



PENNY EVANS
THE AB-SORPTION METHOD

images:
 above: Penny Evans, *Strange Fruit 1* 2014
 paperplate collage, 35cm diameter
 cover: Penny Evans, *The AB-sorption method*,
 Kerriane Cox 2014
 production shot, digital image. Photograph Rohan Langford
 back: Penny Evans, Close up of grid of pages
 from *the AB-sorption Method* 2013
 mixed media, artist book
 all images courtesy the artist



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8 February – 30 March 2014



LISMORE
 REGIONAL
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image: Penny Evans
The Ab-sorption method 2014
 still from film, duration 8 mins 20 secs
 courtesy the artist

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*How I See Myself – The Nobody, Nobody Knows*¹

William Blake: *What is your name?*
 Nobody: *My name is Nobody.*²

1. *The me nobody knows, Children's voices from the ghetto*, edited by Stephen M. Joseph, Discus Books/ Published by Avon, New York, 1969.

2. from *Dead Man*, 1995 film directed by Jim Jarmusch

In the 'absorption method' of cooking rice the rice grains and water are brought to a boil before being covered with a lid and taken off the heat and the rice allowed to sit, absorbing the water. Some personal and social issues take a little time to be rationalized and absorbed. The work of Penny Evans is concerned with hidden histories, and societal attitudes to race and class. A personal construction of self is from your upbringing and your own personal cognitive construction that may come out of a slow cook – a collection or aggregation of images and experiences, words, and responses.

I am Kamilaroi (Gamaroi Marri) and am also of Anglo-Celtic and German heritage. Penny Evans

In 1952 Franz Fanon had written his masterpiece, *Black Face White Masks*, in which he discussed the strains of people

of colour 'passing', wearing white masks to socially survive and be recognized as human beings in post World War II French society. Penny Evans was born in 1966 just before the historic 1967 Australian referendum that recognized Aboriginal people – made us visible. Although of Gamilleroi Aboriginal descent from north-west NSW, Penny was born on middle-class lower north shore Sydney. Until she was about 25 years of age she was unaware of her Aboriginal heritage. Her 'aspirational' parents and grandparents, her grandfather particularly, as with many Aboriginal people of the south-east of Australia, were trying to assimilate and progress socially into the wider 'white Australian' society. Aboriginal descent was seen as an impediment to this and many were 'passing' as 'white' Australians. Her maternal great grandmother's generation of the family (the subject of her film) whitened their skin with talcum powder to mask their 'Aboriginality'.

In the European colonial crime, the mixing of races and cultural or social mores was (is) seen as a diminishing of the society rather than an enriching, as happened with the unrecognized polyglot mixing pot of European races and cultures.

Memories rely on the ability and imagination of each personal mind for storage and retrieval. Memories can be colourful, torn into strips and individual threads, furry on the edges, and catch your attention as they flutter gently in the winds of your mind. They reform and are recollected in a myriad number of ways and need to be perceived, read, reconstructed according to your own personal need. Penny's collage images are printed on paper but stitched together with cotton with long strands hanging down.

The threads move through her art practice, betraying a perception, an inkling of something missing, her Aboriginal lineage. Originally working with ceramics, then photography, and following, the use of these images on paper in forms of collage; Penny creates little spaces or windows into her undisclosed, unclear Aboriginal world. And now there is her using of film (*The Ab-sorption Method*, 2013) as 'homage to

her maternal (Gamilleroi) great grandmother'. In this we see an externalizing of personal memory. She says;

We knew and we didn't know about it (Aboriginal descent) ... clues were around from the beginning ... He (my grandfather) told us about the willy wag tail and that this bird was a sign, a messenger from the other side ... Penny Evans.

There are feelings that remain inside that can't be touched – they survive all the buffering of life that you meet – the whispering memory of your Aboriginal heritage. In the Gamilleroi language, the prefix; Gamil or Gumil, means main soul. Some Aboriginal people believe an unchanging spiritual entity; your soul, exists inside all Aboriginals and remains in a consistent positive beautiful state despite the external changes to our outer body, and the trauma, insults, injuries and scars of the colonial experience.

