

VERNON AH KEE & SOPHIE MCINTYRE
nothing important happened today: An
Interview with Vernon Ah Kee

Abstract

*This is an edited transcript of an interview with Vernon Ah Kee conducted by Sophie McIntyre in which the artist discusses his 2021 exhibition *nothing important happened today*, held at the Spring Hill Reservoir in Brisbane, Australia. The discussion explores the history of the site, to which several of Ah Kee’s works in the exhibition responded, and broader national and global issues relating to colonisation and sovereignty. The conversation also touches on ongoing themes within Ah Kee’s practice, such as race relations and the politics of denial in Australian society.*

Ah Kee details the methodologies used to create his artworks—which range from videos to large-scale drawings to installations—with McIntyre observing in them the relationship between beauty and violence. Ah Kee ruminates on the role of art in society, particularly in Australia, where there remains a significant divide between the experiences of First Nations and non-Indigenous peoples, and our perspectives on history and sovereignty, which were major themes explored in the “Grounded in Place” symposium panel of which Ah Kee was a part.

Keywords: *Aboriginal Australian art, colonisation, Australian history, police brutality, sovereignty, First Nations*

This interview was conducted in February 2022, several months after artist Vernon Ah Kee gave a presentation in the “Grounded in Place” online symposium as part of the panel “History and Sovereignty.” In his presentation, Ah Kee discussed several of the works in his solo exhibition *nothing important happened today*, held at the Spring Hill Reservoir, Brisbane (September 18–October 2, 2021). This interview expands on key points Ah Kee made in that talk and delves more deeply into his practice and views on history, beauty, violence, sovereignty, and related issues.



Figure 1. Vernon Ah Kee, *nothing important happened today*, 2021. Exhibition installation view, Spring Hill Reservoir. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane



Figure 2. Vernon Ah Kee, *nothing important happened today*, 2021. Exhibition installation view, Spring Hill Reservoir. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Sophie McIntyre (SM): *nothing important happened today (Figs. 1–8), one of your most recent exhibitions, was presented by the Spring Hill Reservoir in Meanjin (Brisbane) in late 2021. The exhibition and the space in which it was shown were deeply affecting and resonated strongly with visitors. Can you discuss some of the key issues explored in this exhibition and the historical significance of the site?*

Vernon Ah Kee (VAK): The title of the exhibition references a historical, probably apocryphal quote attributed to King George III. He is said to have written this line in his diary on 4 July 1776—the day Britain’s new-world colonies declared their independence. Because the British government could no longer send their convicts there, it began sending them to Australia.

The gist of what I was trying to say through the exhibition was that there is a willful denial of history and a twisting of context that happens every time opposing narratives collide. This happens on both sides, but when there is a dominant culture it’s usually one-way communication; we see this everywhere, particularly in the colonial context.

When I was approached with the opportunity to mount something in the Reservoir, I took it without really knowing what I was going to do, but I knew I needed to do something. The building is in Spring Hill in Brisbane city. In recent years, it has been restored and refurbished, creating a space for different kinds of events, including exhibitions. The Reservoir is adjacent to a windmill that was built in 1841. Together, the windmill and the Reservoir used to feed water to Brisbane when it was a colony town, so to speak.

The site itself has a horrible history. Not just a horrible kind of colonial history in terms of law and order, but in terms of how Aborigines were treated. They were summarily rounded up and pushed to the fringes of the town. Boundary posts were set up, and Blackfellas were not allowed to enter the city area. They were marginalised from their own lands.

It was also the site of the public execution of two Aboriginal men, Mullan and Ningavil, who were hanged from the windmill in 1841. I think it might have been the first official execution in Brisbane as a town. It was public and done with much fanfare. This history is very much hidden—willfully and aggressively hidden—and more than just hidden, it has been denied. There are similar histories, accounts, and events from this time in other towns in Australia. I wanted the exhibition to engage with the site and to explore themes that recur in my work, one of which is questioning this idea of the colonial narrative and offering opposing narratives.



