councils and enquiries including chair of Reconciliation Australia, co-chair of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples and co-chair of Queensland's Treaty Working Group. She has published numerous essays and studies on Indigenous history and identity and her books include *Sistergirl* (1998) and the acclaimed biography written with her mother, *Auntie Rita* (1994).

Professor Paul S.C. Taçon FAHA FSA is an ARC Australian Laureate Fellow (2016-21), Chair in Rock Art Research and Professor of Anthropology and Archaeology at Griffith University, Brisbane. He also directs Griffith University's Place, Evolution and Rock Art Heritage Unit (PERAHU) and leads research themes in the Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research and Griffith's Research Centre of Human Evolution. He co-edited *The archaeology of rock-art* with Dr Christopher Chippindale and has published over 280 academic and popular papers on rock art, material culture, colour, cultural evolution and identity. In 2016, he was awarded the Rhys Jones Medal for Outstanding Contribution to Australian Archaeology and the Griffith University Vice-Chancellor's Research Excellence Award for Research Leadership.

Charlotte Day, Director  
Hannah Mathews, Senior Curator  
Alicia Renew, Gallery Manager (parental leave)  
Meredith Turnbull, Gallery Manager  
Emma Neale, Collection Manager  
Francis E. Parker, Curator Exhibitions  
Melissa Ratliff, Curator Research  
Warisa Somsuphangsri, Communications Coordinator  
Kate Barber, Public Programs  
Melissa Bedford, Education  
David Thomas, Museum Officer  
Trent Crawford, Museum Officer  
Alkira Kinchela, Administrative Assistant (Indigenous Trainee), Office of the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous)  
Museum Assistants: Isabella Darcy, Cathryn Ross, Rachel Schenberg  
Installation: Benjamin Crowley, Beau Emmett, Gian Manik, Hayden Stuart, Simone Tops  
Volunteers: Marcie Bakker, Mia Bell, Nishita Desai, Nishadi Fernando, Pallas Hocking, Angela Liang, Elsie Preston, Noni Salazar, Anna Smith, Megan Tan, Anna Venosta

## MUMA COMMITTEE

Professor Shane Murray (Chair), Dean, Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, Monash University  
Charlotte Day, Director, Monash University Museum of Art  
Professor Louise Adler AM, Vice-Chancellor's Professional Fellow, Monash University  
Professor Wendy Brown, Chair, Department of Surgery, Monash University and Central Clinical School, Alfred Health  
Professor Jacinta Elston, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous), Monash University  
Damien Farrell, Vice-President (Advancement), Monash University  
Maudie Palmer AO, Founding Director, TarraWarra Museum of Art and Heide Museum of Modern Art  
Renaye Peters, Vice-President (Campus Infrastructure and Services), Office of Chief Operating Officer, Monash University  
Professor Kathy Temin, Head of Fine Art, Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, Monash University

*Through a lens of visitation* Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Dale Harding: Through a lens of visitation* at Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, from 26 April to 26 June 2021 and Chau Chak Wing Museum, University of Sydney, in late 2021.

*Through a lens of visitation* is supported by the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland and the Chau Chak Wing Museum and Power Institute at the University of Sydney.



Queensland  
Government



CHAU CHAK WING  
MUSEUM


Curated by Hannah Mathews  
Editors: Hannah Mathews and Dale Harding  
Design: Stuart Geddes and Žiga Testen  
Lithography: Sebastiaan Hanekroot, Colour & Books  
Print production: Jos Morree Fine Books  
Printing: Wilco Art Books  
Copyediting: Kay Campbell, The Comma Institute  
First edition of 500  
ISBN 978-0-6481529-8-9

Published by  
Monash University Museum of Art | MUMA  
900 Dandenong Road, Caulfield Campus  
Caulfield East VIC 3145  
Australia  
monash.edu/muma



MUMA

Powered by Power  
An imprint of Power Publications  
Power Institute Foundation for Art and Visual Culture  
University of Sydney  
NSW 2006 Australia  
powerpublications.com.au

powered  POWER

© 2021 Monash University Museum of Art, Power Publications, the artists and authors. The views and opinions expressed in this book are those of the authors. No material, whether written or photographic, may be reproduced without the permission of the artists, authors, Monash University Museum of Art and Power Publications.

