

Vernon Ah Kee

“When an individual, or a group, or a society chooses brutality as their best option, they commit themselves to hostility and violence and often oppression, suppression or desperation.”

Vernon Ah Kee, 2015¹



Vernon Ah Kee, *Unwritten (Black)*, 2012.

Short Biography

Born, 1967, Innisfail, Far North Qld.
Language Groups: Kuku Yalandji,
Yidindji and Gugu Yimithirr, North Qld
Waanji, North-West Qld.
Lives and works in Brisbane, Qld.
Major exhibits Australia and overseas.
Founding Member of proppaNOW.

About the artist

Vernon Ah Kee was born in 1967 in Innisfail, Far North Queensland and is a member of the Kuku Yalandji, Waanji, Yidinji and Gugu Yimithirr peoples of the north Queensland regions.

Ah Kee started developing his creative practice when he enrolled in a screen-printing course at Cairns TAFE in 1986. Following his course, he worked as a screen-printer at a local print company where he printed on clothing. Working in the screen-printing business led Ah Kee to further his education in which he enrolled in a Bachelor of Visual Arts (Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art) at Griffith University College of the Art in Brisbane, graduating in 1998. Ah Kee went on to obtain a Bachelor of Visual Art with Honors in 2000 and a Doctorate of Visual Arts in 2007².

He has gone on to exhibit artworks in major institutions around the world and recent solo exhibitions include *Brutalities*, Milani Gallery, Brisbane (2014); *Hallmarks of the Hungry*, Milani Gallery, Brisbane (2012); *Barack*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (2011). His work is also held in a number of public and private collections in Australia and overseas including National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Germany; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Ah Kee works in a broad range of media including screen-printing, drawing, photography, video and text based installation. Ah Kee's creative practice fuses histories of colonisation and political and social views of modern black/white cultures. His artist practice explores issues of cultural difference and racism in Australian society, including exploration of the history of conflict, oppression and injustice.

¹ Gruber, F. & Ah Kee, V. (2015). The 14th Istanbul Biennial Interview. [Online] Available at: <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/booksandarts/istanbul-biennial/6773498>

² Allas, T. Design and Art Australia Online, (2011). Vernon Ah Kee: Biography. [Online]: Available at: <https://www.dao.org.au/bio/vernon-ah-kee/biography>

About the artwork: critical statement

Unwritten (Black), 2012 addresses the challenges of Aboriginal life and experience with identity and colonial racism is formed from a web of lines that looks into the invisibility of Indigenous people and culture in Australian histories. The fragmented figure in the work allows its audience to suggest that Australian colonialism has affected the ways in which Indigenous culture and identity exists in contemporary society.

The affect of this artwork is a form of **automatism**, 'creating art without conscious thought, accessing material from the unconscious mind as part of the creative process'³.

In the Unwritten series "all the portraits start from the idea that you have these formless faces on human bodies, but with no features. These are Aboriginal people, just ordinary people like me, like me family, like my friends. But the way that I'm portraying them in the drawings is how white people see us, how the country sees us. So it's this idea that we have no eyes, no ears, no mouth, no discernable features at all. So we are dumb, in that we can't see, can't speak, can't hear, and we're held static, benign, silent and bound. So the very early ones had lines going across the face. They looked like they were emerging, but being held back, tied back, and pushed back into the surface. So they're always becoming human, but never allowed to fully be human, never reaching that point... The only aspects of humanity in the features are western. So in some of them I will emphasise a brow or the nose or cheekbones, to demonstrate this aspect of the western ideal. Like what's happened with Christ. Underneath is a fully realised human, representing a fully realised people. See I was born three months before the referendum in 1967, and so for the first three months of my life I was a non-person. I was property of the state. The history of Aboriginal people in this country, Australia, has been a history of always becoming human. We were written out of the Constitution when it was first written. There's the doctrine of terra nullius, which wrote us out of existence. So that's why these drawings are unwritten."⁴

While the faces represent ordinary Aboriginal people, the Unwritten series was initially a response to the death of a young man in police custody that resulted in riots on Palm island in 2004.

Ah Kee conjures these faces from his charcoal pencil across the canvas. The faces are non-specific, referring to the haunting history of racism and violence against indigenous peoples in Australia. This powerful presence also suggests the often unspoken motivations for actions and interactions between Australians of different racial and ethnic backgrounds today⁵.

His work is a direct engagement between artist and viewer, concerned with Indigenous politics and culture.

Other relevant works



Vernon Ah Kee, *Aboriginal* (2011)



Vernon Ah Kee.
Whitefella normal blackfella (2004)



Vernon Ah Kee. *George Drahm (Uncle George) from fantasies of the good* (2004)

³ Tate, (2017). Automatism. [Online] Available: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/automatism>

⁴ Mead, E. (2012). MONA Blog. [Online] Available: <http://monablog.net/2012/08/08/interview-with-vernon-ah-kee/>

⁵ Art Gallery of NSW, (2017). Vernon Ah Kee. *Unwritten 9*. [Online]. Available: <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/160.2011/?tab=about>