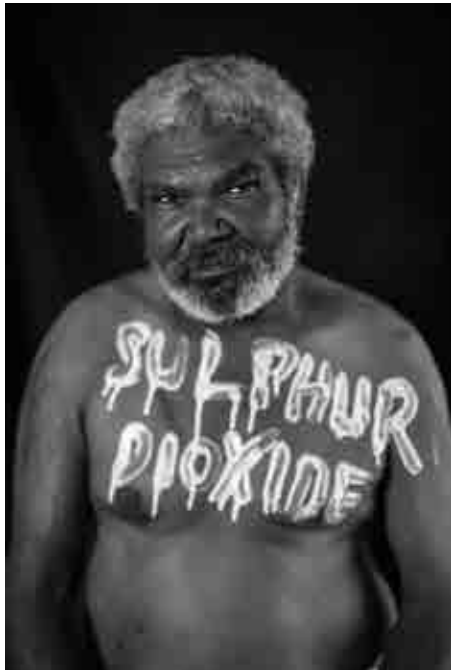
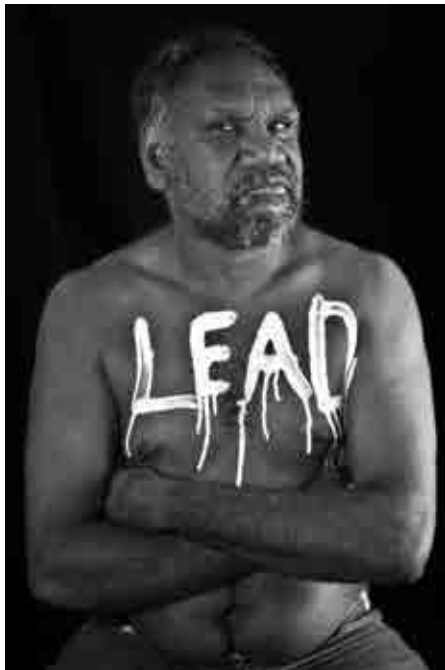
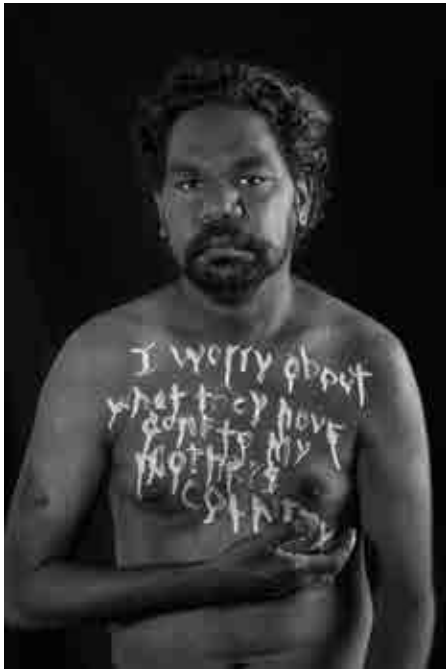


We Never Ceded Our Countries



Those Dreamings travelled like human beings and their spirit is still there in the country. We talk to them as our own relations and we believe their spirits come back into our families in the new generations that are born.

Mussolini Harvey



Speak truth to Power

For decades the Indigenous peoples of the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria region of the Northern Territory have deployed artistic expression through dance, song, story, painting, drawing and film to speak truth to power.

There are many examples that illustrate Garawa, Gudanji, Marra and Yanyuwa, peoples' determination to speak truth to settler colonisers and their governments, including:

- the existential stories told by the late Yanyuwa/Marra Lawman, Mussolini Harvey that illuminate the ontology of Country
- the drawings of the late Garawa Lawman Dinny Mc Dinny that illustrate the systematic killing of Aboriginal people by settler colonisers with their elephant hunting rifles
- the landmark 1981 documentary film 'Two Laws' (with Carolyn Strachan and Alessandro Cavadini), which saw the Garawa, Gudanji, Marra and Yanyuwa peoples present their own experiences of decade upon decade of punitive government policy and settler coloniser violence on their lives and Country
- the paintings of Myra Rory that record the use of trumped-up charges and neckchains by the NT Police to clear Garawa people off their ancestral lands
- the images of Nancy Mc Dinny that illustrate the use of whips by pastoralists to extract Aboriginal labour in a slave like way
- the paintings of Jacky Green that expose the dark art of manipulation and coercion skilfully used by governments and mining companies

- the songs of Gadian Hoosan and the Sandridge Band that document the contemporary experiences of Indigenous lives in the Gulf Country, and
- the canvases of Stewart Hoosan that illustrate the struggle of the Garawa warriors (Darrbarrawarra), Mayawagu and Yarri Yarri, which remind younger generations of Aboriginal people of their ancestors' resistance to the violence of the settler colonisers.

