

## Future Primitive

LINDA MICHAEL

This exhibition brings together works by nineteen artists from Australia and New Zealand to explore a renewed engagement with primitivism in contemporary art.

Artist Richard Bell writes that ‘Aboriginal art, it’s a white thing’<sup>1</sup> and indeed the same could be said of primitivism, a transformative if controversial concept within early modernism, developed along both aesthetic and ideological lines, which liberated artists from the strictures of illusionism and naturalism and revolutionised the traditions of western culture.

Yet its origins in the European encounter with the traditional arts of Africa and Oceania implicate primitivism in the history of colonisation, racism and exploitation. The complex and shifting phases of this relationship are summarised in Andrew McNamara and Ann Stephen’s essay in this volume, which focuses on its ramifications within Australia. As they write, primitivism ‘reside[s] on the knife-edge of envy and denunciation’ and allows for both ‘the project of alternate imaginative horizons and the worst forms of cultural and racial chauvinism’. This precarious, double character provides a departure point for a number of artists in this exhibition, who construct their works from the debris of colonial contact.

The word ‘primitive’ is an empty cipher that has been used in the west to define whatever is different from the present condition.<sup>2</sup> Hence, as Jack Flam writes, ‘primitive art ... is like a reversible mirror that alternately could show either what was felt to be desirable or what was lacking in the self-image of the societies that regarded it.’<sup>3</sup> After World War I, for example, the Dadaists embraced the primeval and spiritual powers of ‘primitive’ art in a challenge to the tragic failures of European ‘civilisation’. It is tempting to think that today a similar move is taking place; as McNamara and Stephen note, primitivism—though less appropriative—is again a magnet of attraction for artists.

Artists working in the western tradition today may draw upon their own indigenous or ancestral history, or upon longstanding familiarity with works from other cultures. Alasdair McLuckie’s art practice is informed by his childhood in a home filled with a collection of North American Indian and tribal artefacts, including intricately decorated weaponry. He learnt traditional beading techniques from his father on a homemade loom, and while his designs at first aligned with the symmetries and geometries of ancient patternmaking techniques, they have become more intuitive, arising from an attention to materials and the rituals of making. His practice collapses distinctions between craft and art, decorative pattern and formalism, and its primitivism is inflected by a psychedelic or ’70s aesthetic and a high-key tertiary palette—pink, orange and mauve have been signature colours.

McLuckie came to modernism via his abiding interest in tribal art. He had disregarded the western art history taught at art school, only recently stumbling across Picasso and realising that the history of modernism was closely linked to his own interests. In a series of collages entitled *Study for Blue* (2012–13) he superimposes a lion’s head on Picasso’s face, a wry take on Picasso’s primitivism, reputed prowess, and lionisation. A simple, spontaneous gesture relative to McLuckie’s painstaking beading, it arose out of jungle imagery that has always featured in his drawings, and also makes an appearance in recent beadworks in leopard print.

Alasdair McLuckie