# Beyond trauma narratives by Ann Stephen

Dale Harding works with two inheritances, one grounded in the ancestral lore of his Bidjara/Ghungalu/Garingbal Country, the other plundered from the Eurocentric canon of cosmopolitan modernism. His achievement lies in making visible, as *abstraction*, the intertwined practices and histories of these conflicting and disparate worlds. He takes nothing for granted—neither pigment, nor place, nor partners—in seeking what he describes as ‘the potential for cultural practice as a mode of resistance . . . to colonising hegemonies . . . [and to] building visual literacy’.<sup>1</sup> The following account of Harding’s more recent works—which culminated in a major public commission, *Spine*, 2018, for the University of Sydney—traces a critical reorientation towards a reparative and abstract aesthetic. This tectonic shift came about as a result of intense debates within his extended family as to how cultural forms might safely deal with the colonial legacy of violence, anger and defiance. The outcome of these extended deliberations was a decisive move to create works that, in Harding’s words, allow ‘the opportunity to move beyond trauma narratives’.<sup>2</sup>

## ON COUNTRY AND PIGMENT

Harding looks to the rock art of his ancestors as a guiding force in his practice. He cross-references familial and community perspectives with academic research on ‘the positive and negative ochre stencil artworks; and positive drawn and painted imagery and petroglyphs on the sandstone walls, overhangs and caves that constitute rock-art galleries in the Carnarvon Range’.<sup>3</sup> His art is premised upon extensive field work on family languages, oral histories, botanical and material cultures spanning the precolonial and colonial histories of the country now known as Central Queensland. The implications of such

- 1 Dale Harding, ‘The language of space’, PhD thesis, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, 2019, pp. 50, 40. I am indebted to the artist for many conversations during the commission and construction of *Spine* at the University of Sydney. I am also grateful for insights about Dale’s work that I have gained from Tim Bass, Nick Croggon, Susan Best and Josh Milani.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 17.



FIG 01  
Dale Harding working on his commission *Wall composition in Reckitt’s Blue*, 2017, onsite at the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. Photo: Chloe Callistemon © QAGOMA

research convinced him that 'this process of colonisation is one that is ongoing and will continue unless conscious efforts are made to disrupt and to destabilise it'.<sup>4</sup>

When he began making monochrome stencils in 2014, he sourced colour from the local plants, clays and ochres from Carnarvon Gorge. These colours were not mixed but used as pure pigments to outline repeated sequences of cultural artefacts, like digging sticks and boomerangs. The stencils made directly onto the museum wall possess a grand scale to 'interact with white-walled galleries as landscapes . . . [to] recall sensibilities of being in and with landscape'.<sup>5</sup> To imagine the white cube as landscape is a radical Indigenous inversion of the strategies developed by the Land Art movement of the late sixties; instead of Robert Smithson's dialectical concept of site and non-site, which brought the non-site (rocks, earth, etc.) into the gallery, Harding imagines the white walls as Country.

To link his stencils to those of rock-art galleries, Harding blows pigment directly from his mouth or through an atomiser onto canvas, glass or plaster walls. Unlike the impersonal sprayed surfaces of 1960s Pop and Lyrical Abstraction, his process is both an intimate performance, and an act of reappropriation taken from the Australian primitivism of Sidney Nolan. As Harding explains:

*The paintings are literally illustrations of my breath. I use a little atomiser to blow the pigment onto the wall. I appropriated the atomiser from Sidney Nolan. Nolan had been to see the rock art at Carnarvon Gorge in 1948, he rode in on horseback, then went onto the Royal Ballet in London and appropriated rock-art techniques using an atomiser spray with negative stencils to blow paint onto the costumes.<sup>6</sup>*

In 2015, in what looks like a modernist monochrome (with perhaps a nod to Yves Klein blue and Ian Burn's *Blue reflex*), Harding began to use an intense blue powder, Reckitt's Blue. However, as he subsequently revealed, the choice of this nineteenth-century laundry bleach powder was driven by a decolonising impulse representing 'a symbol of the forced domestic labour that generations of my female members endured . . . to keep the "whites" of colonials "white"'.<sup>7</sup> In this way he traces powerful undercurrents of colonial violence, whether represented by the burnt black walls of *Their little black slaves, perished in isolation*, 2015; the gouged lines in *Wall composition in Reckitt's Blue*, 2017, at Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA); or the repeated ochre frieze of fighting sticks he made with his uncle and cousins Milton and Will Lawton for *Know them in correct judgement* in *The national 2017: New Australian art survey*. For the latter, in addition to the ochre stencils, ochre was blown across the names of missionaries carved into the walls of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, condemning these historic figures of abuse to oblivion.<sup>8</sup>

