

Witness, testify, resist

Ghost Citizens: Witnessing the Intervention presents a powerful polemic against the Northern Territory intervention. By *Jane Llewellyn*.

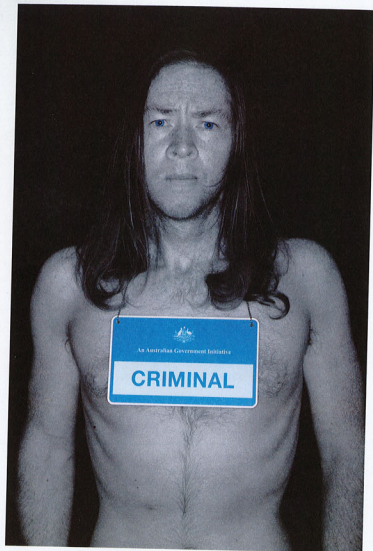


In 2007, the Howard Government introduced the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act (NTNER), along with other legislation to comprise what became known as the intervention. It was met with much criticism – mainly in its breaches of international human rights conventions and its self-mandated exemptions from the Racial Discrimination Act. The intervention was a response to the Northern Territory Government's Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, the *Little Children Are Sacred* report, but the response was seen

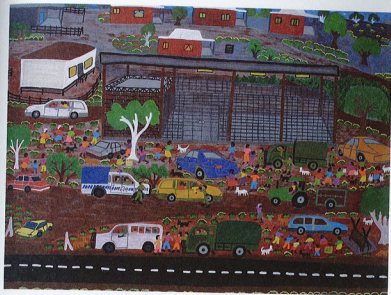
as rushed and poll-driven – it was announced in the lead-up to the 2007 election, which Howard was set to lose.

When the NTNER lapsed it was extended by the Gillard/Labor Government under a new guise, the Stronger Futures policy, which passed the Senate on 29 June 2012. While this was happening, *Ghost Citizens: Witnessing the Intervention* (which had opened the week before) was showing at Cross Art Projects in Sydney's east. The exhibition, led by curators Djon Mundine and Jo Holder, brought together fourteen

Above: Jason Wing, *End Restriction*, 2012, digital C-type print, 29.7 x 42 cm.



Jason Wing, *An Australian Government Initiative*, 2010, digital print on metallic paper mounted on Alupanel, 150 x 100 cm
Image courtesy the artist and Arc One Gallery, Melbourne



Indigenous and non-indigenous artists whose work directly or indirectly addresses the intervention.

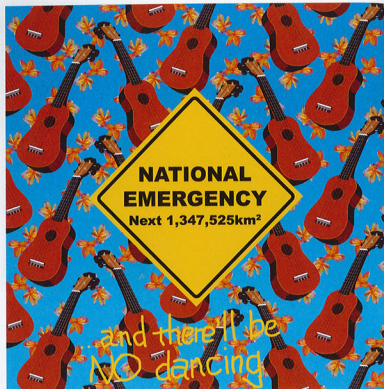
The exhibition travels to Melbourne's Counihan Gallery this month, following a recent showing in Darwin.

"Art is a social act," Mundine says. "It should be something that changes you. That changes your opinion." He saw *Ghost Citizens* as an opportunity to express his feelings about the intervention and found a group of artists who, along with Holder, were of like mind and opinion. "It is one way of getting my statement across about the intervention. I wanted people to come away with an alternative view," he says.

Discussing the significance of the title Mundine says: "Aboriginal people are the

ghosts in Australian history. We hang around but people don't know what to do with us. We are sometimes physically present and sometimes like smoke that can be blown away." Referring to the second part of the title, *Witnessing the Intervention*, he says: "When you are in this disempowered position the thing you can do to resist is to be a witness." Holder notes that the exhibition is structured around two themes. "The historical ghost concept is Djon's and I'm the more prosaic visual witnessing side." Mundine thought it was important to feature both Indigenous and non-indigenous artists in the exhibition to highlight that while "these issues are about Aboriginal people they are also world issues about human rights." While the main focus of the exhibition is the intervention, according to Holder

Above: Kylie Kemarre, *The Intervention at Abalpure Store on the Sandover Highway in the middle of the Uto-pia Community*, January 2008, acrylic on canvas. Private collection.



Chips Mackinoly, *...and there'll be NO dancing*, 2007, inkjet print on German etching paper, edition of 30 plus AP, 49.5 x 49.5 cm [image], Charles Darwin University Art Collection.

"the exhibition doesn't comment on the intervention per se, it just notes that it is very unpopular with few positive results so far".

Ghost Citizens delves deeper into Aboriginal affairs than just the intervention. "The general themes evident are the history of Aboriginal people – the longer history of this disempowerment and the historical ideas about land," Mundine says. "The exhibition looks at the willful diminishing of an Indigenous participatory voice and the loss of citizenship rights, in its historical context, not as a one-off," Holder adds.

The exhibition features artists such as Chips Mackinoly who is well known for his political poster art. Mackinoly started out in the 1970s making anti-Vietnam War posters before moving to the NT and focusing on local Indigenous issues. His work *...and there'll be NO dancing* (2007), a print of a road sign stating "National Emergency 1,347,525km²" (the size of the Northern Territory) is a direct response to the intervention. The title comes from a quote attributed to the 1920s anarchist Emma Goldman who said something along the lines of "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution."

Brendan Penzer's *Basics Card* (2011) references the human rights violations of the intervention as it states "The NT Intervention contravenes 25 articles under The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and 30 articles under The Universal Declaration of Human Rights". Therese Ritchie also uses the Basics Card motif in *All dressed up and nowhere to go* (2012). Ritchie's portrait of Yanyuwa woman and single mum Rachel McDinny dressed in a frock made of Basics Cards takes a jab at the income management scheme and how it labels individuals.

Jason Wing's photograph *An Australian Government Initiative* (2010) looks at what

Mundine describes as the "demonisation of all Aboriginal males as being drunken, violent males". The intervention painted one picture and it was a bleak one. It suggested that the whole Aboriginal population of the Northern Territory was dysfunctional, ignoring the communities that were functioning and the work that had been done.

The artists included in *Ghost Citizens* work across a range of media and while they share similar opinions about the intervention they come from different perspectives. "Notwithstanding if the artist works with a tough-minded romanticism (Fiona Foley) or gives an eye-witness account (Kylie Kemarre and Alison Alder), both are the language of refusal writ large and form a counter-history," explains Holder.

The other artists included in the exhibition are Bindi Cole, Dan Jones, Vernon Ah Kee, Sally M. Mulda, Amy Napurulla and Deborah Vaughan.

Originally showing in Sydney at the same time as the 2012 biennale, which was titled *All Our Relations*, Mundine says the exhibition was "about having a presence against what the biennale was doing. The biennale was all about togetherness... The exhibition was a counter-voice to the universalising 'global party' of the biennale bubble world," explains Holder. "We invited the biennale curators and artists to the opening just so they were aware that in Australia some artists are more equal as citizens than others."

Ghost Citizens: Witnessing the Intervention is at Counihan Gallery, Melbourne from 17 May to 16 June. Panel discussion at Counihan Gallery, Saturday 18 May, 2.30pm. Speakers include Jo Holder, Djon Mundine OAM and Chips Mackinoly.