

time being

curatorial essay, *midling 2*, The Cross Art Projects, 1 to 29 March 2024

midling (Larrakia: together) – the sound, the saying of the word evokes its meaning, the syllables coalescing, entwining.

midling 2 is a revised, slightly enlarged iteration of *midling*, a solo exhibition which showed at Coconut Studios, Darwin as part of the 2023 Darwin Festival. This latest iteration brings together a single photographic portrait from *Nice Coloured Boys* with newly editioned works from a number of related series along with recent hand-coloured photographs and risograph prints. The risographs rework drawings from Gary Lee's personal archive while the hand-coloured photographic prints mostly mine the colonial archive. The exhibition ricochets between mediums and through time – within a life and across centuries – offering a mini-retrospective of an essentially iconoclastic practice which both mimics and reframes ideals of beauty and ethnicity.

There are three portraits of Gary in *midling 2* including two self-portraits although the entire exhibition looms as a kind of self-portrait, riddled as it is with crosslines of kin, ancestry and self. The first portrait is Gary as a four-year-old, the boy closest to the rainwater tank in *Raining at Parap Camp* (2023), a hand-coloured print based on a photo taken by his uncle, Gerald Lee, in 1956. The second is Gary's *Self-portrait as Paul Foelsche* (2023) with Gary aged 70, around the same age as colonial photographer Foelsche (1831-1914) in the photograph *Foelsche with camera on knee* (c. 1900) which inspired Gary's self-portrait. And finally, there is the publication *Heat, Gary Lee: selected texts, art & anthropology* which launches with this exhibition, a voluminous anthology which traverses five decades of a distinctively multifaceted creative life, all brought together – not at last but for the time being.

This exhibition entwines key strands of a practice that formally began in the early '80s when Gary left his hometown Darwin to pursue visual arts studies in Sydney. By that stage Gary had already been in the workforce. He had already travelled overseas, spending a few years abroad including a lengthy period in India. On his return to Darwin after this trip he returned to school as a

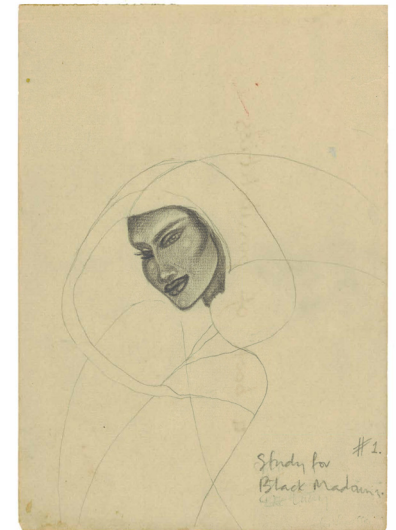


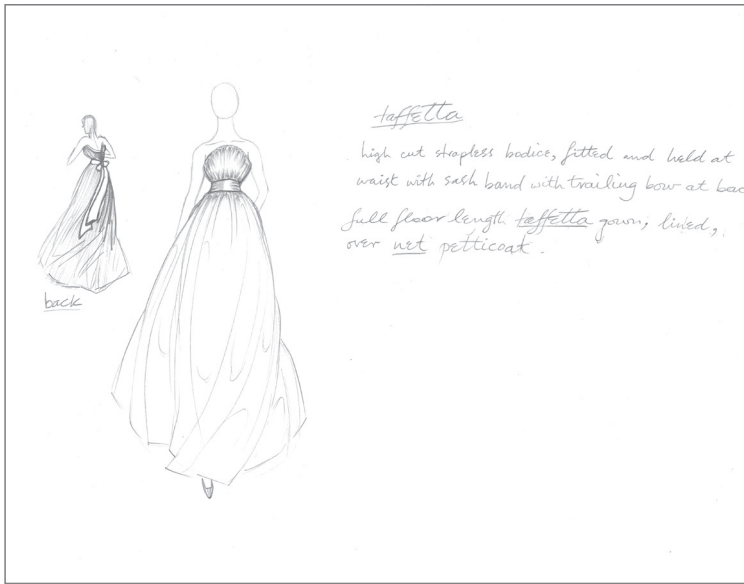
left:
Self-portrait as Paul Foelsche, 2023,
type C print
on Ilford cottonrag paper
42 x 32.94 (paper)

below, left:
Madonna and Child, 1975
oil on board
60 x 52cm

below right:
Study for Black Madonna # 1, c. 1980
pencil on Fabriano 90gsm paper
24.2 x 17cm

