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contemporary
photography

BLACK ON WHITE

AN EXHIBITION OF
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
ABORIGINAL ARTISTS
REPRESENTING
NON-ABORIGINALITY.

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MERVYN BISHOP
GAYLE MADDIGAN
BROOK ANDREW
LISA BELLEAR
DIANNE JONES
CHRISTIAN THOMPSON

CURATED BY MAREE CLARKE
AND MEGAN EVANS

INTRODUCTION

NAOMI CASS

DIRECTOR

CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

AT CCP, we receive many proposals from artists to exhibit photographs of appealing black children with curly hair and big smiles, running or playing in the dust. Dusty photographs of other people. I don't know whether these are taken by black or white photographers. I suspect they are taken by white photographers. As far as I know, we receive no proposals from Aboriginal photographers.

It seems an easy thing to do – if not motivated by noble sentiments – to get onto a plane, or in a car, and travel long distances to take beautiful photographs of other people in exotic settings. There is a long tradition of this form of documentary and some images remain at the forefront of public consciousness. Such images may be ascribed with the power of changing public opinion, for example those published during the Vietnam War.

When curators Maree Clarke and Megan Evans approached CCP to propose the exhibition *Black on White*, we were grappling with these issues, and the idea of turning the lens from black to white, seemed a fine idea. I find however, in listening to the artists represented here, that black & white is far more complicated. While none would dispute this binary division in the history of representing Aboriginal people, for these artists the issue of skin colour and representation is complex and at once personal and political. With the exception of Mervyn Bishop and Brook Andrew, work has been commissioned for this exhibition, including Lisa Bellea, who re-presents her earlier archive. This process has been a major part of *Black on White*.

To the artists Mervyn Bishop, Gayle Maddigan, Brook Andrew, Lisa Bellea, Dianne Jones and Christian Thompson I express our pleasure in and gratitude for their participation. I thank the curators for initiating and propelling this important process and exhibition, and thank Tony Birch for his firm and generous weaving of past and present in his catalogue essay. To the donors to *Black on White*, The Myer Foundation, City of Yarra, Dominique Benoit, JB and Patrick Corrigan AM, I offer all our gratitude.

We're hoping that this exhibition will make a change in the culture of the CCP, where in the future, not all images of blacks and whites will be taken by whites. Seems a simple thing to hope for, but one with profound implications for audiences and artists.

PROLOGUE
MEGAN EVANS
CO-CURATOR

THERE IS a long and fraught tradition of depictions of Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people have been drawn, photographed and filmed continuously since first contact, represented through the eyes of the invading forces. The stereotypes of Aboriginal people that exist in the non-Aboriginal community are largely formed by representations that were created by a culture that had no understanding of their fellow humans and saw them as the disconnected other. In many ways this has not changed. There still exists in the broader community the idea that Aboriginal people look and act a certain way. Aboriginal artists have made inroads to this area by representing themselves, however, how do they see the people and culture that surrounds them?

The idea for this exhibition came from a dilemma I found myself in as an artist when I was invited to create work to celebrate the 20th anniversary of International Women's day. In investigating my identity as a woman and the impact of 20 years of feminism I found myself trapped between my reaction against the male gaze and an attempt to express a femininity that was preordained by the male gaze. There was nowhere to go and the question of who was I, as a woman, remained unanswered. Ten years later we are asking a similar question of the artists in this exhibition. How does the project of representation shape the viewer and how do Aboriginal people see non-Aboriginal people as the other? Is Aboriginality in a contemporary context influenced by or constrained by the myths that exist in the dominant culture. These artists have drawn no clear lines around their perceptions of non-Aboriginality. However the blurring of black and white does not necessarily make grey. For reconciliation to develop into a mature debate with the likelihood of a resolution these issues need interrogation and these artists have opened up the debate with some compelling work that presses into new territory in race relations in this country.

BLACK ON WHITE

DR TONY BIRCH

LET ME begin with two reflections, separated by more than a century, that go some way to illustrating the relationship between 'black' and 'white' in Australia.

