Historian Patrick Wolfe, in a recent article ‘The Settler Complex’, spoke about settler consternation that ‘arises when Aboriginal artists have the temerity to lapse into a realism that makes the miseries of dispossession recognisable.’

The realism of dispossession is something that Garrwa and Yanyuwa narrative artists Jacky Green, Stewart Hoosan, Nancy McDinny and Myra Rory know well. Their countries in the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria harbour countless massacre sites where family members took the bullets discharged from the Martini-Henry military rifles that ‘almost every overlander, stockman and station manager had’. The killings started in the 1870s with the pastoral development of the Northern Territory. Overlanders began passing through the region with vast numbers of cattle and horses. The slaughter continued for the next forty years, with full knowledge of government officials, as the settlers cleared the land of Aborigines to graze cattle. Massacre Hill, Massacre Waterfall, Massacre Creek, Cave Massacre, Uhr Massacre, Skeleton Creek, Flick Yard, Dunganminnie Spring, Coonjula Creek and Malakoff Creek are just some of the places where the killings occurred in the Gulf country. The violent history shrouded in a conspiracy of silence, at least for white Australians, has remained largely hidden until recently. But for Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory Gulf region, the killing of at least 600 men, women, children and babies and the long subjugation that followed remains clamorous.

Nancy McDinny and Stewart Hoosan’s work reminds settlers that their settlement of Australia wasn’t a simple story of Aboriginal people acquiescing to the occupation of their land, but one of resistance where Aboriginal people fought back against the violence, sexual abuse, and dispossession. It is these acts of resistance that McDinny and Hoosan capture in their recent artworks. McDinny says, ‘I need to tell how the settlers came and shot half our people and how that old fella [Mayawagu] was fighting. I want to tell the true story of them old people, what them done. He [Mayawagu] was fighting hard for country.’

Mayawagu was McDinny’s great-grandfather. He was a strong Garrwa man who for a decade from 1913, along with a number of other young men, was the last pocket of resistance to the white settlers who had been occupying Garrwa country for the past thirty years. Demonised as ‘Murdering Tommy’ and all but forgotten in white history, Mayawagu was greatly admired by his own people. He re-emerges a hundred years later in Hoosan and McDinny’s paintings not as a murderer, but celebrated as a freedom fighter.

Hoosan’s Mayawagu—Freedom Fighter (2013) depicts in one painting three events of the Mayawagu story over a five-year period beginning in 1913, when Mayawagu was working at Wollogorang station in the Northern Territory. Historian Tony Roberts describes how Fred, a much despised man of mixed descent who worked on the station, had taken three young Garrwa women as his ‘wives’. He and...
Mayawagu were cutting firewood one day when the younger man stepped behind him and decapitated him with an axe. Mayawagu hid the head and hat in a tree, weighted the body with rocks, and threw it into a waterhole. Arrested months later, Mayawagu was tried for murder in Darwin but acquitted. Five years later, a Queensland policeman approached the camp where Mayawagu was living, leaving the trackers back with the horses, pretending he just wanted to talk. Mayawagu approached warily, his family in the distance armed with spears. Hoosan portrays them smeared in white ochre. ‘Putting white ochre on makes them powerful’, he told me. ‘They used to paint themselves all over. This meant that they really mean it. They go to kill them.’ As Mayawagu bent down to pick up tobacco which the policeman had tossed on the ground as a gesture of friendship, the policeman whipped out his revolver and shot him, but not fatally. Using the heavy nulla nulla he had secretly dragged with his toes, Mayawagu beat the constable severely. The trackers rushed in but were driven back by spears. Mayawagu picked up the constable’s white helmet and revolver, and wore them prominently for more than a year as an act of defiance, in full view of whites, but from a safe distance.5

McDinny illustrates the same events in her Story of Mayawagu (2013). McDinny says she paints the hidden history of resistance because:

When we leave, our children can see it later, the true story of them old people. When they were powerful old people, didn’t know how to speak English but used to talk in language, saying, ‘We not going to give away our land. This is our land. It belong here. This is our history, our story and our dreaming’.

Both Hoosan and McDinny illustrate the racial complexity of colonising northern Australia. It was not a story of white on black, but like other settler societies, one where the ‘natives’ were either pressed or employed to do the conquering of their neighbours for the settlers.

In 1960, at nine years of age, Hoosan started work as a child labourer in the pastoral industry. He spent his childhood droving cattle throughout his ancestral country in the southwest Gulf. It was during this time he says that ‘Long George told me where all the massacres happened on Calvert Hills station. Europeans killed a lot of Aboriginals.’ Drawing on his memories as a young boy slowly traversing this country, Hoosan captures its seasonality and the vastness of its savanna landscapes. This can be seen in the magnificent Joe Flick (2012), inspired by Joe Flick, a young man of mixed descent who lived in the Gulf of Carpentaria in the late 19th century. Hoosan says that as a young boy everywhere he went throughout the region he would hear stories of Flick who was described in the newspapers at the time as a bushranger and ‘half-caste desperado’.6 But his story was more complex than that, taking place in the 1880s, when massacring Aborigines and abducting women and girls was common practice amongst white settlers.