The single canvas, *Blue ground/dissociative*, 2017, comes at the end of the Reckitt's Blue cycle of works which the artist initially made on his knees, rubbing the blue ground pigment into the linen like a washerwoman, with the action of his arm still visible on the surface. Once the all-over blue field had hung overnight in the studio, he completed the work by chewing Carnarvon white ochre and then spitting it onto the canvas, creating a volatile cluster of intense white pigment. Harding's act spoke to communal dispossession of 'family Elders who were forced to live under Queensland government control', 'of the

- 4 Ibid., p. 4.
- 5 Ibid., p. 45.
- 6 Dale Harding, conversation with author, August 2018, as are all further quotations by the artist, unless otherwise indicated.
- 7 Harding, 2019, p. 44. Harding made several cycles of Reckitt's Blue paintings, including for QAGOMA, Brisbane, 2015; the 11th Gwangju Biennale, Korea, 2016; and documenta 14, Athens and Kassel, 2017.
- 8 Harding's matrilineal family were removed from their Country and confined on Woorabinda Aboriginal Settlement when it was established in 1926.



FIG 02  
Dale Harding working on his commission *Wall Composition in Reckitt's Blue*, 2017, onsite at the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane.  
Photo: Chloe Callistemon © QAGOMA



FIG 03  
Dale Harding, *Blue ground/dissociative* 2017, Reckitt's Blue and white ochre on linen, 180 x 240 cm, Private collection, Brisbane. Photo: Carl Warner

forced domestic labour that generations of my female members endured' and, more generally, to 'the diaspora of my people in Central Queensland'.<sup>9</sup> His cathartic performance imagines liberating Indigenous art and cultural practices from the toxicity of colonial relations.

It was during his time in Europe, including a residence in Stockholm in 2018, that, remote from family and country, he turned primarily to abstract painting. An abstract diptych, whose title indicates his new receptivity, *What is theirs is ours now (I do not claim to own)*, 2018, enacts that shift. Reading from left to right, the two abutted canvases—from the forbidding Rothko-like cloud of Reckitt's Blue, to the wild and exuberant ultramarine blue spray that speckles at the edges—are joined by a band of blown ochre. The work enacts a highly charged emotional state. But unlike an abstract expressionist painting, the pigments are coded—colonial (Reckitt's Blue), European (ultramarine), Indigenous (ochre)—each applied with an appropriate tool: 'Reckitt's with a bannister brush, ultramarine with a large finely crafted artist brush.'

For another work, *As I remember it*, 2018, he borrowed the format of Robert Hunter's minimal grid *Untitled*, 1970, consisting of six dropped sheets of paper.<sup>10</sup> Harding blew by mouth some outlines of Bidjara cultural objects on each sheet and painted with a yellow pigment ground from a Chinese ink stick. He then concealed these marks with a radiant yellow, sourced in Sweden, which he applied with a small paint roller in a method also derived from Hunter's methodical minimal painting. The underpainting hovers on the edge of visibility.

#### ON COLLABORATION AND CONCEALMENT

As his focus began to shift Harding started to study his Indigenous languages. 'I personally inherit Bidjara language from my matrilineal grandfather. This paradigm continues where my mother is Bidjara and my father is non-Aboriginal. As is a common contemporary protocol in Murri culture, I also acknowledge the Ghungalu and Garingbal language groups of which my matrilineal grandmother and her Elders are traditional custodians.'<sup>11</sup> He started 'listening to oral recordings of ancestral family . . . drawing out the multiple meanings of language, understanding individual words and phrases, comprehending and consolidating lived philosophical concepts held within the languages, and repairing and mending knowledge gaps'.<sup>12</sup> Being Brisbane-based since 2012, and studying for a decade at Griffith University's renowned centre for contemporary Indigenous art, he knew firsthand the earlier generation of Aboriginal artists including people such as Judy Watson, Tracey Moffatt, Gordon Bennett and Richard Bell. Significantly, the process of immersion in linguistics began to distance him from the prevailing 'identity politics' of contemporary Indigenous art that exposes oppression and trauma to shame the (Western) viewer.<sup>13</sup>

Harding's collaborations take many different forms—assisting his extended family and other artists, as well as incorporating amateur and skilled trades, from needlework and carving to plastering. Such a collaborative practice recalls a focus on communal projects and performances by artists in the late sixties and seventies. He acknowledges the productive role played by his immediate community: 'My making art has gathered intent and opened up to further readings and framings the more I bring my family's artistic traditions into my contemporary practice.'<sup>14</sup> However, such collaboration comes with profound ethical obligations. Harding has wrestled with how best to translate knowledge of Country and kin into art.

