

## A modern take on primitive

December 7, 2013

Dan Rule

It's an image that forms a loaded allegory for Western art's engagement with other cultures. Painted from a 1960 photograph, Daniel Boyd's image of an ageing Pablo Picasso in a Native American headdress is indicative of the fascination, ignorance and far-reaching implications that underpinned the early 20th century modernist strain that became known as primitivism.

Painted using the Sydney-based artist's distinctive pointillist technique, in which he overlays the painted surface with dots of clear glue to form multiple "lenses", the work addresses modernism's formal and appropriative engagement with the so-called "primitive" world and its art and artefacts. But appropriation and understanding are two very different things.

"When Picasso puts on that headdress, it changes context," says Boyd, who is showing the work alongside others from his 2013 New Hebrides series as part of the vast Future Primitive exhibition at Heide. "He views it differently and it's questionable as to whether he understood the cultural implications of wearing a headdress. The surface of the work speaks of that; the idea being that they're multiple lenses and that the object has multiple histories."

For Boyd, who is of Vanuatan and Aboriginal descent, the work speaks of the "background and information inherent in the images or objects" and of the increasingly complex paths via which we uncover our own heritage. By studying Matisse and Picasso's fascination with artefacts from indigenous cultures - in particular, a Vanuatan object that Matisse bequeathed to Picasso - Boyd began to uncover his own story. Indeed, his works come to articulate both art history and personal history.

"I was looking at inheritance in a way - what you inherit through being a

contemporary artist - and acknowledging these other cultures that have influenced modernism," he says. "It comes back to me trying to understand myself, who I've become because of art and family."

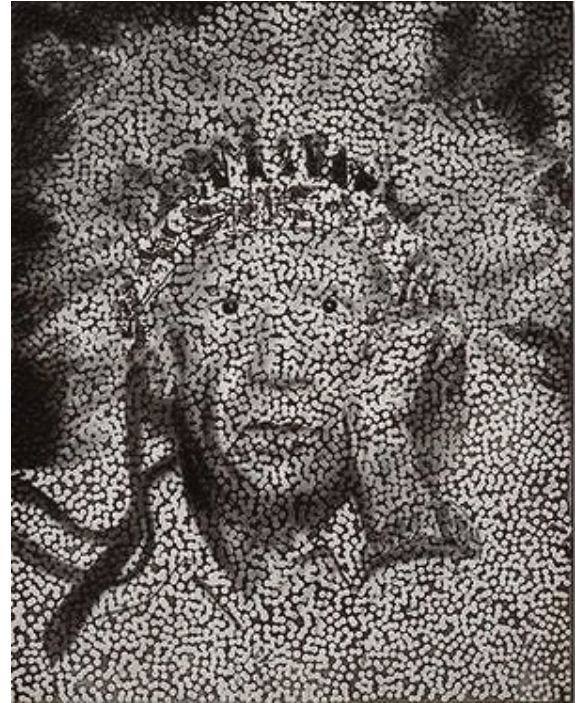
According to curator Linda Michael, the complex historical and allegorical schema that is central to Boyd's work is at the heart of Future

Primitive, which brings together artists as diverse as Sanne Mestrom, Narelle Jubelin, David Griggs, Mikala Dwyer, Jess Johnson, Siri Hayes, TV Moore, Ricky Swallow and collaborative duo Burchill & McCamley. "The poignancy of Daniel's work is that the conduits to his heritage are through those primitivist modernist artists, because that's part of his history equally," Michael says. "He was brought up in the Western art tradition."

