

Aboriginal artist takes on mining giant through paintings

GINA FAIRLEY

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McArthur River Mine has had devastating consequences on a community and its environment; Jacky Green brings us that other story.



Jacky Green's painting Landscape with Mine (2011) of the Phase I of the mine's development. Courtesy the artist and Cross Art Projects.

McArthur River Mine (MRM) is located in the remote top end, sitting just below the Gulf of Carpentaria and about 65km south-west of the town Borroloola. Purchased by the Swiss mining giant GlencoreXstrata in 2003, the lead-zinc-silver mine – notably one of the world's largest zinc deposits - has been on an [aggressive expansion program since it converted to open cut mining](#), first proposed in 2006, and which saw the diverting of the McArthur River 5.5 kilometers – a river of great cultural and environmental significance. Simply 'Country needs water' says ranger and artist Jacky Green.

Green knows this country. 'The mine is built right on the resting place of The Rainbow Serpent', he said. 'When they cut the river up and diverted it to make way for the open cut mine they cut the backbone of The Rainbow Serpent.'

Painted as aerial narratives, Green has said he is not painting dreamings; rather he is painting history. He paints to get his voice heard and to show others what is happening to his country and people. Green said, 'I capture the time past and present.'



Good to Bad (2013) was purchased by the Australian National Warm Memorial in Canberra. Courtesy the artist and Cross Art Projects

This exhibition of his paintings – one that has taken three years of consultation by Cross Art Projects Director Jo Holder – is a staggeringly truthful picture of a town and a community suffering in the wake of the mine. Bulldozers and drilling tear up hunting and ceremonial grounds, while roads vie with song-line journey paths (*kujika*) across Green's paintings.

These are contemporary paintings with a very powerful plea for governments and mining companies to talk properly with Traditional Owners and respect their authority over sacred sites. 'When whitefellas look at our country they never really see it,' said Green.

A Garawa man, and from one of the four language groups that traditionally own this land, he is relatively new to painting – this is just his second solo exhibition. While a member of Waralungku Arts collective, he is a full time ranger and so on a daily basis he sees what is happening to his country, conveying that tension and degradation eruditely in his simple paintings.

Equally powerful are the wall labels that accompany them, written with the assistance of Dr Seán Kerins from ANU's Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research. It is passages such as this, describing Green's painting *Fly In and Fuck Off (2013)*, that capture the heart of the matter:

'It tells the story how the government mob and mining mob fly into our country to talk at us. They fly in and tell us one thing and then they say they will be comin' back but we never see them again. They fly in, use complicated words and then fly right back out, real quick. The people sitting on the ground in the painting are us Aboriginal people. We all focused on the government people standing with their whiteboards. They bring ladies in sometimes who do

all the talkin'. But we not really understandin' what they sayin'. Many of us don't read and write so the words on the board mean nothing.

It's really hard, getting our heads around what it really means... Why they here in our country? ... Their paperwork and their story always two different things... This top-down way of talking with us been going on too long... None of this gotta hurry up 'dos our aeroplane is leavin'. They gotta give us time. No more of this Fly In and Fuck Off stuff.'



Fly In and Fuck Off, courtesy the artist and Cross Art Projects

This is not just a simple tale of land and ownership. It is a story about disregard.

Initial approval of the mine's expansion was supported by the Prime Minister of the day, John Howard, however the 2006 application was denied by Environment Minister Marion Scrymgour. The application was then put before Mines Minister Chris Natt, who had been in the job just a month, and who approved it. The Traditional Owners appealed to the Supreme Court in 2007, supported by the Northern Land Council (NLC), winning the case. Within days, parliament voted to overrule the decision of the Supreme Court and return permission to the mine.

The Traditional Owners took the decision to the Federal Court, who found in their favour, but the case was then declared invalid. Federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett went to Borroloola in January 2009 to listen to the Traditional Owners. But before the close of that month, he had approved the mine's expansion. Since then

progress has continued. Isolation is assured with the mine controlling the price of flights; the grog truck's regular visits causes growing problems for a depressed community, and the land continues to be torn.



Map of Borroloola (2013), courtesy the artist and Cross Art Projects

Last year the mine announced its [Phase 3 expansion was approved](#) doubling the mine's footprint – that is Phase 3 of a 6 part masterplan – but are we hearing about the environmental impact of this expansion? If not for Jacky Green's paintings we would be completely in the dark: it's too remote and too difficult a topic to sustain public interest.

'We feel our culture is starting to get pushed aside. It's not being recognised properly...Whitefellas gotta learn about country, how to take care of it proper way. To do this they gotta work with us,' said Green.

Jacky Green's exhibition will be followed with an equally important show by senior Borroloola artists Nancy McDinney and Stuart Hoosa, which will examine the colonial occupation and 'frontier' killings of the area as a kind of parallel narrative where the power structure has just shifted from colonial pastoralist to miner. Key to both is the lack of proper consultation.

Bringing weight to this debate, their exhibition will open 22 May – 21 June.



The three artists together, Jacky Green on left. Photo Miriam Charlie; courtesy Cross Art Projects.

Jacky Green: Flow of Voices

Cross Art Projects

8 Llinkelly Place, Kings Cross

11 April - 12 May

Open Thursday to Saturday 11 – 6pm

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