Hoosan tells me, Joe Flick’s story began when his white father sent him to get an Aboriginal woman who had been taken from the station to a hotel near Burketown. The hotel owner abused Flick, who left burning with resentment. He later returned and was again abused; pulling a gun a fight ensued and the hotel owner shot Flick. Thinking he had killed him, the hotel owner went to the police. But Flick was gone when they returned. In the following years Flick escaped three times from police custody. Flick’s demise occurred following the killing of a policeman when he was eventually hunted down and shot dead in 1889. Garrwa and Waanyi people still tell his story today, finishing their tale with how he was buried—‘head-down in the grave, so his spirit couldn’t escape’.
Myra Rory’s painting *Wundigala* (2008) is of an event that involved her family in 1933. It instantly invokes a visceral reaction. To honour her family, Rory keeps their story alive in this important work. Rory portrays Constable Gordon Stott’s camp at Wundigala near Robinson River, where he made camp during a journey back to Borroloola after arresting a large number of ‘troublesome blacks’ whom he falsely accused of spearing cattle. Rory paints a young Garrwa woman named Dolly, who was taken by Stott as a witness, and brutally beaten. At night he chained her by the neck to a tree, something Stott denied in court. She was starved and then forced to drink the heavily salted water in which beef had been cooked, making her vomit.⁷ She died of internal injuries two weeks later. Constable Stott, a cruel man, was ‘renowned for preventing his prisoners from escaping by rasping off the heel on one foot.’⁸ Stott was eventually charged with assaulting Dolly, and was tried in the Darwin Supreme Court, but was acquitted despite compelling evidence by numerous Garrwa eyewitnesses.⁹

McDinny’s *Big Boss with Whip* (2006) illustrates a dramatic turning point in the history of black-white relations in the Northern Territory, when whites were finally held to account for their brutal treatment of Aboriginal people. Still today, telling me the story in Borroloola, McDinny’s eyes fill with tears. The painting depicts an event in 1955 when her father, mother, two older sisters and grandparents were working on Eva Downs station on the Barkly Tableland. On the morning of 9 September her grandfather’s wife, Dolly Ross, was told to cook some food for the stock camp. Answering that she was too ill, the manager went to fetch a gun. Terrified, she fled with her husband Jim Ross and his teenage brother, Munro, intending to walk to the Anthony Lagoon police station seventy-five kilometres away. Later that morning they were found by the station manager and four European stockmen, all on horses. An argument occurred and all three were savagely flogged with stockwhips to force them back to the homestead. The feisty Dolly Ross, who took no nonsense from anyone, black or white, took a more defiant stance than Jim, and was flogged severely. Along the way back to the homestead McDinny’s father, Dinny Nyliba McDinny, and uncle, Isaac Walayungkuma, tried to intervene and were also whipped. It was then that a revolver was pulled by one of the Europeans and two shots fired.

After seeing a large hole being dug on 15 September, and assuming they were to be killed, all twelve Aboriginal people living on the station, including a number of small children, slipped away into the night. In fear for their lives they travelled by night and hid by day until, three days later, having had no food and little water, with Dolly and Jim suffering severely from their injuries, the party could go no further. It was decided that Isaac and Dinny, being the strongest, but with wounds of their own, would carry on and try to get help, though Anthony Lagoon was fifty kilometres away. All were eventually rescued, the last of them arriving at the police station on 19 September.

Constable Ron Corbin treated their wounds, as some were suppurating, and then he counted and photographed them. He found that Jim Ross had forty-seven wounds, Dolly twenty-one, Isaac nineteen, Munro six, and Dinny four. Police documents tendered before the court described holes ‘in the flesh deep enough for part of an adult’s finger to be inserted in them’.¹⁰ Four of the five offenders, brothers Sydney (‘Jack’) and Colin Chambers, George Booth and Jack Britt, were charged and stood trial in the Darwin Supreme Court. After a four-day hearing the Chambers brothers were found to be the principal offenders and were each sentenced to six months gaol and fined £400. Booth was fined £50 and Britt was acquitted. As historian Tony Roberts has remarked: ‘The judgement was a watershed in black-white relations, serving notice to station managers and stockmen that the old days, the days of guns, hobble chains and whips – the days of frontier justice – were finally over.’¹¹
Jacky Green’s artwork depicts both history and the contemporary life of his country and its people. He makes another kind of misery recognisable. Green’s Lots of Money Moving Around Over Aboriginal Heads (2012) speaks of Aboriginal powerlessness. On one side of the painting, Green represents the mining representative with his thumbs-up—‘everything is good to go’. On the other side is a government man holding ‘his agreement’ while he thinks about money. In the centre staring out at the viewer stands an Aboriginal man with ceremonial boomerangs representing the Junggayi (‘Boss’) for the country, powerless to stop his sacred sites being destroyed. A crocodile bites the head of the miner. Green says, ‘I am crocodile. I want to slow’em down just like a crocodile can slow you down when he has a go at you’. Above the three figures is a road-train that Green says ‘represents the wealth being taken away from us, from our country’. Green’s artwork is testament to his emotional experience of seeing his people’s country and sacred sites damaged by outsiders. It reveals the power imbalance between mining companies and Aboriginal peoples on whose country the minerals are extracted and shipped away, while they remain in poverty.