Forced Assimilation and the Destruction of Country
Today, through the Open Cut exhibition, the Indigenous peoples of the Gulf Country once again use art to speak truth to power. They do this because they are being subjected to forced assimilation and the contamination of their country.

Forced assimilation is occurring in a number of ways. For example: by not allowing Indigenous peoples the right to participate in decision-making in matters which affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures; through the capture of Indigenous community-based organisations by settler colonisers; and through punitive top-down public policy processes. These processes don't recognise Indigenous peoples' laws, property, cultures, languages and aspirations, and Indigenous peoples have no involvement in such processes. At the same time, the destruction of these Indigenous peoples' Country is occurring through the contamination of their lands, waters and biodiversity through poorly regulated mining activities.

The contamination of land, water, air and wildlife can be seen across the region. There is the Redbank Copper Mine, abandoned in the mid-1990s, with an estimated 54,000 tonnes of partially treated acid-forming material



left exposed to the monsoonal rains for 17 years. Poor management has resulted in highly toxic waste bleeding into nearby waterways. In some creeks, extending up to 7 kilometres from the mine site, copper sulphide leaching forms concentrations so high that there is no longer any aquatic life.¹ Clean-up costs are estimated between 10 and 100 million dollars.²

McArthur River Mine, one of the world's largest zinc, lead and silver mines, poses the most serious intergenerational environmental contamination legacy for the region's Indigenous peoples.

In 2006, after a protracted battle and with government approval, Glencore, the current owner of the mine, diverted over 5 kilometres of the McArthur River through an artificial channel to make way for the massive open-cut pit in the bed of the monsoonal river.

As Jacky Green says, 'The open-cut pit is right in the place where The Rainbow Serpent rests. They cut open not just The Snake, but us ceremony people too. They pushed us aside just like they did first time when they



invaded our Countries with their guns and poison to take our land'.

Before the expansion of the mine and the diversion of the river, the public was told that only 12 per cent of waste rock would be potentially toxic material. But reports in 2014 prepared by McArthur River Mine's independent monitor, the ERIAS Group, provided evidence that the massive waste rock pile contains around 80 per cent of potentially toxic material.³

The results of this poorly planned and poorly regulated mining activity soon became apparent when in 2013 the massive waste rock pile spontaneously combusted billowing poisonous clouds of sulphur dioxide over the region for months on end.

The independent monitor warned that over time, monsoonal rains will penetrate the waste rock's clay cap reaching the potentially acid-forming rock below the surface before leaching acid, saline and metalliferous drainage into the groundwater.⁴

The independent monitor also warned that levels of lead found in the fish in the mine's diversion channel exceeded

the maximum permitted by Food Standards Australia New Zealand. The permitted lead level was exceeded in 9 out of 10 fish caught, with the lead testing at a level similar to that found at the mine site.⁵

Then, in 2015, it was reported that 400 cattle had been shot near McArthur River Mine because some had tested positive for lead.⁶

Despite this litany of unresolved environmental problems Glencore are currently seeking to increase both the size of the open cut pit and the already massive waste rock pile.

The estimated clean-up timeframe once the mine closes was recently estimated in documents submitted to the NT Environmental Protection Agency to be up to 1000 years.⁷ The cost of the clean-up is unknown and the environmental bond held by the NT Government to pay for this remains confidential and unavailable for public scrutiny.

Should the NT Government lift its current moratorium on hydraulic fracturing (fracking), the ancestral lands of the Garawa, Gudanji, Marra and Yanyuwa peoples will in all likelihood experience further contamination.

Indigenous Peoples Rights in the 21st Century

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by the General Assembly on 13 September 2007. The Australian Government endorsed the Declaration in 2009. The rights secured in the Declaration are the minimum standards to ensure the survival, dignity and well-being of Indigenous peoples. The Declaration defends Indigenous territories against waste disposal and against resource extraction without prior informed consent. And, importantly defends their right to participate in decision-making in matters which affect their

rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures.

It is vital that Australian governments take action and pay serious attention to these key articles in the Declaration. The Declaration provides a framework for law and policy reforms to ensure that Indigenous peoples no longer experience forced assimilation and the contamination of their country. Australian governments must act now and walk in unison with 21st Century human rights frameworks.

After 150 years of unfettered white developmentalism and associated disregard for Aboriginal environmental and cultural values it's time for environmental justice in the southwest Gulf, including fair treatment and meaningful involvement of Indigenous people with respect to development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies in their ancestral lands. The goal must be a fair distribution of the environmental benefits and costs.

Seán Kerins, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University.