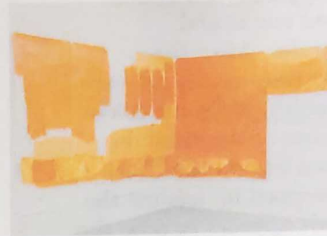


FIG 04

Dale Harding, *As I remember it* 2018, Chinese ink, dry pigment and gum arabic on fabriano paper, 9 parts: each 200 × 150 cm, Private collection, Brisbane. Installation view, *The drive home*, Milani Gallery, Brisbane, 2018. Photo: Charlie Hillhouse

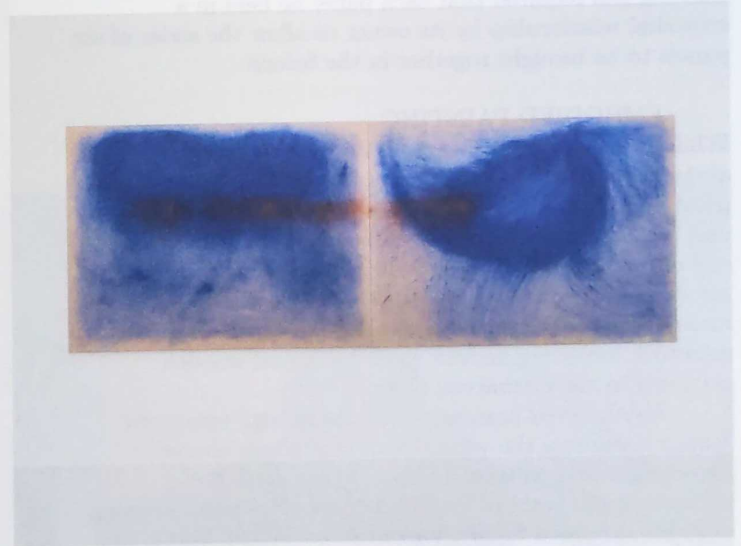


FIG 05

Dale Harding, *What is theirs is ours now (I do not claim to own)* 2018, Reckitt's Blue, ochre, dry pigment and binder on linen, 2 parts, each 180 × 240 cm; 180 × 480 cm overall, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Purchased 2019, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art Foundation. Photo: Charlie Hillhouse

- 9 Harding, 2019, pp. 4–44.  
 10 Robert Hunter held an exhibition in 2011 at Milani Gallery, where he reconstructed his 1970 stencilled wall paintings. While still an undergraduate student, Harding assisted Hunter, which proved to be a formative experience. Harding has elsewhere written about his interest in the work of Anne Truitt and 'her contribution to minimalism in the context of male-dominated minimalism'. Harding, 2019, p. 36.  
 11 Ibid., pp. 7–8. Murri is the name of Indigenous people from Queensland and north-western New South Wales.  
 12 Ibid., p. 8.  
 13 It is no coincidence that this shift coincides with the final years of Harding's PhD at Griffith University, supervised by the art historian, Susan Best who had recently published her study, *Reparative aesthetics: Witnessing in contemporary art photography*, Bloomsbury, London and New York, 2016.  
 14 Dale Harding and Hendrik Folkerts, 'The present continuum: A conversation on Carnarvon Gorge, ambivalent artefacts, and reproduction as artistic method', *Mousse Magazine*, no. 58, Apr–May 2017, reproduced in Dale Harding: *Body of objects*, Griffith University, Brisbane, and documenta 14, Kassel, 2017, p. 10.