Figure 3. Vernon Ah Kee, *scratch the surface* (detail), 2020. Ten riot shields with charcoal, 88 x 48 x 4 cm each, installation view in the exhibition *nothing important happened today*, Spring Hill Reservoir, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane



Figure 4. Vernon Ah Kee, *scratch the surface*, 2020. Ten riot shields with charcoal, 88 x 48 x 4 cm each, installation view in the exhibition *nothing important happened today*, Spring Hill Reservoir, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

SM: *Can you elaborate on these concealed histories and the opposing or parallel narratives that you explore in this body of work?*

VAK: Many people, both in and outside of Australia, think Australians have a lot of guilt about the country's treatment of Aborigines and "lesser subjects," but I don't think they do. There is nothing to suggest in society—and particularly in policy and the way the government conducts itself—that there's a lot of guilt. I think this is because of the level of denial inherent in Australian values, and the most common narratives kind of cancel out the guilt. They don't even override it, they just cancel it out completely, like it's something people should not have to contend with. The Australian populace, in general, continues on its merry way.

And so, part of my role as a visual artist—and I'm not alone—is to demonstrate to audiences that there are parallel narratives, which are generated by the kind of parallel existences that different peoples in this country have. Ultimately, it is a colonial experience—both of the coloniser and the colonised, the persecutor and the persecuted.

These overarching themes run through a lot of my work, but primary within this exhibition is the idea of brutality—particularly the brutality inherent in the dominant authorities' treatment of lesser people, and specifically, Blackfellas. The police are a tool of the legal system in this country—and I am using the word "tool" to be diplomatic when, really, they're most often used as a weapon, a blunt weapon at that. And again, there's been so much evidence to demonstrate this, particularly within Aboriginal communities.

So, basically those are the broad strokes of the exhibition. In a way, the space demanded this kind of show; the space was never going to allow anything soft or with rounded edges.

SM: *Yes, viewing your work within this space was a disorienting, unsettling, and almost otherworldly experience. The visitor had to descend into the space, located six metres underground, via a narrow steel staircase. It was dark, with no natural light, and it was also quite cold. It took time for the eyes and body to adjust and for your work to become visible. The building's architecture—with its high and solid stone walls and its curvilinear arches and compressed spaces—is the antithesis of the "white cube" gallery. Was this something you were conscious of when selecting and presenting your work in, or should I say "for," this space?*

VAK: The space is unlike a lot of exhibition spaces I've been to—it has a particular atmosphere that we must let settle on us. We had to be mindful of the architecture—the floor, the height of the space, and the acoustics. We knew that

we needed to make this space work fully for us and for us to work fully with the space—there was no kind of thinking we could work with the space a little.

The site itself had already gone through a kind of renewal; it was like it had revisited past sins and reckoned with that history. I don't know, but maybe it excited some ghosts—I wasn't game to spend the night there!

As you descend into the space, the change in temperature immediately shifts you to a profoundly different kind of psychology, and you have to adjust to the light and the architecture.

When you walk into any curated space, as a viewer, you're searching for a place to locate yourself. Any kind of well-thought-out space, particularly architecturally, will lead you to a starting point, and the most obvious starting point here is the centre corridor, where we installed the shields (*scratch the surface*, 2019, Figs. 3–4).

One of the most striking aspects of the space was the height of the ceiling, and we could include works of scale in this reasonably tight space. The large drawings *lynching I* and *lynching II* (Fig. 5) were displayed on the side walls and spot lit. The video *Kick the Dust* (Figs. 6–7) was displayed toward the back of the space. These were two very active sections within the space, and they changed the feel of the space.