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left:
 fashion design sketch and notes
 made while working as a fashion
 designer in Sydney
 during the early 1980s,
 pencil on paper
 21 x 29.7cm
 Collection: the artist



right:
 Chris, 2010, from *Day Visitor* series,
 type C print on photographic paper,
 24 x 32cm (image)

mature-age student to obtain his year 12 matriculation in step with his plans for university.

In year 11 and 12 art was one of Gary's favourite subjects, along with English. He excelled in it and throughout his schooling was the one that fellow students turned to, to do their drawings or be enthralled by his own. He still has his final year 12 assessment work, his first and only oil painting, a version of the Madonna and Child framed by a halo of rich-red Darwin frangipanis. The Madonna, however, has the face of a baboon in a pallid turquoise hue. The child she holds in her slender hand is the skull of a baby baboon. Apparently this work was a bit too anti-creationist for Gary's art teacher at the time but he passed.

Post-high school, Gary worked and travelled and continued to make art on the side including his first forays into fashion design. An image from this time, *Study for Black Madonna #1*, is included in *midling 2*, one of several remade works as part of the exhibition's archival vein. Here, Gary's original pencil drawing is translated through a risograph print medium to give it a pop-vintage feel. While continuing the Madonna icon theme, this work also contends a 'black is beautiful' sentiment inspired by black fashion icons of the time Beverly Johnson

and Iman. It's also a nod to Karel Kupka's *The Aboriginal Madonna* painting at St Mary's Cathedral, Darwin, an image which Gary had known about since a kid.

On arriving in Sydney Gary soon realised he was a year early for his enrolment at Sydney College of the Arts (SCA). He stayed on nonetheless, studying art at Alexander Mackie for a year while teaming up with ex-Darwinite Andrew Trewin in fashion design and with his cousin Laura Lee for an artisan stall at Paddy's Markets. He did attend SCA the following year but soon after, fashion designing with Andrew led to a full-time enterprise.

midling 2 doesn't include any examples of Gary's fashion work but it does represent his photo portraiture for which his practice is best known. The parallels seem obvious – the focus on youth and beauty. As a fashion designer though, despite his love of fabric and form and his evident skill in design illustration, Gary grew tired of the demands of clients and of the industry per se. "If I met another model", he said of this time, "I would have spewed because a lot of them were very beautiful but, oh, you know, not very thoughtful about other people."¹

Fashion design also proved lacking for Gary as a vehicle for his growing politicisation within the Aboriginal struggle for land rights and cultural recognition. By this time, he was an active claimant in the Kenbi Land Claim for Larrakia people which was a catalyst for a cultural revival which continues today.² He went on to become an anthropologist mainly with a view to working as a curator of Aboriginal art as reflected by the subject of his Honours thesis, *From Artefact Into Art: The Commoditisation of Paintings on Bark from Arnhem Land* (1990). Towards the end of 1994, he was a guest curator for the Department of Foreign Affairs in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and India which is when his photo-portrait series *Nice Coloured Boys* began.

Gary is not a trained photographer. He has little interest in technical details apart from making the best use of natural light. He has happily called himself a point-and-shoot photographer. Yet he is keenly aware of the politics around the pointing and shooting and, as suggested above, his artist's eye was in train from a young age.