A strategy of partial concealment was adopted when working with his maternal cousin, Hayley Matthew on *Untitled (private painting H1)*, 2019, at Sharjah Art Foundation in the United Arab Emirates. In an unusual role for an Indigenous male, Harding had previously been given responsibility by his matrilineal grandmother, Margaret Lawton, to know private women's histories within his community. In preparation for their residency in Sharjah, Harding and Matthew 'spoke to my mother and that's how the private painting came about—how to make it culturally safe by veiling . . . to enter into a conversation in an Arabic culture . . . as outsiders at Sharjah.'<sup>15</sup> Over a week they drew and occasionally blew yellow pigment onto stencils of cultural artefacts across six un-primed canvas stretchers creating a series of repeated marks and silhouettes while sharing ancestral stories. After the ritually charged performance these 'private paintings' were subsequently rolled over with white paint (the same colour as the walls), leaving only certain traces of the event on the panels. They were then placed in a line on the floor, except for the final panel that was propped up against the wall. The adoption of a horizontal axis appears to echo the serial floor sculptures of Anne Truitt, a minimalist artist of an earlier generation who Harding admires. Each panel has a subdued glow, with uneven off-white patches covering underlying pale yellow signs in between long, repeated, vertical roller-strokes of white. The uninitiated viewer can only witness a residue of the passing of knowledge that has taken place, which is materialised but not known, recorded but foreclosed. In this way, when not on Country, Harding both reprises and protects aspects of traditional secret/sacred ceremonial practices in collaboration with his extended family who have not had his own exposure to Western, tertiary art education, and who would otherwise be dismissed as amateurs. In acknowledgement of the cultural significance of *Untitled (private painting H1)*, Harding has required that each panel be held in a custodial relationship by its owner to allow the series of six panels to be brought together in the future.

#### EMBODIED PAINTING

While Harding's paintings have become increasingly abstract—with signs or objects concealed under layers of paint—a bodily trace is ubiquitous in the paint handling and the intangible breath of blown pigment. Such embodied painting suggests how ritual and performance are at the heart of Harding's practice. He also employs the measure of the body through his work, informed by much fieldwork recording ancient stone tools and wooden artefacts in the Carnarvon Gorge.

He observed how, when collaborating, 'epigenetic memory' informs the work derived from 'our shared knowledges and cultural selves'. He has spoken of witnessing the trace of traditional practices when working with his extended family, for instance: 'When Jordon first painted with me, he immediately demonstrated a muscle memory in how to apply and spray paints in stencil form. I also observed that at first application, Will sounded just like his father when mouth spraying, and that Hayley demonstrated muscle memory the first time she used a hatchet for carving.'<sup>16</sup> By celebrating a shared, social memory, Harding marks a significant cultural difference from the individualistic practices of European modernism.

In some of Harding's work, the artist's body is specified as Aboriginal, male and queer. It is the titles that are explicit in works like *Repression cloak (ceremony for a gay wedding)*, 2018. In this work a protective cloak—a blanket painted in pigment and ochre—is a

- 15 A conversation with his grandmother, Margaret Lawton, appears in the program on Dale Harding in *Colour Theory with Richard Bell*, which first aired nationally in Australia on NITV in March 2014. See also Angela Goddard's recorded interview with Dale Harding, Sharjah Art Foundation, 2019.
- 16 Harding, 2019, pp. 23–24.



FIG 06

Dale Harding with Hayley Matthew, *Untitled (private painting H1)* 2019 (detail), dry pigment, acrylic and gum arabic on linen, 6 parts, overall dimensions variable. Installation view, *Iterative work*, Milani Gallery, Brisbane, 2019. Photo: Charlie Hillhouse



FIG 07

Dale Harding with Hayley Matthew, *Untitled (private painting H1)* 2019 (panel 2), dry pigment, acrylic and gum arabic on linen, 150 x 150 cm, Private collection, Brisbane. Photo: Charlie Hillhouse

response to the homophobic campaigns provoked by the 2018 referendum on gay marriage. When exhibited, it was folded and nailed closed, out of sight. Such a strategy of withdrawal recalls the acts of concealment of complex, secret rituals that inform the social relations within all Indigenous Australian cultures.

Another of Harding's related non-objective works, *Moonda and The Shame Fella*, 2018, has a sheet of glass, the height of the artist, covered in dark yellow resin from the Xanthorrhoea grass tree, formerly known by the racist tag 'black boy'. Harding's colloquial Indigenous title redeems the negative connotations for a minimal self-portrait. The combination of semi-transparent glass with its layer of glowing sticky resin laid horizontally on a pedestal has a delicate precariousness, hypersensitive to materiality and signifier. Harding's abstraction is never purely aesthetic, being socially invested in Indigenous culture and history.