In 1843, the early colonist, William Adeney, was enjoying the comforts of his Collins Street address when he decided to 'peep through between the blind and window frame to see how the day looked out of doors.' The day did not look as fine as Adeney expected. At the same moment that Adeney looked out into what was confidently viewed at the time as a recent British possession, an Aboriginal woman was looking in through the window, from *her* country, at William Adeney.

The European historical record informs us that Adeney was obviously startled when visited (or perhaps haunted?) by what he would describe in his diary as 'a black horrible face.' Perhaps Adeney had suffered a crisis of confidence common in such encounters, with the colonist confronted by a reality; that the nominally colonised had not been colonised at all?

This early nineteenth century encounter is illustrative of a constant theme within black and white relations in this country. The coloniser's hold on indigenous country has been, and remains tenuous within the contemporary landscape. It cannot be otherwise while the *dominant* attitude in white Australia clings to the psychosis of terra nullius, which although now ridiculed in both law and occasional socio-political commentary, remains a deep seated emotional barrier inhibiting the ability of 'the nation' to mature and reach a state of postcolonialism.

This Aboriginal woman, who peered into the internal world of a British gentleman articulated her autonomy and sovereignty both simply by her presence, through her capacity to act, her ability *to be*. We do not know what the woman thought when confronted by a representative of Imperialist violence looking back at her and into her country, or how she might have described the pale face of the invader, but we can be sure, as recognised by Adeney himself, that the coloniser did not enjoy the scrutiny of the Aboriginal eye.

Both prior to, and subsequent to Adeney's colonial fright, white Australia has attempted to avoid the Aboriginal eye in so many ways, including incarceration and the imposition of various forms and categories of caste legislation, designed to subjugate the autonomous Aboriginal voice and identity in all manner possible.

One of the more bizarre attempts to fulfil such an outcome is provided by the behaviour of the 'protectors' who managed the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Reserve in Gippsland, Victoria. This reserve, established in the mid nineteenth century, was overtly regarded as and referred to as 'the final solution' to the ubiquitous 'Aboriginal Problem' in that state.

We could imagine that a society assisted by both the bullet, the (abusive) rule of law, and a form of Indigenous containment predicated on punishment and incarceration would again, as with William Adeney, be more self assured, more confident of its status and place *in* place; but this was not so.

The Aboriginal community of Lake Tyers were and remain an activist community. For more than 125 years now they have demanded that their inherent rights as Indigenous people be recognised.

Such was the inability of the reserve manager to accept with equity the face of Aboriginal people at Lake Tyers that in the postwar era a mirror was erected in the manager's office, and positioned in such a way that it enabled the manager to see any Aboriginal people who came to speak with him, while the manager himself could not be seen by them.

But the Aboriginal community of Lake Tyers refused to allow their 'protector' to remain out of sight, taking their protest against the conditions they were subjected to at the reserve to the steps of the state parliament, in petitions demanding the recognition of land rights and through the voice of their own protests.

Therefore the all-seeing coloniser was unable to maintain the façade of cultural dominance without the aid of smoke and mirror tricks and hidden devices.

The images and narratives contained in *Black on White* not only expose the narrowness contained in white Australia's construction, and at times total erasure of Indigenous history and culture. They interrogate a history of whiteness in this country with such acuteness that white Australia's fragile sense of security is immediately exposed as a fraud. Such is the power of these works.

This is no more illustrative than in the work of Brook Andrew, who as a visual artist explains, questions and displaces 'Australian cultural assumptions which trumpet sameness and "mateship" while denying difference' in conjunction with the exceptionally anti-egalitarian behaviour of abusing Aboriginal people who are habitually marginalised as 'criminalised, categorised, catalogued, stolen and killed.'

Through the use of a simple and briefest textual interrogation, 'OPINION AS CRIME', Andrew both highlights the insidiousness and triviality contained in the modes of power and control adopted by white Australia and its efforts to continue to maintain this country within a state of colonisation.

And yet, by the very production of this statement, by voicing an OPINION, alongside the other artists presenting in *Black on White*, Andrew shakes at the very foundations of a colonial history enacted on, and eventually contained within both Aboriginal country and knowledge systems.

