

CAIRNS REGIONAL GALLERY

JAMES MORRISON RE-IMAGINING PAPUA NEW GUINEA

15 APRIL - 19 JUNE 2016



James Morrison,
Torress Strait, 2014
oil on canvas, 155 x 155cm,
Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne

Vacations in time

James Morrison's paintings and drawings show us the world constructed as a sequence of impossible histories, one in which fragmentary moments in time coincide in fictionalised landscapes, the like of which can only exist in art. In the same way that a novel transports the reader into an imaginary world, Morrison's artworks engulf the viewer in their puzzling narratives through the evocation of an almost excessive and detailed sensuality.

In this survey of Morrison's paintings and drawings from 2007 to present times, we are offered a series of artworks that act as tableaux, scenes from stories that blend the archetypal with the personal. A fleet of tall ships advances across an emerald sea only to be shipwrecked upon treacherous coral reefs, an abandoned pioneer hut stands alone in the dry tundra, mushrooms and lichens grow on red rocks, unknown flora and fauna, the weird result of cellular modifications are drawn in scientific detail and giant wallabies rest alongside rivers filled with primitive forms of fossil life. Under the ocean we can glimpse another world, as beautiful and strange as an alien galaxy, filled with deadly, sharp, biting and stinging things, and always the skies are filled with the lurid excessive colour of the equatorial sunset.

'The tropics' as a place of *other* is integral to the work of Morrison, who was born in Garoka, Papua New Guinea (PNG), but grew up moving between boarding school in southern Australia and the vivid landscapes and peoples of the Papuan Eastern Highlands. Although originally colonised by the Dutch, Germans and British, the southern region, or British annexation of PNG fell under Australian administration in 1906, with the Territory of Papua remaining Australia's only colony until Papuan independence in 1975.

The familiarity of the tropics serves Morrison well and his choice of the tropics for a pictorial setting should not surprise, for where else could divergent fictional scenes and characters meet, but in a place that is - in the history of western literature - largely *unimaginable*? In European narratives 'the tropics' exist as ulterior, a physical and psychological geography of liminality. In the tropics we are in constant danger of primordial encounters with our most archaic emotions: fear, lust, horror.ⁱ

What cannot be said must be shownⁱⁱ

The story of colonisation and its devastating impact is such a totalising truth that we find it impossible to grasp in any singular depiction. In *Building Goroka*, 2016, a confident man dressed in a pinstriped silk suit is seated at a desk. With the longhaired curls of an 18th

century gentleman he turns to face the viewer, well aware that his portrait is being painted. Surrounding him are the trappings of travel and knowledge, fine china figurines, a medieval stained glass window, a portrait head of Abraham Lincoln. That the man in the painting is a black man is significant for the reading of the picture shifts and the large Sepik River mask on the rear wall becomes much more than an artefact in a cabinet of curiosities. The savagery of the mask reveals the anxiety of the colonising power and we are presented with the white man's worst fear: a reversal of power, the topsy-turvyness of an alternate history, one in which it is the white man who is subjugated.

The tale of the individual who finds himself unwittingly caught against a force greater than himself has long fascinated Morrison. Patrick White's epic novel of doomed exploration *Voss*, examines the unstable psychological conditions experienced by an expedition of inland explorers as they succumb to the inevitable and overwhelming harshness of an unfamiliar land. In *Bungaree, Patrick White and Ray Bradbury at the Sepik River*, 2012 we find the author, Patrick White, standing in a red landscape, rocky and sparsely vegetated, more akin to the Australian outback than the verdant Sepik River region of the painting's title. White is not alone in this imagined, or possibly remembered landscape, but rather stands beside the science-fiction writer Ray Bradbury, both men looking strangely ill at ease in their location. The genre of science fiction is a favourite of Morrison's with its visions for alternative futures an enjoyable counterbalance to his own confabulated histories. The one figure in *Bungaree, Patrick White and Ray Bradbury at the Sepik River*, who seems to fit into this weird and beautiful riverscape, is the impossibly small Bungaree, the famous 'first Australian' Aboriginal friend of Matthew Flinders, who stands, dressed in European clothes, separate to the other men, a kind of antipodean faery or spirit figure, reminding us that the original owners of this land had also dreamt it into being through story.

The conventions of scale and perspectival space are often discarded in Morrison's paintings as each separate object appears on the canvas like a collection of ideas, one often on top of another, until a type of cohesion, or conceptual resolve is reached. We find an example of this most strongly in his recent painting *Goodenough Bay*, 2016 with its gluttonous display of bounty: cakes, fresh fruits, wine, jellies, cocktails, game and seafood, all laid out on a table set with a Tiffany Lamp, ready for afternoon tea, that very English convention. The landscape literally seethes with life, exotic birds crowd together, a snake slithers into view and out of the darkness a black woman looks furtively to the side as a white hand offers her a strawberry. Above all this a fleet of alien spaceships hover, a reference to the mass sightings of UFO's above

Goodenough Bay recorded in the 1970s, but equally plausibly a signifier for how completely foreign the tropics are to the uninitiated. As the jungle crowds in upon the scene we see that the fiction of colonialism comes undone, along with any dream we may have had of taming this foreign terrain. In this painting we face the great paradox of the tropics: for the traveller the tropics appear as a paradise, offering the fantasy of escape and the promise of self-knowledge. Instead the journey through the tropics results in a life and death encounter with the sticky, harsh reality of that environment - quinine and mosquitoes, guns under the bed and cultures that are impossible for the white man to understand. The jungle will always devour the cakes and the pies.

Julia Powles
Independent curator and writer

ⁱ There are many examples of the tropics as a place of moral ambiguity in western literature, but perhaps the most apposite is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* with its tale of an African river journey that transports the protagonists beyond accepted ethical frameworks.

ⁱⁱ Zizek, S., *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, Verso, London, 2013.

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