### SPINE

In 2018 Harding began a major commission for a new entrance site at the University of Sydney, which marks a crucial nexus in his oeuvre. The work, his first permanent public art work, was on Gadigal Country, which caused him to articulate the distinction between cultural practice on his own country and art made elsewhere, as he explained:

*I've brought different histories and new materials into my work. It's not separate from cultural practice, but it's culturally safe, in a new way . . . For instance, the interior wall painting at the Lees Building entrance is a departure from my previous use of locally sourced ochres. Instead, I'm using lapis lazuli, that's the blue pigment; vivianite pigment which is bluey-green; hematite, a blood-red ochre and a pure lemon ochre from Italy which is a commercial pigment.*

Harding began by watching how students moved across the site, noting 'the flow of the line of sight from the entrance off City Road and up and down Eastern Avenue. The form of the avenue offers compression and release. The slight elevation rising to the north allows the work to reveal itself as you move through the space.' In an imaginative leap, he linked Gadigal land to his own Country, observing that 'the approach mirrors for me how the Great Dividing Range has those planes before the kick-ups of the cliffs'.

The project evolved from a single monument to a sequence of three works called *Spine*, 2018. It alludes to the ancient ranges running down the Eastern Seaboard that were formed over three hundred million years ago when the continent collided with what are now parts of South America and New Zealand. For tens of thousands of years Indigenous communities, like Harding's ancestors, occupied and painted these caves and rock platforms.

*You could walk north up the Great Divide all the way from Victoria to the Carnarvon Gorge and beyond to Grandad Bidjara's country, and a bit further up to Townsville. The sandstone of my country leads all the way to Sydney . . . and many of the university buildings here have been built from that sandstone. My works will make a connection between the university campus on Gadigal territory and the culture that my ancestors have passed on.*

The most visible element of *Spine* is starkly minimal: two large sandstone cubes balanced on one end

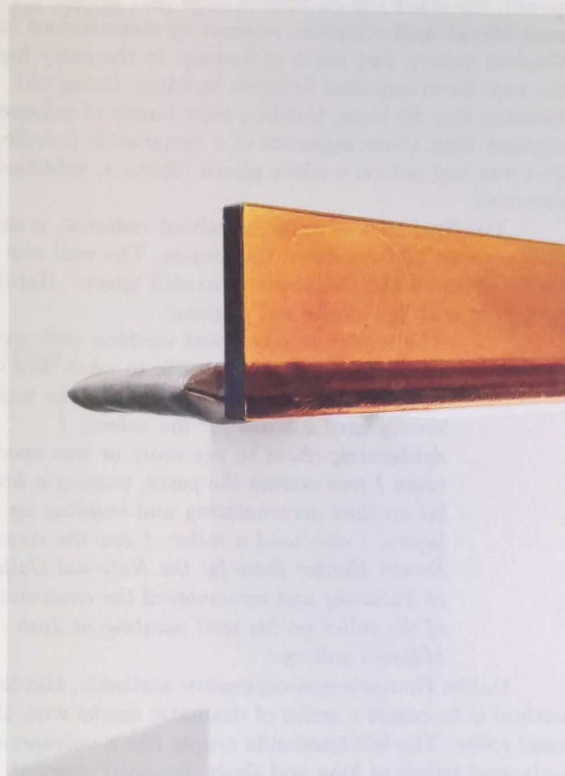


FIG 08

Dale Harding, *Moonda and The Shame Fella* 2018 (detail), glass, xanthorrhoea resin and lead, 3 parts: glass 12 × 210 × 2 cm; lead 5 × 215 × 15 cm; plinth 200 × 120 × 20 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane. Photo: Charlie Hillhouse



FIG 09

Dale Harding, *Spine 2* 2018, Gosford sandstone, off-form concrete, hematite oxide, 3 parts: wedge-shaped plinth, 113 (to 200) × 1200 × 130 cm; front block 139 × 150 × 150 cm; back block 150 × 150 × 150 cm, The University Art Collection, The University of Sydney, UA2018.25.2. Photo: David Jones



of a concrete wedge aligned to the north/south axis of Eastern Avenue. As Harding noted, they sit 'side-by-side with no hierarchy'. At the far end, one block overlaps the plinth, the other has an uneven edge that reveals a magnificent dark striation, sourced by stonemasons at Gosford quarry, just north of Sydney. In the entry foyer of the new Environmental Sciences building, facing old Moreton Bay fig trees, Harding blew bursts of coloured pigment high above segments of a remarkable petrified log that was laid out on a white plinth (*Spine 1*, subtitled *universe*).