The portrait *Vikram* from *Nice Coloured Boys* belies Gary's interest in India and in particular Varanasi where this series has largely taken shape through numerous self-funded residencies over a 20-odd-year period. As an image it shows Gary's interest in creating close-up, intimate compositions in which the directness of the subject's gaze and his erotic presence undeniably confront the viewer. Its aesthetic might be considered 'beefcake' and Gary has no issue with his work being considered in this vein even when 'beefcake' has been used rather dismissively of his work to infer a kind of shallowness. Yet Gary's aesthetic strategy with such photo-portraits is highly politicised, more about creating a self-determining space – both for himself as a black/Aboriginal, gay artist and for his subjects (whatever their ethnicity or sexuality) – and much less about propagating 'types'. It is a postcolonial photographic practice in the sense in which Christopher Pinney describes, enabling a "vernacular modernism" in which the surface of the image is not a window onto some colonial "rationality" but is the very substance of the image. "In these practices", Pinney writes, "the surface becomes a site of the refusal of the depth that characterised colonial representational regimes."³

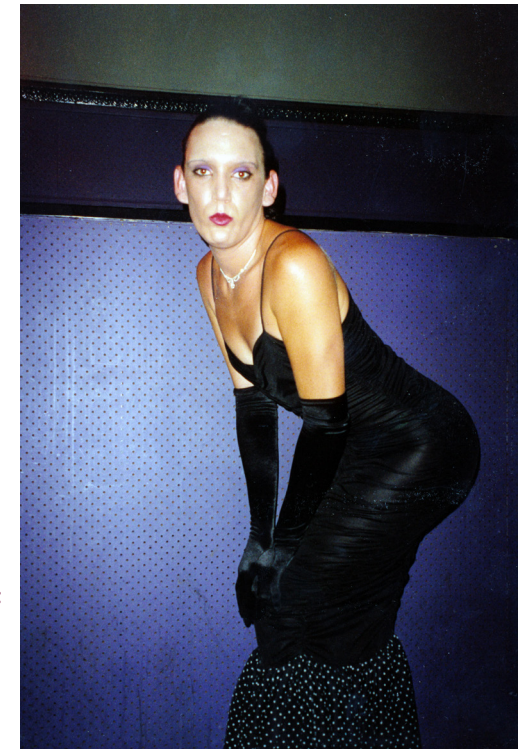


Vikram, 2012/2023
from *Nice Coloured Boys* series,
type C print on Ilford cottonrag paper, 27.6 x 36.4 (image)

As with *Nice Coloured Boys* the photo-based portraits from Gary's other series represented in *midling 2 – Skin*, *Darwin Lads* and *Day Visitor* – also explore the nexus of masculinity, beauty and ethnicity. Unlike *Nice Coloured Boys*, these series forego a street photographic method for a staged approach whereby Gary has pre-arranged the subject and setting with the series concept in mind. Admittedly, *Vikram* straddles both approaches in being the result of a chance encounter but with the portrait resulting from a shoot conducted in Gary's hotel room. By this time Gary had developed a bit of a reputation in Varanasi (particularly in the 'old city') for his portraits of local men, as well as having formed longstanding friendships there. Indeed, he came to meet Vikram through these connections which are really at the nub of *Skin*, the only series where Gary has put himself in the frame, to enact his experience of cultural



left:
Ramesh's paan shop 2, 2003/2023
 from *Skin* series
 type C print on Ilford
 cottonrag paper
 26.6 x 42.4cm (image)



right:
Lily, Corroboree, 2014
 type C print
 on photographic paper
 42 x 29.7cm (image)

camouflage while in India and South Asia. *Ramesh's paan shop 2* from the *Skin* series shows Gary with a customer at this street-side, hole-in-the-wall-type space. Ramesh is seated behind with his younger sister Pinki helping out. Gary could be just another local customer on this wintry Varanasi day yet beneath this camouflage is an enduring cross-cultural story. Ramesh, who calls Gary his *chacha-ji* (uncle), was one of the first men Gary photographed in Varanasi, while Ramesh's shop along the busy Dasaswamedh Road pilgrimage has often been a kind of impromptu studio for Gary's *Nice Coloured Boys*.