Dianne Jones, Gayle Maddigan, Christian Thompson and Lisa Belleair, similarly express both their individual eye and voice in this exhibition. None of these artists are reliant upon white formations and expressions of Aboriginal identity for the basis of their own work. And yet each of them displaces any notion of 'white on black' through the very act of production; through, like an Aboriginal woman standing in Collins Street in 1843, returning the gaze of the coloniser, or similarly with the demands made by the Lake Tyers community that the reserve manager confront his own reflection.

Black on White has also taken the opportunity to showcase the work of the photographer Mervyn Bishop. His has been a remarkable achievement. As a photographer working within the 'mainstream' print media for several decades, Bishop is both a practitioner and an artist who has asked for nothing from the wider community than to have his work accepted on its merit.

Bishop is a photographer who happens to be Aboriginal, but who as an Aboriginal man, could not avoid being revered as an inspiration and role model by young aspiring photographers who also happen to be Aboriginal. (This goes without saying that Bishop's work would be regarded as inspirational to all young photographers).

This is not a contradiction. It is central to the balance and the symmetry of cultural identity. Each of those exhibiting in *Black on White*, including Bishop, are entitled to a recognition of both the autonomy of their work and the inherent, and at times, abrasive influences of culture and identity.

The tenor of *Black on White* is contained in one of Bishop's most widely circulated and well known images, produced at the 1975 handover of land belonging to the Dagu Ragu people. Bishop was at Wattie Creek to witness and record the moment when the then prime minister of Australia, Gough Whitlam, and Vincent Lingiari, a leader of the Dagu Ragu's struggle for land rights, exchanged the soil of Dagu Ragu land.

Bishop's image does much more than record this 'symbolic

moment', as it is so often referred to. Sure enough, the image is laden with, perhaps even burdened by, symbolism. But it is in the foregrounding of Lingiari himself, in the ability of Bishop's eye to give attention and dignity to Lingiari's profile that we come to recognise that this is the story of an Aboriginal man, and an Aboriginal people who would not have its rights, its law and its sovereignty denied to it by recalcitrant white employers and governments. The moment may be shared by the then imposing figure of Whitlam, but the story and the images belong to Lingiari (and of course, Mervyn Bishop.)

Its vitality as an historical document is highlighted also by its resonance within contemporary Australia, as the exhibition of this image in 2005 is a timely, if unfortunate reminder of the regressive attitude toward Aboriginal land rights displayed by the current Australian government.

Let me conclude with a third reflection, on the iconic photograph produced by Mervyn Bishop in 1971. This work, 'Life and Death Dash', is illustrative of the status of Aboriginal people in Australia, without an Aboriginal person appearing in the photograph.

We see a nun in a desperate 'dash' for life. She is racing to hospital with a clearly distressed and very ill child in her arms. The child is Afghani. The photographer is Mervyn Bishop, who produced this graphic image that would appear on the front cover of the Sydney Morning Herald on 22 January, 1971.

There is nothing distinctly 'Aboriginal' about this image. It is in fact recognition of the ability of a good news photographer being on the right spot at the right time, and getting the right shot. That is all the recognition that I would expect Bishop would ask of us. But there is more contained in 'Life and Death Dash' for all of us.

Mervyn Bishop took this photograph at a time when too many Aboriginal people were denied opportunity, denied access to a place in the wider community. This photograph, taken by a man who just happens to be Aboriginal, denies the opportunity of those who would have preferred to keep Aboriginal people firmly in our place, to fulfil the colonial fantasy of unproblematic control of country.

Since Bishop's groundbreaking work many Aboriginal photographers have produced their own narratives of this country's past, both black and white. Some of them are exhibited here in *Black on White*. In the future we will continue to look on the photographic work of Mervyn Bishop as holding a central position in the development of Aboriginal photographers in the country. I am sure that some of those exhibiting with him will one day be similarly regarded.

Prime Minister Gough Whitlam pours soil into the hand of Vincent Lingiari in 1975 at Wattie Creek type C photograph, 2003

© 2003 Mervyn Bishop licensed by Viscopy 2005
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Victor Lingiari, Son of Vincent Lingiari pours soil in the hand of former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam at the Yeperrenye Festival held at Alice Springs, 2001 type C photograph, 2003

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Life and Death Dash, 1971
50.7 x 40.5cm, silver gelatin photograph, 2003

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GAYLE MADDIGAN

As a photographer I try to capture that which is beyond the flesh; looking always into the spirit of the subject. There are no words for my images as they tell their own stories of authenticity and truth, with a language that is far beyond the realm of words.