The final part of *Spine*, subtitled *radiance*, is on an external wall midway down the avenue. The wall was plastered and while the plaster was still 'green', Harding marked it with his hands and a spoon:

*The renderers who I was working with were amused, as it's the opposite to what they do with their trowels when smoothing the wall. I mostly used a brush for the colour, I deliberately chose to use more or less opacity when I was mixing the paint, putting a little bit on then accumulating and building up the layers. I also used a roller. I saw the recent Robert Hunter show [at the National Gallery of Victoria] and remembered the contribution of the roller on his wall painting at Josh Milani's gallery.*

Unlike Hunter's non-expressive aesthetic, Harding's method is to create a series of dramatic marks with the small roller. The left-hand side erupts like a volcano above horizontal bands of long and short 'spooned' rows of indentations. Its deep monochrome colour, derived from hematite oxide, an ancient pigment of rock art, gives emphasis to the passages of scored plaster and links the mural to a primal creation landscape. Its two rectangular earth-red panels, over four metres high and twelve metres long, command the otherwise grey surroundings.

#### JOINING THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

Harding's turn to public art coincides with a moment of world-wide militancy that has targeted symbols of colonial power. As if in dialectical motion, while police stood guard on the nineteenth-century sculpture of James Cook in Sydney's Hyde Park, *Spine* arose as a highly visible commemoration of the deep time of Indigenous cultures. When seen in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, it testifies to the timeliness of contemporary Indigenous art, and 'the beautiful idea of a life principle joining the past to the present', as Susan Best has written of the reparative mode of another Indigenous artist. Her conclusion, that 'this new understanding of history and patrimony sits alongside the colonial legacy rather than displacing it', is true of Harding's sensitive restaging, thus 'ensuring that the damage of the past is not forgotten'.<sup>17</sup> In this way Indigenous visual languages claim a sovereignty and contemporary presence in the public realm.

As part of a new generation of Indigenous Australian artists who have been exposed to the global turn of the art market with all its hyped-up visibility, Harding has adopted modernist erasure and Indigenous concealment as aesthetic and political strategies to protect sacred and familial knowledge. To borrow a phrase from the art historian Darby English, writing on an earlier generation of Afro-American abstractionists, the act of 'productive deformation of canonical modernism' has created conditions of possibility for an Indigenous art that is both contemporary and deeply invested in the recovery of ancient living cultures.<sup>18</sup>

- 17 Susan Best, *Reparative aesthetics: Witnessing in contemporary art photography*, Bloomsbury, London, 2016, p. 98. These quotations are drawn from her commentary on the series *The pressure of sunlight falling*, 2010, by Maori artist Fiona Pardington.
- 18 Darby English, *1971: A year in the life of colour*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2016, p. 5.