Nice Coloured Boys takes a leaf from Tracey Moffatt's film *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987). Both projects foreground Indigenous agency, defiantly expelling any shadows of 'victimhood'. Tracey was also the inspiration for the title of Gary's *Day Visitor* exhibition, a title she suggested when visiting Gary in Canberra in 2009 when he was still recovering from a major stroke which has left him confined to a wheelchair with semi-paralysis on his right side (he used to be right-handed).⁴ *Day Visitor* came about as Gary was adjusting to this dramatic change in independence, i.e., that he could no longer take himself out and about so potential sitters would need to visit him at his home. The

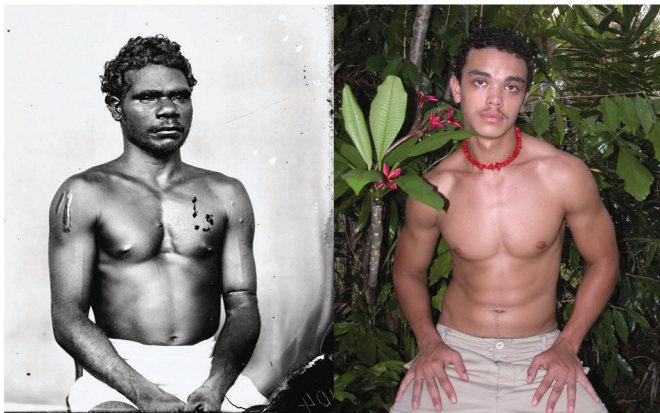
exhibition includes two works from *Day Visitor* including *Chris*, one of Gary's favourite muses in Canberra who he photographed on a number of occasions. An art school life model at the time, Chris was perfectly at ease with his own body which Gary's portrait clearly celebrates. As with most of the subjects in *Day Visitor*, Chris is not coloured but white, marking a shift towards a more expansive exploration of masculinity or at least the idea that Gary could move beyond his own cultural frame as an artist of colour.⁵

midling 2 also presents an ancestral togetherness, gathering the diptych portraits *Billiamook and Shannon* and *Mei Kim and Minnie* and Gary's hand-coloured photo-based prints including of his maternal great-grandparents (*Mrs and Mr Lee*, 2022, and *Antonio and Lily*, 2023)⁶ and of a Larrakia public ceremony photographed by the colonial photographer Paul Foelsche in 1891. Larrakia woman Minnie (Annie) Duwun is the mother of Lily, while Foelsche is also the photographer of Minnie and Billiamook's portraits (in 1877 and 1879 respectively) in the diptych works. *Billiamook and Shannon*, writes Gary, "is a

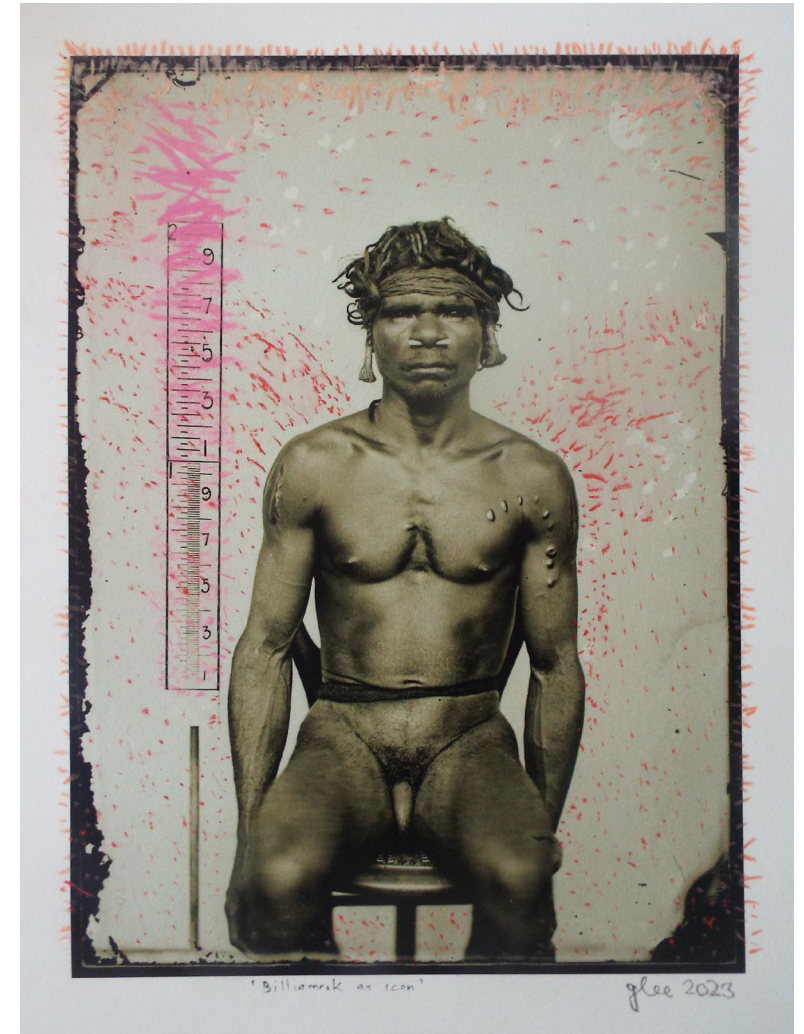
right:
Mei Kim and Minnie, 2006/2023
 type C print
 on Ilford cottonrag paper
 29.7cm x 42cm (paper)