1 Kerins, S., 2014. 'Sick Country: Poisoning Garawa with Mining and Politics,' New Matilda, 23 July.
2 Jones, R., 2013. 'Indigenous leaders want government help to stop copper sulphide leaks at Redbank mine', Australian Broadcasting Corporation.
3 ERIAS Group, 2014. Independent Monitor Community Report, McArthur River Mine, ERIAS Group, South Australia.
4 ERIAS Group, 2014.
5 ERIAS Group, 2014.
6 Kerins, S., 2015. 'Indigenous communities are losing out in the development of northern Australia', The Conversation, September 2.
7 Draft Environmental Impact Statement, 2017. McArthur River Mine Overburden Management Project, Appendix Y, Stakeholder Consultation Report, p. 16.

Paintings Jacky Green. Research and text Seán Kerins. Photography & design Therese Ritchie.



Yee-haw Money trucks

Year after year mining trucks keep taking the minerals from our country. The miners cut our river and diverted its waters to dig at the resting place of the Rainbow Snake. Year after year, hour on hour, the trucks haul the minerals away. They take all the Spirit from the country. They take wealth from our country, leaving behind a huge open cut pit and toxic waste rock pile for us to clean up. They cut-open the guts of the Snake and left us with the mess.

We hurt when we see those trucks driving through our country. Just like the cowboys scream Yee-haw at the rodeo I imagine the miners riding their trucks across our country screaming, “Yee-haw, I’m rich, Fuck you!”



The Christmas Father

The blue, green, yellow and red areas represent the four clan groups of the southwest Gulf Country, the Garawa, Marra, Gudanji and Yanyuwa.

In the middle sit The Dreaming ancestors, the Rainbow Snake and the Stinking Turtle. We all tied into this powerful place through our sacred songs, our ceremony and our Law. This place is right where Glencore have dug their massive open cut pit at McArthur River Mine.

On the left of the painting, sitting in the hills looking out are spirit people. They can see some people tryin’ to stay on their country, tryin’ to keep their culture and Law strong and protect their country. But they can also see how the miners work like the Christmas Father throwing out Toyota motorcars, just like lollies, in front of people with the aim of gettin’ them to agree to damaging our sacred places and contaminating our country. Some of our people run with their arms open wide and their eyes closed tight shut to get to the shit that the miners throw down. But while they running to get a little they can’t see how the miners are ripping our people apart and contaminating our country with the toxic waste they make.



The Whitefella Chicken-bird dreaming

The miners keep trying to smash our Law and how we want to organise and represent ourselves. They take our people away from our culture to make it easier for them to take our resources from our Country.

They work out who they think are the main traditional owners for an area and then they swoop down, like a clumsy bird of prey, and grab them, and take them away to their nest.

A man with ceremonial paint can see what’s happening and tries to spear what he sees as a Whitefella chicken-bird. At the nest the miner man, standing up, starts to give them chicken food to keep quiet and get the OK for sacred sites to be damaged. ‘You just sing our song now’ he says throwin’ them scraps.



Red Country

Right across the McArthur River region are The Dreaming tracks of the ancestral beings. The barramundi, the two snakes who travelled together and the one that come up from the south. The Rainbow Snake and the Stinking Turtle. They all there. So too are the places where they coiled or rested, or went down under the earth like at the place I have marked in the river. Big name places, important and sacred places, they are right across the region and they tie people to places and people together.

Right in the middle of this sacred country is a torn-up place, right where the Sacred Tree is that forms part of the Rainbow Snake story. It’s a big name place, right where the massive open cut pit now is. The black represents the hole that keeps getting bigger and bigger and the brown represents how the mining company is now talking about stuffing all the toxic waste rock back in the hole before they take-off with their money and leave us and generations to come with their toxic mess.



The damage has been done

The mighty McArthur River has been cut and the diversion has been put in place. The open cut pit keeps getting bigger and bigger, so too do the evaporation ponds and the toxic waste rock pile. Our sacred places have been cut up, or fenced in, and we have been pushed aside. The damage has been done.



The Whitefella Chicken-bird dreaming #2

They might come in their Toyotas, but what them miners are really like is a big chicken-bird. They swoop in and out of our community picking people off one by one and carrying them off to their nest. Us ceremony people gotta chain ourselves together so we don’t get taken and worked on by the miners. Whitefella miners want us to say it’s OK to poison our country with their toxic waste. They just dreamin’, us ceremony people never going to give in to them poisoning us and our country.



Jerriminni—The Snake Line

Powerful song-lines criss-cross our Countries, they tie people to country and to each other. Near McArthur River between two hills rests a ceremony ground where people sing. Three sacred trees stand on the song-line, people hunting on country know about these places and know how to respect and look after them. Miners got no idea of our culture or our rights.

Acknowledgements

In order of appearance overleaf from left to right: Isa McDinny, Casey Davey, Gadian Hoosan, Jacky Green, Donald Shadforth, Timothy Lansen, Kyeika Neade, Ian Davey, Shauntrell Green, Robert O’Keefe, Stewart Hoosan, Nancy McDinny, Scott McDinny, Jackie Green, Karen Noble, Josie Green, Cain O’Keefe (front image).

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