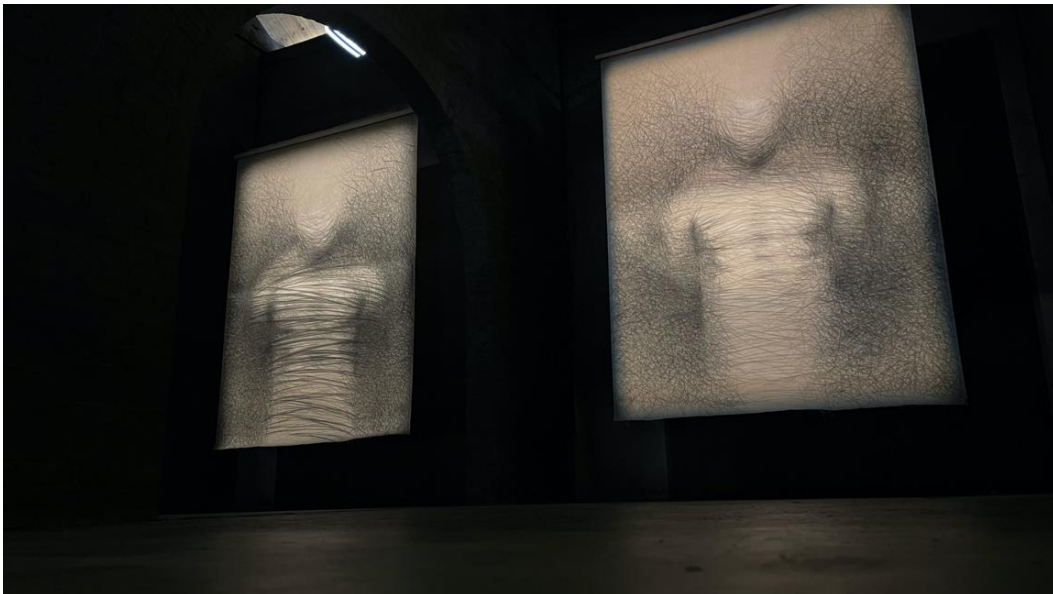


Figure 5. Vernon Ah Kee, *lynching I* and *lynching II*, 2015. Charcoal on Belgian linen, 300 x 200 cm each, installation view in the exhibition *nothing important happened today*, Spring Hill Reservoir, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

SM: *These are three separate, pre-existing bodies of work, yet by bringing them together in this exhibition, and in this space, they acquire new meaning. Collectively, they examine past acts of racial violence—locally and globally—and the erasure of these acts, and this connects with the history of the site itself.*

VAK: Yes, *lynching I* and *lynching II* were created quite some time ago. In this exhibition space, these drawings of lynched bodies are a direct reference to the executions of the two Aboriginal men at this site. They are dead Aboriginal bodies.

These works also refer to the historical practice of gibbeting, in which dead or dying bodies were strung up on a wooden structure or displayed in a cage and presented in public to deter other people. In North America and Europe, they would just wrap the body in chains, and the birds could eat the bodies, leaving only the bones. Just barbaric really. It's a medieval practice, but it also was done during the Armenian genocide in Turkey in the early twentieth century.

There may be scholars and historians who would question me and my use of that kind of imagery, particularly as a reference to that kind of practice happening in Australia. They might say we don't have any evidence of it, and I'd be like, well, do you think it *never* happened here? There are people who think lynching never happened in Australia. . . . [This despite there being] lots and lots of records of massacres of Aboriginal people, in which bodies were put on public display, where bodies were dismembered and displayed in trees—that kind of brutality. You keep hitting this kind of denial and it's a specific kind of denial that is recognisable and almost instant. In my career, I've come up against it so many times and it just makes me think that this must be a characteristic of being Australian. I don't have another explanation for it. And believe me, I would like to be wrong, but it's how I make sense of the world in the context of my life, so yeah, that's the idea of the drawings.

These drawings are huge, too, because I wanted there to be a sense of undeniability about them. I worked on them for about four days, using charcoal on raw linen. In North America in particular, lynching was a public spectacle. They would make a bonfire and burn the bodies, leaving only charcoal traces of the victims. We pinned the linen to the wall and the charcoal collected at the feet of the drawings.