In this show I have tried to find the common element that bridges all peoples together, to find the common good, the stories of alienation and isolation, intimacy and beauty, sorrow and pain and the truth about our common humanness.

As humans, we appear and vanish as vapour. We are like passing shadows on the earth.

Our way of seeing will determine our connection for other people and races, our attitude will add or subtract from the life of another, it determines whether there is war or peace, tolerance or intolerance.

During my many years as an artist I have come to understand that although things may appear as black and white, there is always colour and where there is colour there will always be black and white.



BROOK ANDREW

US, THEM, they, me, you.

For me, looking outside of myself, I don't see only black and white people, especially within Aboriginal culture. Today is a time of mixed heritage and colours of skins that do not, by 'looking at', represent those 'cultures' of division so easily.

Some of my tasks as an artist is to respond to dominant cultural strategies and activities which create borders about who is 'in' and who is 'out'. This is based on economics, skin colour and cultural identity amongst other things. The 'Indian series' was specifically created to respond to: Who is privileged, who has power, who inherits land/wealth, who has resources to invade others, what supports a celebrity lifestyle, etc. these are fundamental questions in varying degrees which we all live and navigate.

There are a number of questions which I believe we should never stop asking, questioning and speaking about: Who is in CONTROL? Who is SELECTED for INVASION? Who is THE SAME? After all what is the recipe for cultural/ethnic supremacy and what values keep this going?

Brook's work challenges the mythology of middle class-ness; of sameness; of opportunity for all which permeates the dominant culture of Australia. He not only interrogates Australian cultural assumptions which trumpet sameness and 'mateship' and deny difference but also the culture of the long white shadow in which Aboriginal peoples did not select their invaders; were criminalized; categorised; catalogued; stolen; killed – precisely for their difference, for not being the same. What gives Brook's work its power and beauty is that it is located both in and from the cultures which birthed him yet nonetheless has universal resonance.

from the essay *Signs, symbols and portents*
Meaghan Delahunt, 2001, Sandskriti Kendra, New Delhi

A black rectangular sign with red, bold, sans-serif text is attached to a tree trunk. The text reads "OPINION AS" on the top line and "CRIME" on the bottom line. The background is a bright, sunny outdoor scene with green trees, a paved path, and a stone structure on the right.

**OPINION AS
CRIME**

LISA BELLEAR

MY PHOTOGRAPHS and world is inclusive. I do not attend public gatherings and consciously capture 'Blak' or 'White' people. I find these terms restrictive and discriminatory. If I viewed it that way I would be exhausted and disillusioned, but most importantly, I wouldn't be able to celebrate the rich diversity of cultures and heritages that mix freely with Indigenous people, here in the heart of the Kulin Nation's land.

When I attend a public function such as National Sorry Day/Journey of Healing, NAIDOC (National Aboriginal & Islander Day Observance Committee) Week or Your Voice (Political Party) or an art gallery opening, me and my camera are inseparable – my favourite saying as I hold up my left hand and wave is 'act natural'! However, it is very important for artists photographing individuals or communities to return images to the immediate family, friends or loved ones associated with those in the images.

For too long, some members of the 'dominant' culture have not done this. I have been taking photographs of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people and our friends for the past twenty-five years or so. My collection is some thirty thousand images and growing. I love taking photographs and writing about our people and the decent non-Aboriginal folk. I want there to be no excuses about not knowing anyone or who to talk to! The work in this exhibition is a glimpse into how I deliberately, in a fun and respectful way, offer an alternative view on Indigenous people and our friends – perhaps through photographs – we can show the possibilities – even reconciliation!