below:
Billiamook and Shannon, 2006/2023
 type C print
 on Ilford cottonrag paper
 29.7 x 42cm (paper)



right:
Billiamook as Icon, 2023
 pencil and pastel
 on type C print
 on Ilford cottonrag paper
 25.5 x 18.5cm (image)



celebration of Larrakia male beauty and male identity over 130 years of change and disruption.”⁷ Similarly, for Mei Kim and Minnie: “I am reappropriating the colonial Larrakia photograph of my great, great *alap* [Larrakia: grandmother] and re-presenting her as the strong, beautiful Larrakia woman that she was, and not as the subjugated ethnographic specimen as she was first portrayed.”⁸ As Gary affirms, “The two works reconnect contemporary Larrakia to their ancestors and to place – to Darwin – *gwal’wa daraniki* – our land.”⁹

Gary’s exploration of the hand-coloured print began with the work *Billiamook as Icon* (2020) based on another portrait of Billiamook by Foelsche taken around 1880. (*midling 2* includes the third and final version of *Billiamook as Icon*, 2023). Given that he now uses his left hand, Gary’s mark-making is a little less refined when compared with the draughtsmanship evidenced by the drawings

on which this exhibition’s four risograph prints are based. Yet the eye for colour and composition remains, guided by Gary’s concept for each of these works in *midling 2* of using colour to highlight particular elements. In *Mrs and Mr Lee*, for example, the hand-colouring is contained to the side of the image where the couple stand, with the red-dotted field encompassing them like a billowing love heart. In *Nagi* (2023), a tribute to Gary’s maternal grandfather who was killed in the bombing of Darwin in 1942, he uses colour more liberally to accentuate

the gardenia-filled background and the image's overall aura of reliquary. In *Antonio and Lily* (a photograph believed to be initially made as a postcard souvenir of Darwin 'exotica'), colour is mainly applied to the couple and is primary, tonal and sparse – alluding, says Gary, to the bare materiality of their life. In *Moedra'nyini (Star Dreaming)* (2023) the touches of iridescent blue evoke flora, the scattering of down (cotton) from ceremonial regalia, and the Moedra'nyini itself, represented by the pattern of connecting circles. Gary writes:

We believe that the *moedra* or stars fall from the sky at night and into Moedra'nyini, also known as Blue Hole, a large circular freshwater hole in the middle of the ocean reef, accessed only at high tides and so deep its depth is unknown.¹⁰

Maurice O'Riordan, 2024

adapted from the curatorial essay originally published for midling, Coconut Studios, Darwin, 10 August to 9 September 2023

