Settlers Miners Same Thing – Jacky Green

Although I know Aboriginal sovereignty as always present, embedded within country, I find my strongest encounters with specific sovereignties of place often occur in unexpected moments – like a bolt of remembering – chanced upon in the presence of a scar tree or a reference found deep within a historical text. Recently I experienced such an encounter when looking for a particular type of tree in the bush-land of Garrmalang [Darwin].

Need to seek out local instruction as to where to find this tree, I was surprised to realise that my everyday existence is actually surrounded by them. Here, Larrakia sovereignty was made explicit with the shock of my not knowing: a confrontation with my own inability to see this land.

_Open Cut_ at the Northern Centre for Contemporary Art (NCCA) in Darwin, last August, was another such encounter. Stepping in from the crowded Parap Market that Saturday afternoon, I entered a small but potent exhibition presented by members of Garawa, Gundanji, Marra and Yanyuwa clans from Borroloola. An exhibition by Jacky Green, Therese Ritchie and Seán Kerins, _Open Cut_ explicitly protested the destruction of Gulf country by the McArthur River Mine (MRM) (Australia’s largest zinc mine, owned and operated by Glencore). _Open Cut_ also sought to expose the ongoing realities of settler colonialism, as enacted by the Northern Territory (NT) Government under the guise of ‘Northern Australian Development’. As the program describes it, the exhibition was an opportunity to ‘speak truth to power’. It was an artistic expression of political resistance that, in contrast to the usually relaxed, even laconic, tone of the Darwin arts scene, felt immediate and urgent.

More than this though, _Open Cut_ presented an encounter with place that implicated viewers in the continued destruction of Gulf Country and, in doing so, made demands for a truly decolonial future that is far from being realised.

The NCCA in Darwin is a small gallery and _Open Cut_ only encompassed one room. Yet, this close proximity created a heightened sense of potency. One wall of the gallery was lined with striking black and white portraits of Garawa, Gundanji, Marra and Yanyuwa people painted with messages or words. Some read ‘Sulphur, Dioxide’ or ‘Lead’; another ‘ Sovereignty’. One man’s chest wrote ‘I worry about what they done to my mothers country’. A young girl looks out to the viewer – her word, painted down the side of her arm: ‘Ethics’. These portraits were the work of Darwin based Settler photographer Therese Ritchie. Invited to create the photos by Borroloola families, Ritchie had asked each siter
to choose a word or statement in reference to the mine. In some ways the images were simple in their re-inscription of marked Aboriginal bodies, perhaps even reductive, yet when I visited Open Cut a number of the individuals from the photographs were also present in the gallery — supporting the exhibition, wrangling kids, coming and going with market food — and it was this direct encounter with the subjects of the photographs that held, for me, the strongest resonance with their statements. In particular, the presence of Garawa leaders Nancy McInnity and Jacky Green filled the gallery with a commanding energy. In this way, appearing less as politicalised images and more as autonomous subjects, Garawa, Gundanji, Marra and Yanyuwa people held the space — and it was as if by entering the exhibition, by meeting the faces and artworks of Borroloola in the white cube of the gallery space, one came into relation with protocols from a different place — the sovereignties of southern Gulf Country.

Here I define sovereignty as place-based authority held in the land. Always present — yet borne by descendants through ancestral connection and enacted through cultural practice and ceremony. It’s a definition of sovereignty as ‘permanence’ described by Alexis Wright in her recent article ‘Hey Ancestors!’: ‘I am talking about time immemorial experience — how to grow roots like that. Not like scrap of paper made yesterday — a second ago, flimsy, impermanence’. Revealing these deep roots of sovereignty however, Open Cut also registered the discord between this truth and the current practices of mining — an overlay or temporary order of things nevertheless capable of untold destruction.

This is particularly evident in the works of Garawa artist and senior Lawman Jacky Green. In Open Cut Green’s paintings of Gulf country simultaneously presented a strong assertion of continuous Garawa sovereignty and a depiction of damaged and hurting land. Holding the viewer open to the seeming contradiction in these two themes, the works produce an unsettling affect. Many paintings include figures, infrastructure, trucks, and, most pertinently, the mine itself. Disrupting Settler audience’s desire for an untainted culture usually associated with the painterly aesthetics of Northern Aboriginal art, while presenting a political determination more commonly associated with the South-East, the paintings are contemporary storylines of place that do not shy away from the violence being done to the land: ‘Right in the middle of this sacred country is a torn-up place’.