Green says he picked up the brush and started painting so he could ‘get his voice out’. He had been deeply wounded by two things. The first was the damage of a significant sacred site caused by the expansion of McArthur River Mine, from an underground to an open cut operation, and the five kilometre diversion of the McArthur River undertaken to allow the pit to be excavated. The second was in 2007, with the Northern Territory Labor Government’s swift reaction to his people’s successful challenge to the approval process for expanding the mine and diverting the river in the Northern Territory Supreme Court. The Government legislated to override the court’s decision and removed any avenue for future legal challenge. He says:

I want to show people what is happening to our country and to Aboriginal people. No one is listening to us. What we want. How we want to live. What we want in the future for our children. It’s for these reasons that I started to paint. I want government to listen to Aboriginal people. I want people in the cities to know what’s happening to us and our country.

In Same Story – Settlers, Miners (2013), with its brooding sky, Green portrays the wet season when monsoonal storms bring life to his beloved country. He tells me that this artwork is about ‘how we tryin’ to pull up the mining companies from wrecking our country. It’s not the first time we had people invade our country. It happened first time when whitefellas came with their packhorses, looking round to see what was there. Aboriginal people were watching from a
distance, staying back, not wanting to be seen. Others were ready to spear them. ‘The invasion is happening again, he says. ‘This time they come with their “agreements” and their dozers.’ In this work Green imagines his people lined up on the edge of the river, armed and ready to drive the miners out of their country, ‘just like the first time’.

Green’s Four Clan Groups (2012; see p. 8) tells a similar story. He reflects on happier times, when Aboriginal people were freely living on their country practising ceremony and trading peacefully with Macassan traders who had been visiting the northern coast of Australia for hundreds of years. Green reproduces a stylised Macassan prau in the centre of his painting, copying one that his great-grandfather painted on a rock face at Spring Creek in the early 20th century after witnessing a Macassan visit. Green’s angst can be seen again when he paints miners and government men colluding to try to keep Aboriginal people apart. He says, ‘They don’t care about the rock art or our sacred sites. They go looking for them, taking pictures, or they ignore them when the mines go in.’

His provocative FIFO – Fly In Fuck Off (2013; see p. 8) captures something that many of us never see, the Aboriginal experience of dealing with state officials and mining company representatives in remote regions of the continent. It gives the viewer a rare glimpse of this power relationship from an Aboriginal viewpoint. Green says this artwork tells ‘how the government mob and mining mob fly into our country to talk with us. They fly in and tell us one thing and then they say they will be comin’ back to talk more but we never see them again. They just fly in, fuck off.’ Green’s painting details how these meetings unfold after the planes arrive. He tells me:

Aboriginal people sitting on the ground all focused on government people standing with their whiteboard using complicated words. But we not really understanding, getting our heads around what it really means. That’s why some of them just sittin’ there, on the ground, scratchin’ their heads, and others got their hands up wantin’ to ask questions. Their paperwork and their story always two different things. They just put something in front of us and when they think they got it right, they outta here and we don’t know what they really meant. This top-down way of talking at us been going on too long. Things gotta change.

On a recent visit to Canberra, Green declared he wanted to visit the nation’s shrine of remembrance that he’d just heard about from a fellow traveller on the aircraft coming from Darwin. He told me: ‘I wanna see that place that whitefella told me about. That whitefella sacred site. The place where they remember the fightin’. You know? The fightin’ to protect country, protect family and way of life. We got stories like that too. I wanna see them.’

After a visit to the Australian War Memorial, ANZAC Parade and surrounding areas Green left the nation’s capital bitterly disappointed. ‘We not there. We nowhere’, he said, before asking me a question that I couldn’t answer. ‘Why don’t they tell blackfella stories in that place?’

Settlers, on the whole, prefer to hang in their homes, offices and galleries Aboriginal artworks of a time before the violence and dispossession started. Perhaps they desire the artwork of the Dreamtime to ‘undo the uncomfortable reality of invasion’. The Dreamtime is something that Jacky Green, Stewart Hoosan, Nancy McDinny and Myra Rory won’t give settlers. ‘Dreamtime paintings, we don’t do them’ says McDinny, ‘because the old people didn’t let us. We can only tell history story. Perhaps the old Garrwa and Yanyuwa men and women who gave this edict thought that by restricting their people’s artwork to the secular world their art could be deployed, like a weapon, to wound settler society by making the ongoing miseries of dispossession recognisable.

9. The Courier Mail, Brisbane, Friday 20 April 1934, p 17. The Land, Sydney, Friday 11 May 1934, p. 4
12. See Wolfe above note 1, p. 7

A group Waralungku Artists exhibition is showing at The Cross Art Projects, Sydney. 12 April to 10 May 2014: waralungku.com; crossart.com.au

Seán Kerins is an anthropologist at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University. Thanks to the Jacky Green, Stewart Hoosan, Nancy McDinny, Myra Rory, Madeleine Challender, Miriam Charlie and Tony Roberts.