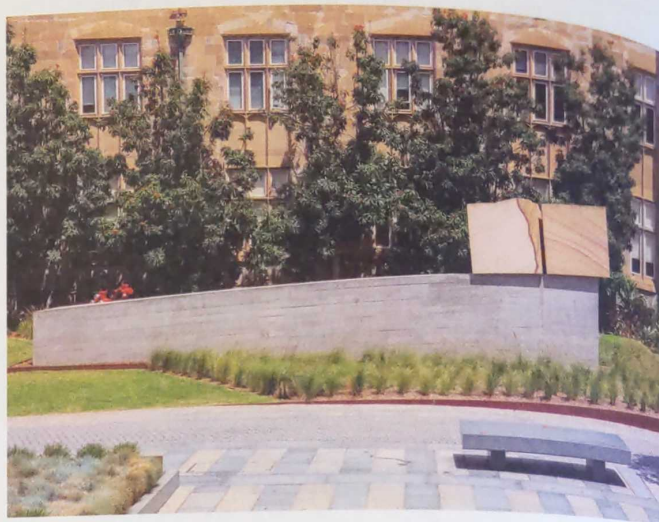


FIG 10

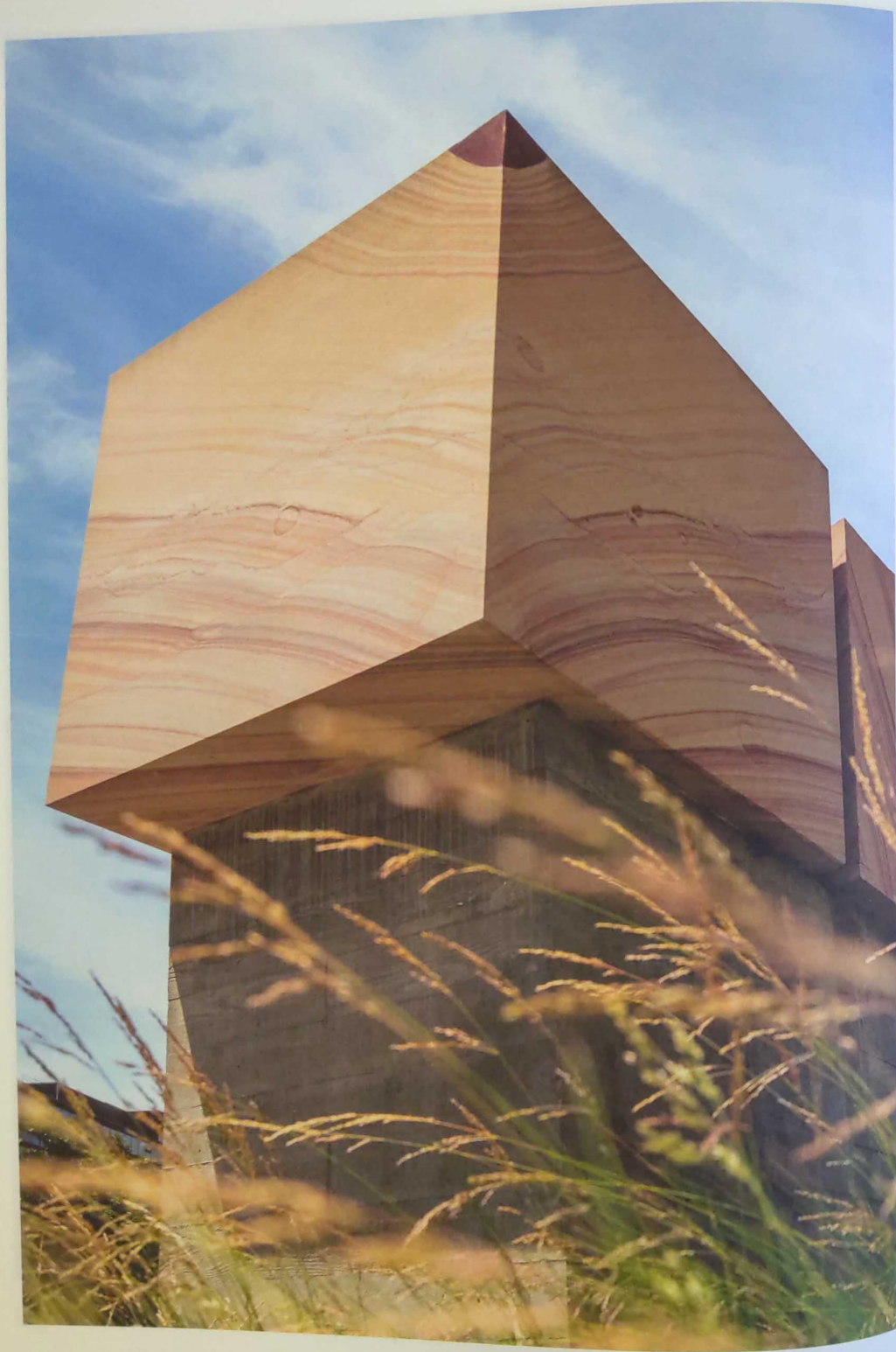
Dale Harding, *Spine 2* 2018, Gosford sandstone, off-form concrete, hematite oxide, 3 parts: wedge-shaped plinth, 113 (to 200) × 1200 × 130 cm; front block 139 × 150 × 150 cm; back block 150 × 150 × 150 cm, The University Art Collection, The University of Sydney, UA2018.25.2. Photo: David Jones



FIG 11

Dale Harding, *Spine 3 (radiance)* 2018 (detail), plaster, hematite oxide, 4.45 × 12 m, The University Art Collection, The University of Sydney, UA2018.25.3. Photo: David Jones





Dale Harding, *Spine 2* 2018,  
Gosford sandstone, off-form concrete, hematite oxide, 3 parts: wedge-  
shaped plinth 113 (to 200) × 1200 × 130 cm; front block 139 × 150 × 150  
cm; back block 150 × 150 × 150 cm, Eastern Avenue, The University of  
Sydney. Photos: David Jones