In many of Green’s works the McArthur River Mine is itself the subject of the painting. Red Country is one example. Here the mine is present as a central black hole, literally occurring atop of the river, offset by a brown mound and framed by a yellow borderline. In certain interpretations it may be possible to read the dark shape as natural — not unlike a waterhole or rock formation. But there’s something unmistakably ominous about the depth of blackness. In mining language this open cut pit is known, almost poetically, as the ‘void’.

The current dimensions of the McArthur River Mine’s void is: length 1750 metres, width 1550 metres, depth 420 metres — with an overall footprint of 210 hectares. It was for this massive hole in 2013 that MRM diverted over five kilometres of the McArthur River — so as to dig deeper into the bed of the river. Or as Green more specifically describes, ‘the open-cut pit is right in the place where The Rainbow Serpent rests. Their cut open not just The Snake, but us ceremony people too’. Thus the river appears as two lines in Red Country, intercepted and re-routed by the void.

Yet alongside his works of destruction were Green’s paintings like Jerriminni - The Snake Line, which appeared in the exhibition as an assertion of rights and Law. As a painting that is tied to place — that stands in place and speaks from place, Jerriminni - The Snake Line presents a Garawa reading of country. In this work and the description that Green provides, I recognised just how unsettling Aboriginal storied land is to the miner’s maps and surveys:

Powerful song-lines criss-cross our Countries ... Near McArthur River between two hills rests a ceremony ground where people sing. Three sacred trees stand on the song-line, people hunting on country know about these places and know how to respect and look after them.

This is not environmental activism. Here Green speaks of sovereignty and respect, revealing settler ignorance and arrogance to be hand in hand: ‘miners got no idea of our culture or our rights’.

One of the prompting questions for this edition of un was ‘How do we develop practices that bring us into encounters with place?’ With Green’s work in mind, I would extend this to ask, when brought into these encounters with place, how do we ensure we do not look away from the implications?

Green’s work Yee-haw, Money Trucks depicts six figures each riding a large yellow mining truck cutting across country. In the accompanying text he writes, ‘Just like the cowboys scream Yee-haw at the rodeo I imagine the miners riding their trucks across our country screaming, “Yee-haw, I’m rich, Fuck you!” It is a clear and uncompromising indictment of the colonising...
An unsettled Settler response to Open Cut

Kate Leah Rendell

greed explicit in the continued expansion of the McArthur River mine in Borroloola. Yet, faced with this work I was also left wondering about the rest of us — perhaps not as euphoric as the miners on their trucks yet nevertheless implicated as beneficiaries of the material consequences of the mine.

I work at an organisation in the Northern Territory that runs arts programs in Borroloola directly funded by the McArthur River Mine’s ‘Community Benefits Trust’. The MRM Community Benefit Trust has invested $12 million into socio-economic development in the Gulf region since 2007. Many organisations in the Gulf are similarly either directly or vicariously funded by the mine, including local art centres, schools and créches and sports clubs, even the renal dialysis unit and the local regional council. Funded programs also include major investments into cultural projects like the Gulf Songbook project, the publication of the Yanyuwa dictionary and the Garawa Rock Art project, as well as environmental programs including turtle, dugong and dolphin conservation, Land and Sea Ranger programs and migratory bird studies. MRM representatives also have a seat at the table on a number of local boards and committees, including:

— Regional Representative for Alcohol
— Management Committees
— Roper Gulf Regional Council Local Authority (includes the Pool Committee)
— Gulf Rivers Land Care Group
— Minerals Council Environmental Group

It is a complex web. Indeed the individual artists involved in Open Cut would be hard pressed to avoid some level of involvement with MRM-funded projects. Such is the mine’s wielding of local power that ensures questions of ‘ethics’ remain precarious and each individual is in some way connected or implicated. Or what Green calls the ‘Whitefella chicken-bird’ giving out ‘chicken food to keep quiet’.8

Yet it is not just in these local ways that Green’s work brings to mind the entangled and implicated web of mining in this nation. I was also left wondering about what is taken from country itself — the resources that are removed and where they go. The MRM website informs me that zinc is used in a variety of items that ‘improve our everyday lives’ including:

— roofs, gutters, down-pipes and fences on houses
— the bodies of the cars we drive
— batteries for toys, calculators, watches as well as electric powered vehicles
— fertilizers to help our gardens grow
— vitamin supplements for better health9

We all consume these products and know little of the means by which they are made and produced. Of course, the raw material from the mine is shipped directly overseas before being sold back to consumers, which makes it easier to cover over the tracks back to Gulf country. Yet I can no longer look at the zinc tablets in our bathroom cabinet the same way.