I tend to build my drawings almost sculpturally. The drawing action I use is a kind of cutting—it involves crossing [cross-hatching], using lots and lots of small lines—and I just build up layers and layers. Conceptually, I employ this technique because it's like thousands and thousands of cuts on skin. It's kind of like having a sense of skin, but also of scarring. And there's a kind of ritual in scarification. Every

single cut hurts, but not enough to kill the subject, so the person just walks around with these wounds.

SM: *Earlier in your career you created a lot of large-scale portraits in which the subject's face is front and centre.¹ What sets these lynching drawings apart is that they focus on the torso.*

VAK: Oh, the heads are kind of hanging off the top of the neck, but torsos are the main anatomical focus of the lynching. They are also meant to represent a universal kind of sculptural torso—the classical Greek kind of ideal of the universal man—and so the torsos themselves are meant to be beautiful and anatomically attractive. This idea is juxtaposed with the context of horror that these figures have been subjected to.

SM: *This is one of the striking things about your work: aesthetically, there is a beauty and refinement, yet conceptually there is a strong sense of violence and brutality. How do you see that relationship expressed through your work—between the violence of the subject and the aesthetic beauty of the composition or form?*

VAK: My shows are highly designed, and I commit myself to establishing an aesthetic of beauty. I'm aware that my drawing action is borne of a recognisably classical discipline, and that's inherent in the way I draw and the lines I employ. I wouldn't describe any of my drawings as messy.

If something is presented beautifully, you can say horrific things. You can show horror and tragedy and brutality to extreme levels if you present it beautifully. And you can elicit a lot of forgiveness from the audience if the work is presented in a way that is kind of recognisably beautiful.

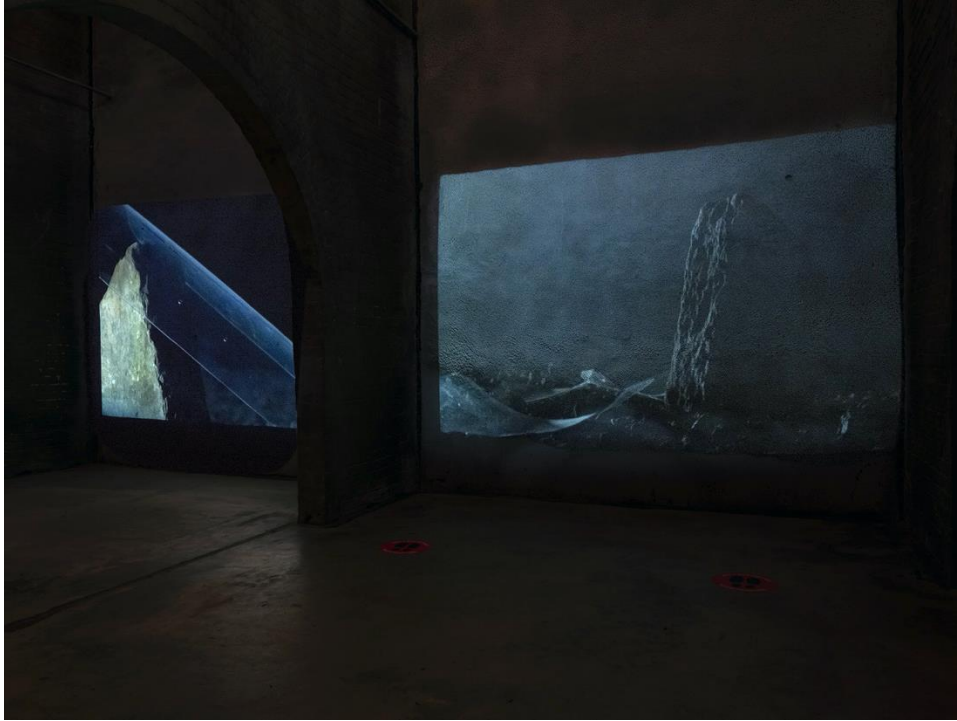


Figure 6. Vernon Ah Kee, *kick the dust*, 2019. Three-channel video, installation view in the exhibition *nothing important happened today*, Spring Hill Reservoir, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane



