

2020 ADELAIDE BIENNIAL OF AUSTRALIAN ART

29 FEB—8 JUN 2020

MONSTER THEATRES

Karla Dickens Interpretive Resource

Identity | Myths and Morphs

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Karla Dickens

Identity | Myths and Morphs

Born in Sydney in 1967, Karla Dickens is a Wiradjuri artist living and working in Lismore, New South Wales. Despite training as a painter at the National Art School, Sydney, in the early 1990s, Dickens quickly turned to collage and sculptural assemblage. Dickens is also a skilled writer, often using poetry and prose to amplify the themes of her mixed-media collages and sculptures, spanning the intersections of race, class and gender; motherhood; Australian culture and politics; and the ways in which the past informs the present.

Collage is essential to Dickens' practice. Across Western art history, collage has reared its head as a politicised medium. During the First World War, European Dada artists used collage to reflect a world in turmoil. They positioned themselves as anti-war, they rejected the class system and so their art – collage, poetry, performance – was frequently non-linear, humorous and even nonsensical. Dada artists used collage to scramble the existing meanings of images, to combine multiple artforms at once and to draw from material close at hand, such as newspapers, political posters and other print media. During the 1950s and 60s, collage again carried political messages as a part of the Pop Art movement. Similar to Dada, collage was a medium for Pop artists to use what was close at hand and thus to critique the world around them. This time imagery from glossy magazines, advertising campaigns and slogans, newspaper clippings and factory-produced domestic products called into question burgeoning American ideals of capitalism and consumerism, gender roles within broader society as well as the structure of the nuclear family.



Karla Dickens, Wiradjuri people, New South Wales, born 1967, Sydney, *Clown Nation*, 2019, Lismore, New South Wales, mixed media, 120.0 × 120.0 cm; © Karla Dickens/Andrew Baker Art Dealer, photo: Mick Richards.

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For Dickens, the technique (collage) evolved out of necessity; "...because I had little money, I'd find things to collage". However, she has since transformed the process of scavenging materials from op-shops, historical refuse and hard rubbish from the Lismore tip into salient political commentary. Through the process of collecting and reworking materials into new forms, Dickens reveals our underlying associations. Innocent enough kangaroos, Australian flags, bullseyes, cowboys, clowns, innocuous plastic toy snakes, wooden toy guns and dress-up props quickly turn grim and reveals a *mélée* of damning political attitudes towards Aboriginal people. By using the close at hand and revising the existing meaning of images and objects, collage has enabled Dickens to illuminate and resist disturbing historical and contemporary narratives surrounding the treatment of Aboriginal people in Australia.

Virginia Fraser, "Karla Dickens", *The National 2017: New Australian Art*, National Library of Australia: Sydney, exhibition catalogue in conjunction with the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Carriageworks and the Museum of Contemporary Art, 2017

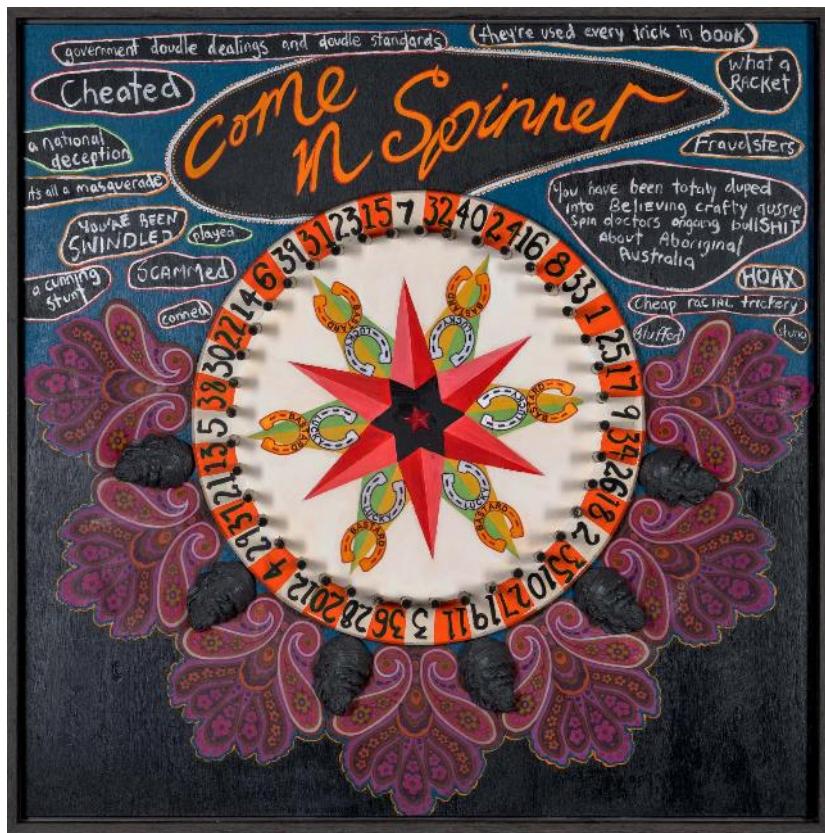


Karla Dickens, Australia, born 1967, *A Dickensian Circus: House of Horrors*, 2019, Lismore, New South Wales, mixed media; © Karla Dickens/Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane, photo: Mick Richards

A Dickensian Country Show (2020)

Upon stepping into *A Dickensian Country Show*, you enter a world of clowns, freaks, outcasts, misfits and mystics. Dickens has repurposed the trappings of regional country fairs and Easter shows to illuminate a shadow-side to Australian society.