It is this aspect of Green’s work that I found most unsettling — the way it reveals the absurdity of it all. How we seem to be caught in a trap that primarily benefits the world’s largest commodity company who pay no revenue to the Northern Territory or company tax to the Federal Government. In this way, Open Cut brought about an encounter with Gulf Country that revealed mining to be the current manifestation of settler colonialism: a continuation of our own festering open wound.

A preliminary Google search quickly verifies the claims in Open Cut that the McArthur River Mine has had real and lasting environmental consequences for Gulf Country. Indeed I learn that the mine’s ‘waste rock’ dump has been spontaneously combusting clouds of toxic sulphur dioxide into the air since 2013 and fish in nearby tributaries are contaminated with lead.10

In contrast to these reports the MRM’s community consultation video Our Mining Process informs me how the ore dug from the pit is processed and the remaining reactive ‘waste rock’ is taken to the ‘waste rock’ dump (as if I should be grateful they’re sorting the ‘good’ minerals from the ‘bad’ minerals in the ground) — before concluding obliquely that ‘what we do at MRM becomes part of our everyday life.’

If ‘decolonisation brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life’12 as Tuck and Yang demand, Green calls bullshit on the current state of play. Despite settler decolonial desires, which often present as mere performance, there has been very little disruption to the comfortable maintenance of settler colonialism. We’ve just become better at pretending otherwise. Indeed settler desire itself often obscures the real task of decolonialisation, ‘...the cultivation of critical consciousness, as if it were the sole activity of decolonization; to allow conscientization to stand in for the more uncomfortable task of relinquishing stolen land.’13 Thus, we’ve created a scenario whereby our acknowledgement of sovereignty and our destruction of country are not mutually exclusive. We may ‘recognise’ country, within our community consultations and ‘Reconciliation Actions Plans’, but we still dig it up.

In contrast, as both an assertion of sovereignties of place and a demand for a halt to the continued destruction of country, Open Cut presented the true requirements of
decolonisation. Here, decolonisation is not a metaphor for improved ‘consultation’, not deals or compromises but rather a declaration that things must be radically otherwise.

Since Open Cut I’ve become more attuned as to how entwined mining and our everyday reality is. Recently a press release from the NT Government caught my attention – if not for its ‘open cut’ references it may otherwise have passed me by. Issued by the NT Government’s Environment Protection Authority, the press release announced the green light for a brand new open cut mine in Anmatjere Country 10 kms from Alyuen community. Having completed a ‘rigorous environmental impact assessment’ the Environment Protection Agency (EPA) concluded that the mine ‘could be managed to avoid unacceptable environmental impacts and risks’.

As if pre-empting environmental appeals from ‘the South’, the release then made the truly fascinating link between open cut mining and renewable energy. Introducing the rare earth materials being mined as ‘key components in many green and sustainable products, such as wind turbines for the clean energy industry and hybrid vehicles’ – the EPA exposed our current predicament whereby we destroy country in the pursuit of ‘sustainable’ futures.

Reading further into the proposed Nolan’s mine in Anmatjere Country I am not reassured. The ‘Heritage’ assessment report produced by the EPA on this same mine, while acknowledging that it had failed to consult directly with ‘Traditional Owners, also concluded that, ‘Whilst all Aboriginal archaeological places and objects are protected under NT legislation, destruction of sites may be necessary to allow other activities or development to proceed.’ It is a stark reminder of the priorities held within our settler colonial nation-state.

No matter our desire for thematic or metaphoric decolonisation – while the above statement is par for the course of our Government’s ‘Environmental Protection Authority’ and ‘development’ continues to justify the destruction of country with little regard for the sovereignty of criss-cross songlines, Jacky Green is right: ‘Settlers Miners Same Thing’.

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2 Jacky Green, Open Cut, Exhibition Program, 2017.
4 Jacky Green, Open Cut Exhibition Program.
5 ibid.
6 ibid.
8 Jacky Green, Open Cut Exhibition Program
11 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Mil>MxnxQ7g
13 Ibid. p.19
15 ibid.