Figure 7. Vernon Ah Kee, *kick the dust*, 2019. Three-channel video, installation view in the exhibition *nothing important happened today*, Spring Hill Reservoir, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

SM: *Your video kick the dust (Figs. 6–7) expresses this contrasting sense of beauty and violence. Filmed in slow motion and in black-and-white, it has a poetic and cinematic quality that seduces the viewer and draws us in. Yet, the work focuses on the issue of racially motivated violence and injustice. In it, we see three police shields dragged across a dusty road, and battered against a rock, until they splinter into fine plastic shards. Can you elaborate on this work?*

VAK: I wanted to make a work that was drawn from the events of Palm Island and Cronulla in 2004 and 2005, respectively; in particular, I wanted to focus on the aspect of police brutality.² The police are a kind of freewheeling tool of the legal system. Because of the amount of leeway they have, and their kind of willingness to brutalise, I used police shields as a symbol of such persecution and of the way the legal system works. In Australia, there are more than 200 separate laws specifically regarding Aboriginal people. How can this be unless there is a long history of established practices and attitudes that contribute to this kind of engineering?

There are so many occurrences of police brutality, particularly with Blackfellas. The police are trained to think of anybody of difference in a specific way and to punish accordingly—to always punish. It’s an extremely brutal way of conducting yourself as a society. For this video, we tied shields to a four-wheel-drive car and dragged them through a riverbed and mud, and we also shattered them with a crowbar. These are Perspex shields, the same as you would see riot police with.

The video also reflects on two examples of extreme violence committed against Black men: one in Texas and one Australia. In Texas, James Byrd Jr. was literally dragged behind a four-wheel-drive truck driven by a white man. The really striking aspect of that story is that it wasn’t so much that the white guy knew he wasn’t going to get away with it; it was that he just thought it was alright to do it. In Alice Springs, these young fellows who were drinking jumped into their four-wheel drive around one or two o’clock in the morning, and drove down the riverbed where some Aboriginals were sleeping. They beeped the horn and flashed their high beams, and it had the desired effect: the people sleeping there ran for their lives. But there was one old Blackfella who was too tired to get out of the way, so he stood his ground in front of them. They had to swerve to avoid him, and they drove off. But they couldn’t let it go; they were so offended that this old fella—who was in his sixties—had stood his ground that they decided to go back and beat him to death. And they did. Again, because they thought it must be OK

to do that. They had probably beaten people just like that man before, but this time they actually killed somebody.

The legal system comes into play here, because these guys were identified and arrested, but the court decided to take statements from the white community testifying to the character of these young men—that they were just young, came from good families, and things had just gotten out of control. Some of them got very minor sentences—like ten months—for killing a person! I think the most severe sentence handed out was four years. So, Australia is a country where you can just kill Black people and somehow, it's OK. They just think, they're Black and we're white, and this is an OK thing to do. By virtue of them being Black and Aboriginal, it makes them a lesser consideration—and not just as people, but in the eyes of the law, in the eyes of history, in the eyes of every popular narrative in this country, in the eyes of society, in the eyes of education, in the eyes of the academy, of museology, and of literature in every way. There was no reason for these guys not to think that it was OK to kill an Aboriginal man.

For Aborigines, shields are used for protection, battle, and for combat. As you know, in earlier works I've used Aboriginal shields, rainforest shields. But in this work, I want to reflect on a clash of ideologies and an opposing kind of context. I am dragging police shields and rendering them powerless. The shields continue to be dragged and the audience doesn't know if their heads and limbs will come off. We're not going to stop; we just keep going. So, the work is a kind of examination of the powerful over the powerless and the horrors that ensue. And then there's this sense of clash and the sense of the actual violent action.

In *scratch the surface* (Figs. 3–4), I used the same cross-hatching technique on the surface of the plastic police shields as I used in the lynching drawings. I hung the shields from the ceiling of the Reservoir's central atrium. There is a seriousness to those shields—they have that critical weight but also a lot of emotion.

