

**An interview recorded  
on Ngunnawal Ngambri country for  
*Apparitions: Six Recent Works by Dean Cross*  
Tributary Projects, Canberra, 18 October 2018  
by Sally Brand**

We are in an industrial lot on the outskirts of Australia's national capital. Dean has assembled six recent works: paintings, sculptures and digital photo collages with one boldly painted red wall. The gallery floor is covered in fresh top soil and the late evening sun spills through the windows casting shadows of the exhibition announcement hand painted on the glass. Our noses are full of damp earth and a little spider negotiates the interior terrain. I am reminded of a work by New York based Tibetan artist, Tenzing Rigdol, who in 2011 covertly arranged to move tonnes of soil from his homeland so that he and other displaced Tibetans could walk on their homeland again. Emotional, ancestral, tangible connections to country are here too. Dean has just returned from the 4A Shen Shaomin Studio Residency in Beijing, so we begin our conversation there, 9000km away.

*SB: You've just come back from a residency in China, how did you find your time there and your transition back to Canberra?*

DC: China was difficult, amazing, incredible and wonderful but also mad and chaotic. I was really fascinated by the level of aesthetic control in that place: every tree is perfectly in line, every road is really straight but then it seems like there are no road rules. It's a fucking mad place. It was good, but you do get tired of the language barrier, feeling misunderstood, or just not having the capacity to understand what is going on around you.

*You talk about being misunderstood in China, is that something you also find living here in Australia?*

Less so here as I think people are more aware to be sensitive about Aboriginality. There were a few conversations early on in China where people were really confused about who I am and where I am from. It didn't quite make much sense to them that I was Indigenous and that's my history. When I was talking about art and Aboriginal art there was no real concept of what colonisation means so some of the layers of my work were not well understood. But that's all part of the challenge, and part of the job too. If you want to be an artist, and international in scope as an Aboriginal artist, it's part of the job; it's boring and tiring but you have to tell the story, you have to explain, and you have to put up with weird conversation. You have to put up with being told that Aboriginal art is dots.

*The glass exterior walls of the gallery are painted with what looks like dots in red, can you tell me about that?*

I make this mark often in my work and it's appearing more and more, I think of it as a visual disruption.

*Like a moiré pattern?*

Yeah, which I guess in some ways is how it is actually used in Western Desert painting, to screen secret stories. I see the history of contemporary Indigenous art in Australia as two kinds of points: Namatjira and then in 1971 with the Papunya paintings. Coming back from China you realise that these points are the only thing people think about when they think about Aboriginal art. So this mark appears on the glass as many things but one thing is as a dot stretched through time. If a dot was made in 1971 and then here we are in 2018, that dot has moved. And what is a dot that has moved? A small straight line. Maybe as I get older these dots will get longer and longer.

*Your exhibition is called *Apparitions: Six Recent Works by Dean Cross*, but the exhibition itself is all encompassing: dots stretched through time, a big bold red wall, the smell of the fresh top soil beneath our feet. Could we talk a little about the six discrete works in the exhibition? Which do you want to start with?*

I think this painting on the floor is the first one. It's made with Australian linen painted with charcoal, binder and acrylic and says: EMPTINESS HAD NEVER BEEN SO FULL, which is another way of saying *terra nullius*. This country wasn't empty, it was chockers full of people, it was totally full. I hope this painting is the first thing people see.

*What does the word apparitions mean to you?*

Things that are there that are also not there. Ghosts. You walk around in the bush, or anywhere, there are ghosts everywhere. If you know what to look for they are there. This place is really rich, if you know how to look, how to listen and how to feel, it's thick, like walking through a fog. There's so much everywhere.

*Can we talk about this photo-collage on the large red wall, it is your most recent work?*

Yeah, it's only days old. I feel like a collage all the time. I am someone who grew up dislocated from my ancestral country. I feel like a living collage, that's the easiest way I can explain it.

The bottom third of the picture is an image of our farm on Ngunnawal Ngambri country, looking due west. The central image is Yuin country down at Moruya on the coast, where I spend all my summers, this image is looking south. The top left quadrant is an image of the Tasmania tiger that I found on the internet. My body behind these images forms a mountain landscape and my dislocated features are there, staring at us.

This work was made in China, not especially for this show, but I had been thinking about how I could

articulate in an image or a work ideas of multiple countries or multiple places. What it feels like to have my ancestral country up north but actually have lived here my whole life and feel really connected here and to Aunt Matilda House and to feel like this is home too. It's a weird feeling and I have been looking for ways to bring that together into a picture. I am beginning to find a language of bringing these things together. I'm also looking at doing real world collage, so printing the images separately but there is something I like about digital collage, when the images are printed all these disparate elements collapse and they end up democratised, existing on one plane.

This whole show is about landscape, or to *do* with the landscape may be a better way to describe it. I think a lot about landscape and the history of landscape painting but also the history of portraiture. These are essentialist art tenants in the Western canon. I think about Caspar David Friedrich's paintings and how a figure in the landscape is still just a figure in the landscape. If I make an image of country, however, it's actually a portrait. I'm still trying to figure this out but I think there is potential to collapse those two ideas. In the Western mode of thinking landscape and portraiture are really separate; you have landscape painting and you have portraiture. I think that for us, they are one and the same. This idea of country and self is one of the greatest mysteries to non-Indigenous people and if we can perhaps help non-Indigenous people understand a bit better then that might help the conversation progress. If people can understand that a bit more it can only be a good thing.

*Why did you want to use soil in the gallery, how does this bring the exhibition together for you?*

A few reasons, it's an idea I just wanted to test and this felt like the right time. It's about the smell, the texture, how it changes the articulation of the foot on the ground. It brings awareness to your body. It's a gentle reminder to tread lightly and know that you are leaving footprints everywhere you go. At the moment the soil is still quite light, moist and vibrant but it won't be long before it becomes quite dry, brittle and compacted. That will change the feeling in the room. It's the same with the red wall, that much colour has an effect on your physiology, the soil does the same thing. I listen almost exclusively to symphonic music and think that it is almost the ultimate of human expression, or the peak of our civilisation. To be a symphonic composer you have to have your brain across 64 instruments, at least, which is 64 nuanced, beautiful things that each on their own are stunning. You have to bring them all together to work in harmony. It's fucking amazing that people can do that and so I think about that as I am putting together shows, the subtle ways that melodies play through symphonies. It's quite formal. Here in this show, there's a red book that bounces off the red wall, and the red bricks and the holes in the bricks which then echo the dots on the windows. The soil on the floor

and then soil in the picture plane, little things like that, symphony building, it is a choreography of form.

**Dean Cross** was born and raised on Ngunnawal/Ngambri Country and is of Worimi descent. He is a trans-disciplinary artist primarily working across installation, sculpture and photography. His career began in contemporary dance, performing and choreographing nationally and internationally for over a decade with Australia's leading dance companies. Following that Dean re-trained as a visual artist, gaining his Bachelor's Degree from Sydney College of the Arts, and his First Class Honours from the ANU School of Art and Design.

**Sally Brand** was born on the country of the Turrbal and Yugara (Jagera) peoples in Brisbane and is of Latvian, Scottish and Irish descent. She is an arts writer, curator, researcher, and project manager based in Canberra. Between 2009 and 2015, Sally lived in Beijing, China, where she worked with artists from across the world to deliver new commissions, exhibitions and publications. Currently, she is completing her Masters of Arts (Research) from the University of Sydney with a thesis on the global art practices of Gordon Bennett, Shane Cotton and Tony Albert.