The topsy-turvy sideshow is brimming with found objects, photographs, mixed-media collages and sculptures, as well as hand-painted signs and printed banners. A *Dickensian Country Show* includes works that riff on the thrills of simulated risk, such as *Truth on the ghost train* (2019) or *A rough ride* (2019). In *Ready, aim, fire* (2019) and *Black Joe's* (2019) Dickens reworks bullseyes and targets to enact violence as entertainment. *Lions, Tigers and Endangered Bears* (2019) make use of a central tenet of the sideshow – the spectacle of difference – to produce piercing political commentary on the historic and ongoing treatment of Aboriginal people. In *A Dickensian Country Show (Artist's Statement)* (2019), Dickens describes these perverse pleasures of the sideshow. She writes, audiences are "...waiting for the acrobat to lose her footing / the fat man to explode / they feel beautiful as they cringe at the bearded lady / the snake-man and any other human with unusual differences."



A Dickensian Country Show (2020)

Amongst her mixed-media collages and assemblages, Dickens has also included found objects. The collection and curation of second-hand circus paraphernalia, scoured from an auction house in Adelaide, expands upon Dickens' collaging technique. Once again, Dickens reflects the world around her, revealing objects in a new light beyond their normal use or purpose. By thrusting real-world items that capture prejudiced cultural attitudes into motion with her own works, Dickens produces a maelstrom of haunted objects.



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Karla Dickens with her work *A Dickensian Country Show*, 2020 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art: *Monster Theatres*; photo: Saul Steed.



installation view: 2020 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art: *Monster Theatres* featuring *A Dickensian Country Show* by Karla Dickens, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; photo: Saul Steed.

Early Years and Primary

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Responding

Dickens sometimes uses objects which she finds discarded in hard rubbish. Make a list of all the things you recognise in Dickens' installation.

Find an object which has a history. It might be an item that has been in your family for a long time or it could be an object you have discovered in a second hand shop. Imagine you are that object. Tell a story about your life.

Dickens is a Wiradjuri artist who lives and works in Lismore in New South Wales. Looking at *A Dickensian Country Show* what do you think Dickens is saying about the treatment of Aboriginal people in Australia?

Making

Dickens reworks materials by squashing, stretching, cutting or tearing materials. Find an object or material that was otherwise destined for landfill. Experiment with different ways you can rework this item.

Dickens finds beauty in broken things. Find something at home or school which is broken. Transform this object so others can see the beauty in it again.

Collage is an important part of Dickens work. Dada artists used collage to scramble the existing meanings of images. Using a variety of newspapers, posters and other print media, create a collage which is humorous or political.



installation view: 2020 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art: *Monster Theatres* featuring *A Dickensian Country Show* by Karla Dickens, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; photo: Saul Steed.

Secondary

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Responding

Art has always sparked controversy and debate. Do you think Dickens' work is controversial? Give 3 reasons why it might be considered so.

Dickens sometimes uses poetry and prose to amplify the themes of her mixed-media collages. Write a poem or prose in response to *A Dickensian Country Show*. Begin by looking closely at all the visual information. What objects or images do you recognise? What are they juxtaposed with? How have they been altered? How might the arrangement of certain objects alter their original meaning or function?

Contemporary artists often challenge our assumptions about culture, society and politics. Examine works of art by Megan Cope, Karla Dickens, and Yhonnie Scarce. Using these artists' work as evidence discuss how works of art challenge society's understanding of the history of Aboriginal people.

Making

Dickens reflects the world around her, revealing objects in a new light beyond their normal use or purpose. Using assemblage repurpose found objects to create a work of art that tells a story about the world around you at the moment.

During the First World War, European Dada artists used collage to reflect a world in turmoil. Create a collage that responds to Australian culture and politics today.

Investigate a specific historical or contemporary event that impacted the lives of Aboriginal people in Australia. Create a work of art that illuminates this narrative.

Resources

Articles and Books

A special kind of vision: contemporary Aboriginal art from the Northern Rivers, Arts Northern Rivers: Alstonville, 2009

“Artist note: Karla Dickens”, *Indigenous Law Bulletin*, Vol. 8, No. 30, July-September 2017, pg37

Behrendt, L. “Channelling a chameleon: 'Bungaree: The First Australian', *Art Monthly Australasia*, June 2015, Issue 280, pg26-29

Contributor Fraser, V. “Karla Dickens”, *The National 2017: New Australian Art*, National Library of Australia: Sydney, exhibition catalogue in conjunction with the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Carriageworks and the Museum of Contemporary Art, 2017

Fraser, V. “Bungaree, The First Australian interrupted”, *Art Monthly Australasia*, August 2013, Issue 262, pg9-12

King, N. and Mundine, J. *Whisper in my Mask*, Tawarra Museum of Art Biennial 2014, exhibition catalogue, 16 August – 16 November 2014, PDF online, accessed 9 February 2020, <https://natalieking.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Whisper-in-My-Mask-TarraWarra-Biennial-2014.pdf>

Zafiriou, Y. “Karla Dickens: 'It's not bloody art, it's work!'” *Artlink*, Vol. 35, No. 2, June 2015, pg72-75.

Websites

Karla Dickens, artist website,
<https://www.karladickens.com.au/>

“Karla Dickens”, *Design & Art Australia Online*, last updated 11 August 2016,
<https://www.daao.org.au/bio/karla-dickens/biography/>

Videos

“Artist Karla Dickens”, *Art Gallery of New South Wales*, accessed 9 February 2020,
<https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/channel-archived/clip/473/>

“Karla Dickens”, *Colour Theory*, Season 3, Episode 2, National Indigenous Television, 2015 25:59mins, expires online 11 June 2020,
<https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/video/699460675571/Colour-Theory-S3-Ep2-Karla-Dickens>

This resource has been written and developed by Belinda Howden, Dr. Lisa Slade, Assistant Director, Artistic Programs and Kylie Neagle, Education Officer.

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