SM: *It's poignant that it's been ten years since then-Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered the National Apology to the Stolen Generation. Do you feel much has changed since then?*

VAK: Well, we know things have gotten worse. We know this because Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, recently made a speech that kind of dismissed any notion of an apology and actually emphasised that forgiveness should be a sentiment that should override any sense of apology.³ He was putting the onus on

the victims of any crime to forgive . . . We are left to make of that what we will . . . This was the prime minister of the country, speaking on behalf of all of us.



Figure 8. Vernon Ah Kee, *nothing important happened today*, 2021. Exhibition installation view, Spring Hill Reservoir, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

SM: *Looking back over the past twenty-three years when you began exhibiting, the subject of your work seems to have shifted from the highly personal—focusing on your family—to global issues becoming more predominant in your work. Is that a fair observation to make?*

VAK: Oh, yeah, that's true, although some of what I was saying at the start of my career had international elements and meaning, particularly around the kind of context of Indigenous peoples internationally.

Certainly, there's a kind of a universality there, but it's increased the longer my career has progressed. At the start of my career, I was concerned about making work about my own life and experiences, and it was important at that time that I speak about things that I know are true. I made work based on my own family's experiences and histories, so at any given time, I could point to those experiences

and say, well, these are experiences that I know are true. I am the expert, me and my family, we are the experts, because these experiences come from my own self and my family and what immediately surrounds me, and they are undeniable.

And I consciously established that as a pattern throughout my career, where I would really make sure I was talking about experiences I know are true. I know they are true for people of colour, about the way we experience skin, and about the commonalities that Native people experience the world. And that comes from engagements that I've had with Native people internationally.

For Aborigines in Australia, we see ourselves very much tied to the fate and history of the Native people in North America—the commonalities are so obvious they are unavoidable. But as people with dark skin in this country, we also occupy a lot of the polemic around skin and the politics of skin and skin-colour by racism that Black Americans occupy. What sets us apart is that Black people in America think that being Black is about the legacy of slavery. For Black people everywhere else in the world, being Black means “land” and the sense of history tied to that land. There are those kinds of generalisations there and cultural specifics there, but they're all kind of up for grabs, but they're all anchored in common experiences, so it's important that there is a throughline to these experiences that ring true.

SM: *In your panel [at the “Grounded in Place” symposium], one of the key words used was “sovereignty.” For some of the presenters, sovereignty of self and sovereignty of land are intertwined. How do you understand the word “sovereignty”?*

VAK: Sovereignty depends very much on the context of your life as an individual. . . . What are the benefits of sovereignty? That's what I want to know. I want to know what it means to me as an individual, and to my family as a group, and to my language group as a group. You know, people can point and say we have sovereignty over this land and I'm like, yeah, but what does that do? Because sovereignty is more akin to being able to point to something and say, “I can build my future there, I can build my family's future there.” And if that's what sovereignty is, then let's pursue that.

On the one hand, I'm wanting to embrace the idea of sovereignty; on the other, I'm trying to dismiss it. I want to know that it has enough substance that you can't dismiss it so easily; that the notion of sovereignty has a weight of its own, and that you can build something on top of it. Do we want to use sovereignty

in the place of human rights? Some people say that we [Aboriginal people] are born with inherent rights—does sovereignty work like that?

So, on the one hand I want to say that sovereignty sits on its own with all these values and descriptors and these kinds of characteristics tied to it; on the other hand, I want to dismiss it because there's so much evidence to suggest that it does not have much weight to it. Surely the Uluru Statement was an exercise in sovereignty, but it's proven to have absolutely no weight at all. In fact, it's fading into obscurity daily. Is it possible to demonstrate sovereignty through a piece of well-written legislature? I don't know. . . . Maybe sovereignty is just a word and that we should get rid of it.