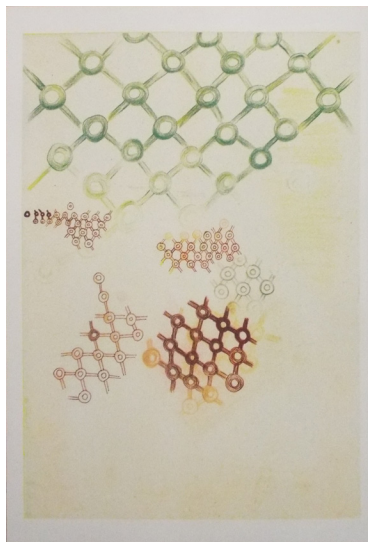


above:
Moedra'nyini (Star Dreaming), 2023,
pastel, pencil
on type C print on Ilford cottonrag paper
26.31 x 34.74cm (image)

right:
Antonio and Lily, 2023
pastel, pencil
on type C print on Ilford cottonrag paper
27 x 37cm (image)

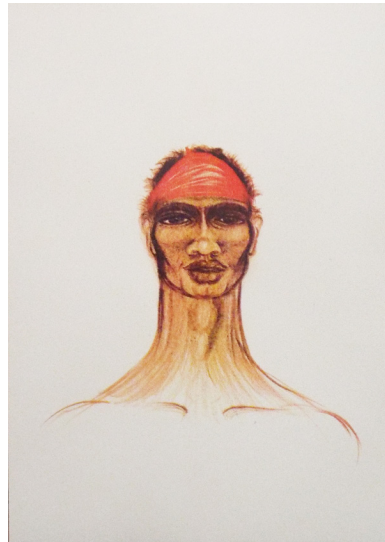


left:
Nagi, 2023
pastel, pencil
on type C print on Ilford
cottonrag paper
42 x 29.7cm (image)



far right:
Biliya, 2023
(biliya - Larrakia, initiated man)

right:
Moedra'nyini (Star Dreaming), 2023



risograph prints
on 250gsm Vellum paper
42 x 29.7cm (paper);
printed by Matthew van Roden,
split/shift press, Darwin.

Endnotes

1. Lee, G. & Hodge, D. (2023). So in that sense, Aboriginal gay. In M. O'Riordan (Ed.), *Heat, Gary Lee: Selected texts, art & anthropology* (p. 173). Darwin: dislevel books. Originally published in D. Hodge (Ed.), *Did you meet any malagas? A homosexual history of Australia's tropical capital* (Chapter 4, pp. 47-72). Darwin: Little Gem Publications.
2. The Larrakia Kenbi Land Claim (1979-2016) is one of the country's longest-running land claims.
3. Pinney, C. (2003). Notes from the surface of the image. Photography, postcolonialism and vernacular modernism, p. 202. In C. Pinney & N. Peterson (Eds), *Photography's Other Histories*, Durham and London: Duke University Press.
4. In similar victimhood-defying style, Gary's exhibiting career as a photo-artist has largely come about since his stroke in late 2007.
5. *Day Visitor* comprised around 10 portraits each of five subjects, all white Australians except for Tien, a Vietnamese Australian. The exhibition showed at Canberra Contemporary Art Space, 10 April to 15 May 2010 and was preceded by Gary's *On the Verge* solo exhibition (Sheahan Galleries, Clifton School of Art, Clifton, 18 February to 7 March 2010) which similarly focused on white Australian males (youth).
6. Gary Lee has the surname Lee on his father's and mother's side. *Mrs and Mr Lee* depicts Widji Lee (Nelson), a Wardaman Aboriginal woman from the Katherine region, and Harry Lee, a Chinese man, at Adelaide River Station in 1912. Their daughter Louisa (Nanna Cubillo) is Gary's maternal grandmother.
7. Lee, G. (2006). Artist statement.
8. Lee, G. (2006). In F. Green (Ed.), *Togart Contemporary Art Exhibition*, exhibition catalogue (p. 21). Darwin: Toga Group.
9. Lee, G. (2006). Artist statement.
10. Lee, G. (2023). *Nokturne*. In O'Riordan, 2023: 127; based on a Larrakia welcome to country and opening speech for the *Nokturne* exhibition curated by Jenny Fraser, 24HR Art, NT Centre for Contemporary Art, Darwin, 4 August to 9 September 2006.