**ROBERT ÓHARA BURKE
AND
WILLIAM JOHN WILLS
LEADERS
OF
THE VICTORIAN EXPLORING EXPEDITION**

DIANNE JONES

Inequality is the cause of all local movements

Leonardo Da Vinci

*and her face, too, seems to change with this change of position,
because, even here, the two sides do not quite match*

Wikipedia on Mona Lisa

Chiaroscuro – the technique Da Vinci uses to perfect light and dark

In many ways the theme for this show, 'black on white', sets up two separate sides, implying a binary opposition of black versus white, black as different from white. My approach to the way these oppositions operate is to see what happens when they exist in the one body as these oppositions are not as clear as 'the black and white' way a lot of people see them. What happens when these separate identities literally manifest in one body/individual? What becomes of the notion black on white, coloniser/colonised, when you have one black parent and one white?

When I examined my own feelings and thoughts about white people and how my life is affected overall by them, I realised that I had a range of emotions from anger to confusion to despair and resignation on the negative side and wondered if I would be ok with expressing these emotions and certainly felt that I had the right. But then I thought about my family and one of my brother's and my sister both married a white person and had several children with them. If I was unable to find something positive in this then what I say would have an effect on my nieces and nephews. They have to grow up in this world, which has already been made hard for them because one of their parents is black and one white. They have a foot in both camps and need to be supported and need more than anything to see themselves positively represented.

I am relocating my nieces and nephews and positioning them as the sitter of the Mona Lisa, a figure who has resisted all attempts at defining identity. The enigma of Mona Lisa's gaze and persona has outwitted critics, historians, artists – anyone who has attempted to deconstruct her. Who is she? What is it she knows that we don't? Is she male or female? Is it Leonardo Da Vinci himself? In this sense the Mona Lisa can be seen to override the many binary oppositions that dictate the dominant structures of western phallogocentric society. I have referenced the Mona Lisa because she embodies beauty, strength, knowing, curiosity, questions, iconic representation, identity and visibility. Whilst Marcel DuChamp satirised the hyperbole surrounding her identity, I place the hyperbole into a different context, that of the fuss/anxiety surrounding black and white identity. By situating my nieces and nephews as the Mona Lisa, I highlight the unnecessary and often negative emphasis on whose mob they choose and how they define themselves – black or white. Positioning my nieces and nephews as the Mona Lisa is also a statement on their strength, beauty and individual power in surmounting the pressure to fit into unnatural binaries and to insist that they be taken for the unique and complex individuals they are. My Mob, as bicultural people need to be visibly represented in positive ways that embrace their experiences rather than undermining and forcing them to choose teams. Do we need to use chiaroscuro in order to start decolonising ourselves?

Madame Kristy

97 x 50cm, archival inkjet on canvas, 2005



CHRISTIAN THOMPSON

MY WORK deals primarily with issues of representation, history and identity. I work within the context of my own identity as an Aboriginal person of Australia to reveal broader issues about the human condition.

I Needed You, You Needed Me (The Fox) will be a continuation of this type of investigation into representation through the construction of identity. This new series takes the Australian Aboriginal concept of dreaming (a conscious and sub-conscious connection to land) and applies this principle in a non-Aboriginal context. An element of dreaming in a ceremonial context is the incarnation of the individual of ancestral spirits, a crocodile, snake, lizard etc.

The fox could be a metaphor or spirit for the non-Aboriginal person's dreaming, a creature that represents a pilgrimage from one land to another. The textile based sculptural work made primarily of leather and fox fur will construct different elements of the fox costume incarnation. The fingers, the mouth, the ribs, the feet and the tail.

I Needed You, You Needed Me (The Fox) is about inverting the colonial process and in a way swapping places with the coloniser to create new ideas about male sexuality and identity. The title *I Needed You, You Needed Me (The Fox)* is a reference to the secular communities of Australian art and how the idea of Australian art would not exist if Aboriginal art did not exist either. This is an idea proposed by Australian academic Rex Butler. Butler argues that the idea of reconciliation will never be flown under the banner of Australian art.

I Needed You, You Needed Me (The Fox) also refers to the contradictions and tensions that exist between the two ideologies and is an attempt to enter into a dialogue about the space that is occupied by artists such as myself, who do not exist in either.

I hope that this work can speak universally about occupation, identity, desire, fear and ownership. This work will be part of a video triptych that I will complete over three years, the other characters will include The Hare and The Cat.



ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

MERVYN BISHOP

After completing his Certificate in Photography at the Sydney Technical College, Mervyn Bishop was employed as a cadet photographer at the Sydney Morning Herald from 1962-74. In 1971 he was awarded News Photographer of the Year for his photograph *Life and Death Dash* (1971) and in 1975, while staff photographer with the newly formed Department of Aboriginal Affairs, photographed Vincent Lingjari and Gough Whitlam at the handover of the deeds to Gurindji country at Wattie Creek. In 1979 Bishop returned to the Sydney Morning Herald and in 1986 became a freelance photographer. Bishop's solo exhibition *In Dreams: Mervyn Bishop, Thirty Years of Photography 1960 to 1990* was presented by the Australian Centre for Photography in 1991 and subsequently toured for over ten years. Bishop lives and works in Sydney, and is represented by Viscopy.

GAYLE MADDIGAN – RUEMELIN

From the Wamba Wamba Wertigkia clan Gayle Maddigan was born in Mildura, Victoria, Latji Latji country. Maddigan holds a Masters of Fine Art from the Victorian College of the Arts and has also completed a graduate Diploma in Secondary Education and a Diploma in Fine Art at La Trobe University. Maddigan has been exhibiting painting and photography in group and solo exhibitions since 1979 and has received numerous awards and commissions. In 1993, Maddigan was the recipient of the National Indigenous Art Award and her work is represented in both public and private collections. Maddigan lives and works in Bendigo.

BROOK ANDREW

Brook Andrew completed his first degree at the University of Western Sydney in 1993 and more recently completed a Master of Fine Arts (College of Fine Arts, University of NSW) where he is currently enrolled in the PHD program. During this time he has exhibited extensively throughout Australia and abroad in numerous group and solo exhibitions. He has received several major awards including the Works on Paper, Telstra National ATSI Art Award in 2004. Andrew is represented in both public and private collections including the National Gallery of Australia, National Gallery of Victoria and the Art Gallery of NSW. Andrew lives and works in Melbourne and is represented by Stills Gallery, Sydney and Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne.

LISA BELLEAR

Lisa Bellear has completed a number of degrees including a Masters of Arts (Women's Studies) at the University of Melbourne and is currently enrolled as a PhD student at La Trobe University investigating contemporary Indigenous issues through photographic and radio text. Bellear has exhibited regularly since 1991 and was recently invited to exhibit a collection of seventy images entitled *Kooris at home* as part of the 2004 Olympic games. In addition to her photography, Bellear has also published a book of poetry entitled *Dreaming in Urban Areas* (University of Queensland Press, 1996). Bellear lives and works in Melbourne.

DIANNE JONES

Born in Perth, Dianne Jones has undertaken studies in Art Foundation (Perth TAFE) and Aboriginal Orientation (University of Western Australia) and most recently completed a Bachelor of Visual Arts at the Edith Cowan University in 2001. Her works have been included in numerous group exhibitions both at home and abroad and she is represented in a number of prominent public collections including those of the National Gallery of Australia, National Gallery of Victoria and the Art Gallery of Western Australia. Jones lives and works in Melbourne and is represented by Niagra Galleries.

CHRISTIAN THOMPSON

Christian Thompson is a Bidjara man of the Kunja Nation from Southwest Queensland and is also of German Jewish heritage. Thompson has completed a Bachelor of Visual Art (University of Southern Queensland, 1998), an Honours degree in Fine Art Sculpture (RMIT, 1999) and a Masters in Fine Art History (University of Melbourne, 2002). He has exhibited across Australia and abroad and is represented in the collections of the National Gallery of Australia and National Gallery of Victoria. Thompson lives and works in Melbourne and is also an active curator. He is represented by Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi.

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LOANED TO THE CCP BY PATRICK CORRIGAN AM

FROM THE CURATORS

Our appreciation to the artists for their willingness to engage with these questions. Also thanks for continually putting your hearts and minds in the public arena for small return. The world is a better place because of you. Thank you to Tony Birch for his art of words. Thank you to the generous philanthropists without whom the exhibition would not have been possible. Thank you to Naomi Cass for her vision and foresight in encouraging this exhibition, and Karra Rees for her hard work.



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cover: Mervyn Bishop, *Life and Death Dash, 1971* (detail) © 2003 Mervyn Bishop licensed by Viscopy 2005
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10 JUNE–16 JULY 2005

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