SM: *Do you feel that art has the potential to assert a kind of sovereignty?*

VAK: Well, I don't know if that's the role of art. Is it possible to demonstrate sovereignty through artwork? I think art plays a role in that process, but art on its own shouldn't do that. I think that art should be one of those things that sits in the corner and asks questions . . . You know, that sits there putting his hand up every five minutes while someone's talking. Hopefully sovereignty is a much bigger thing that art can't possibly be enough. And there's good art—there's good art all the time—so yeah, sovereignty has to include cultures and practices that are drawn from the weight of history and those customs, but also contribute to it over time. Maybe I'm being a little unfair, because I'm someone who walks around asking questions all the time. My aim is not to give answers. My aim is to ask questions—that's what art is for, I think.

Vernon Ah Kee's conceptual text pieces, videos, photographs, and drawings form a critique of Australian popular culture from the perspective of the Aboriginal experience of contemporary life. In particular, he explores the dichotomy between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies and cultures. Ah Kee's works effectively reposition the Aboriginal in Australia from an "othered thing" anchored in museum and scientific records to a contemporary people inhabiting real and current spaces and time. Ah Kee is a descendant of the Kuku Yalandji, Waanji, Yidindji, Koko Berrin and Gugu Yimithirr peoples. Born 1967 in Innisfail, North Queensland, Australia, he lives and works in Brisbane. He has had several major solo shows, as well as participated in numerous group shows, both internationally and within Australia. His work is held in many national collections.

*Sophie McIntyre is a senior lecturer at the Queensland University of Technology, and a curator and writer specialising in art from Taiwan, China, and the Asia-Pacific. She is the author of *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity* (Brill, 2018), and has published widely on visual art, museology, cultural diplomacy, and identity politics. McIntyre has been a director and curator in museums in Australia, Taiwan, and New Zealand, and her curated exhibitions include: *Ink Remix: Contemporary art from Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong* (2015-7); *Penumbra: New Media Art from Taiwan* (2007-8); and *Islanded: Contemporary Art from New Zealand, Singapore and Taiwan* (with Lee Weng Choy and Eugene Tan) (2005). In 2001 and 2002 a selection of Ah Kee's earliest works featured in two exhibitions she curated: *Place/Displace: A selection of Postgraduate Student works presented at the Queensland College of Art and Transit Narratives: Works on Paper from Australia presented at Centro per la Cultura e le Arti Visive Le Venezie, Villa Letizia, Treviso, Italy.**

Notes

¹ For further information and examples of these portraits see the collections of Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia, "Ah Kee, Vernon": <https://collection.qagoma.qld.gov.au/stories/1715> (accessed Sept. 7, 2022); and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia, "Vernon Ah Kee": <https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/artists/vernon-ah-kee/> (accessed Sept. 7, 2022).

² On November 19, 2004, Cameron Doomadgee, a 36-year-old Aboriginal man on Palm Island was arrested for being drunk and a public nuisance. At the time of his arrest, he had no visible injuries. An *ABC News* report confirmed that "hours later he was dead from massive internal injuries including broken ribs and a ruptured spleen, and his liver was so badly damaged it was almost cleaved in two across his spine." On the day the autopsy results were revealed, local resident Lex Wotton led a riot throughout the town to protest the violent and reprehensible police brutality that this incident revealed. See Allyson Horn, "Palm Island Death in Custody: Community Still Struggling to Deal with Memories Ten Years on," *ABC News*, November 19, 2014, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-11-19/palm-island-community-still-struggling-after-death-in-custody/5901028>.

In 2005, there were a series of race riots that took place in the New South Wales suburb of Cronulla, at the heart of which was a "turf war," where white Australians were asserting their supposed ownership of the beach in response to the presence of Middle Eastern immigrants. See National Museum of Australia, "Defining Moments, Cronulla Race Riots," last updated March 17, 2022. <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/cronulla-race-riots>.

³ Three months after this interview was conducted, Prime Minister Scott Morrison was defeated in the federal elections and succeeded by Prime Minister Anthony

Albanese. Morrison's speech was made to commemorate the fourteenth anniversary of the National Apology and it was delivered on 13 Feb. 2022. For further information see 'Anniversary of National Apology': <https://www.pmc.gov.au/news-centre/domestic-policy/14th-anniversary-apology-australias-indigenous-peoples> (accessed Sept. 7, 2022).