There are a number of lines of memory and support in an Aboriginal life. Professor Diane Bell, in a private conversation, commented that the Ngarrindjeri of the lower Murray River have a 'navel cord exchange' called ngai-ngaimpi – by which relationships were established with groups beyond the Ngarrindjeri Nation. Your ngai-ngaimpi partner gave you safe passage through their country and took your part in fights. In Penny's simple film, her maternal great grandmother struggles to whiten her complexion and fit in, but the knot of this discomfort is cut by her Aboriginal sister seeing her actual worth and through to her Aboriginal soul that needs no mask.

I came to in 2000 and I had an epiphany and I had thought everybody (the Gamilleroi) were dead – massacred and then found, I realized they weren't ... my lineage is still here. Penny Evans

A central motif of eastern Australian Aboriginal cultural expression is the parallel line and 'concentric' diamonds, etched into the ground of ceremonial spaces, into weapons and utensils, possibly the human body and into the trunks of living trees as funerary posts and revelatory devices. They

represent the beginning and continuity of the spiritual world and are used by Penny to provide a sacred window into the past and the spirit world.

I paint a white body clay and covering with a black glaze and scratching back. Even though these souvenirs depict racial stereotyping and grotesquerie, I collect them and know many Aboriginal people who do. Penny Evans.

Her ceramic teacher, Gudrun Kliks, who was German and Jungian, really encouraged her to look for her Aboriginal inspiration at college – to follow her Gamilleroi beckoning. In her diasporic cultural refugee position she took to creating and using Aboriginal kitsch ironically if a little desperately.

The 'souvenir' is a feature of my work presently. Specifically 'aboriginalia' style souvenirs (ceramics, tea towels etc) from the 20th Century which were my main external reference points (other than the white education system), for my aboriginality during my childhood because of cultural annihilation. Penny Evans

The word image comes from imago (Latin) that literally means mask as in death mask. In psychoanalysis it refers to an unconscious, idealized mental image of someone – especially a parent that influences a person's behavior (her great grandmother perhaps).

In northern Australia local land owning clans call people of mixed descent 'half a colour'. In Aboriginal societies all over Australia native populations see 'white' people as a form of dead corpse – when Aboriginal people die the body loses its 'colour' and turns a pink white – whiteness is equated with death. When appearing as spirits of the dead in religious ceremonies performers paint themselves with white clay. The clay is believed to be an extruded material from a creative spirit being, and wearing it bestows powers of many kinds.

There is a certain irony of Penny's family starting and developing Maurer's Funeral Service. The Mortician's role is

often to 'make up' the appearance of the deceased.

Badtjala artist Fiona Foley is one of the few contemporary artists using white powder (flour) to strike political comments. She used flour in a spiral in *Land Deal* 1995 and in *Velvet waters - laced flour* 1996 installations. The latter installation includes stripes of flour on the floor said to be 'laced' (poisoned with arsenic). The work relates to the practice of early frontier conflict when, in the rations of flour, tea and sugar given to Aborigines, flour was mixed with arsenic (poison). In fact in the early 1860s such a mass poisoning of the Bandjalung took place near south Ballina in the region Penny lives and works now.

There are people with a history and people without a history, or more correctly, people blinded to their history. For people of mixed Aboriginal descent we strive to make sense of what has until now been 50,000 years of gibberish due to a disappearance of traditional indigenous religious practice and loss of language.

Things cast no shadow at the point of change 'mid-day'. Some painters use shadow to make an object or subject, or person, or personality appear solid or three dimensional. When light shines on something or someone, a shadow is always cast. As the shadows physically bring attention to physical features, the social or historical shadows bring the personal character and/or social mores to your notice. We may all live a form of shadow life and all carry a displaced personality.

A third meaning of imago is in entomology where it describes the final and fully developed adult stage of an insect, typically winged. I see this exhibition as a step in the opening of another stage in Penny's practice. Has Penny metamorphosed, and about to take flight? It is to become unconsciously but correctly, a symbol of the unconquered.

For me our history is not the distant past. I am the culmination of it and embody it. Penny Evans.

essay by: DJON MUNDINE OAM JANUARY 2014