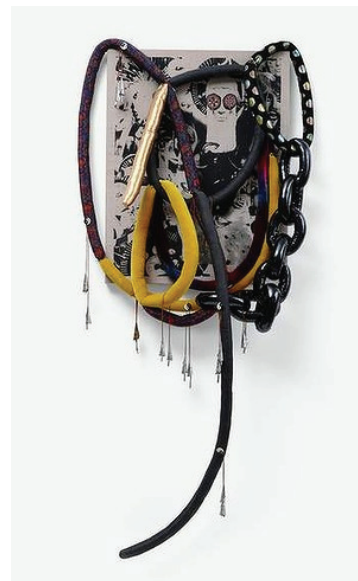
She set about researching the exhibition after observing a re-engagement with modernist primitivism, especially the work of Picasso. In the wake of a decade dominated by video and photographic practice, Michael identified a generation "going the other way".

"Artists are more interested in the handmade again, but also more fundamental things like the reusing of found objects in someone like Dylan Martorell's work. And all of it seems to relate to some kind of disaffection with our world and where it's going," she says.

While the term "primitive" carries potentially negative cultural connotations, Michael's usage is a poetic reference to a new encounter with primitivism that eschews its former colonialist undertones.



Making a point: Daniel Boyd's Untitled, 2013, questions whether Picasso understood the cultural implications of wearing a headdress.



Sarah Contos | Ladies and Gentlemen, Sarah Contos Presents: The Muses and The Folly 2013 (detail) | Courtesy of the artist. Future Primitive pics.

Newell Harry, who is of mixed-race South African descent, is known for his woven mats and sculptures made in collaboration with artisans from the Pacific region. Dealing with the slippages and similarities among cultures in the post-colonialist setting, his ceremonial mats are emblazoned with the Australian, South African and Melanesian lingua franca, while his orb-like sculptures compile junk, clothing and detritus that has made its way to the Pacific.

"His works might look like tribal forms, but they're made of all the debris of colonial contact, which in itself is this contradictory material that alludes to all these different, overlapping histories," Michael says. "It's not like the past, when artists are on one side taking from the other - it's a lot more mixed up."

The work of Melbourne artist Alasdair McLuckie, meanwhile, brings together drawn and collaged forms referencing Picasso and Matisse, with panels marked by intricate Native American beading techniques. While not part of his culture, McLuckie's childhood was spent "immersed" in his father's collection of folk art and artefacts from around the world.

"I was taught the beading from my father, who taught himself from reading books and studying old antiques and tribal art, largely from North America," he says.

"While these cultures and techniques are a huge influence on my practice, the more it has gone on, the more my work has become about formalist and material concerns - the process of making and ritual - and has actually become more personal."

There are more playful approaches at work too. Sydney artist Sarah Contos is known for her embroidered Australasian Post and album

covers, resurrections of the pop-cultural deities of her childhood, such as Olivia Newton-John, Barry Crocker and Kamahl. In her commission for the Heide project, she has reconfigured plaster casts of Greek gods and cultural icons such as Shakespeare and Beethoven with air-dried clay, Femo and other bits and bobs to create gender-bending mutations that fit the unique vernacular of her own "fictional primitivism".

"I see it like a 3D collage or, like on the Acropolis or the Great Wall, when people graffiti their names and who they love and that becomes beautiful as well," she says. "I just want it to be like someone has graffiti spray-painted over these artefacts. It kind of brings the artefact into the contemporary day. In the early 1900s it might have had a different residue, but now its plastic water bottles and litter."

Michael describes New Zealand artist Rohan Wealleans, meanwhile, as "an alien anthropologist who's creating his own tribe", his psychedelic, choreographed photographs and lurid relief sculptures and paintings pointing to a kind of primitive futurism that "collapses different times and eras".

"Like a number of other artists in the show, he creates his own possible world through his art," she says. "His understanding of primitivism relates to how he makes that world."

It's a notion that permeates much of the show.

"All these artists tend to look elsewhere to see what they can retrieve in order to go forward," says Michael. "The future is always implicated in their work."

***Future Primitive is at Heide Museum of Modern Art until March 21, 2014. [heide.com.au](http://heide.com.au)***



Alasdair McLuckie | Untitled 2013 | Private collection, Sydney. Future Primitive pics.