Danie Mellor is one of Australia’s leading contemporary artists. Now based in Bowral, New South Wales, Mellor was born in Mackay, Queensland, in 1971, and has a peripatetic upbringing, regularly moving to new places. His artistic practice is heavily informed by his cultural heritage and his interest in the intersection between Western and Indigenous philosophies. His father is of Australian-American descent and his mother of Aboriginal and Scottish descent.

Mellor’s work is represented in major national and international museum and gallery collections and the significance of his art has been acknowledged through numerous awards and grants including the 26th National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award in 2009, and the Australia Council for the Arts’ highly sought after Fellowship for the Visual Arts in 2016.

Mellor’s artworks are visually seductive and conceptually arresting. He deliberately employs European aesthetic and pictorial devices associated with the colonial period to subvert and reimagine the complex collision of Australia’s pre and post-settlement history.

This exhibition, Proximity and Perception, is grounded in Mellor’s engagement with the history, culture and landscape of his matrilineal Country of the Atherton Tablelands region in Far North Queensland. It situates his most recent artworks and ideas relating to the rainforest areas of North Queensland in the context of earlier artworks, while providing background for his newly commissioned piece for the Cairns Art Gallery Collection.

For more than fifteen years, Mellor has regularly returned to the Atherton Tablelands region. On field trips he continues to receive and absorb knowledge about Indigenous rainforest culture and histories of Country, particularly through a strong relationship with Jirrbal Elder and educator, Dr. Ernie Grant. Spending time on Country with Ernie Grant and his family has become close to an annual personal ritual and pilgrimage for Mellor.

Ernie is not only a mentor; he and his family have become close friends of mine. He has taught me so much about Indigenous cultural frameworks and given me an expanded, holistic worldview as well as greater understanding of initiated cultural knowledge.
Mellor’s new commission for the Cairns Art Gallery’s Permanent Collection Dulgu-burra (a procession of history) 2018, depicts an idyllic scene of Bama (rainforest people), going about daily life beside a river. Two men deep in conversation hold long thin spears and Bala Bigan (rainforest shields cut from the buttress of fig trees). Other men wear Jawun (unique bicornual shaped woven baskets) around their foreheads and walk with young ones held high upon their shoulders. Two women sit in front of a low thatched shelter, cautiously looking up from their weaving, seemingly disturbed by the gaze or presence of the viewer. A protagonistic tree kangaroo stares out from the centre of the white river gum canopy, flanked by a cornucopia of colourful kingfishers, king parrots and Bajinjila (black Spangled Drongo birds). The viewer feels voyeuristic, as though peering into another time and place. It is a Utopia in one sense, however the landscape also conveys what Mellor refers to as ‘Arcadian melancholy’. The transformation of landscape is allegorical, romanticised even, but it foreshadows the experience of first peoples through the recent procession of history... This landscape speaks then of colonialism, and an age of expansion that irrevocably transformed the lives of people and contemporary, borrowed and reimagined, new and layered post-colonial experience and thinking. Whereas some of the source material for the works is historical, gathered on field trips by early photographers of Australia’s northern landscapes, much of the material is photographed by Mellor, also gathered on field trips into the rainforest and remote areas of the landscape. In some ways, his recent journeys are an echo of early expeditions, an enactment of sorts. These photographic works demonstrate an important shift in Mellor’s practice and his continually expanding view and perception of Country whereby his elaborately conceived and referential landscapes become more reductive autonomous spaces that investigate the spiritual and metaphysical meanings of ancestral spaces, and communicate the unnerving and ancient beauty of the Australian rainforest.

In recent years, Mellor’s practice has shifted beyond his iconic, intricate pastel drawings and redrawing of archival imagery to incorporate his own photography. He now frequently uses photographs captured on field trips to Far North Queensland to inform his artworks. In the landscape Mellor learns, re-examines and looks into micro and macro views through the camera lens, gazing upon different worlds and environments. I value working in this way, coming North and then going back to my studio, connecting and retracing. I allows me distance to process my learning, to consider my position and personal proximity to subject matter. In these photographic works the camera has become not only a reference tool, as in the earlier ‘Blue and White Series’, but also a device for the actual realisation of new work. The complications of authenticity are subtly emphasized here, acknowledging and hinting at the recent, multi-decade interrogation of colonialism through intense and layered post-colonial experience and thinking. Another significant element of authenticity is the presence of the photographic image and source, and how they are combined in these new works - historical and contemporary, borrowed and reimagined, new and redeployed. Images summoned from the late 19th and early 20th Century meet one another in a re-contextualisation of landscape and portraiture, and meet yet again when they are interwoven through Mellor’s contemporary visualisations of those same areas of Country. This important work continues and possibly finalises Mellor’s ‘Blue and White Series’ that began in 2006. Other works from this series in the exhibition, such as Postcards from the edge (in search of living curiosities) 2011, on loan from the Art Gallery of South Australia, are highly exotised and exaggerated. Heavily laden with colourful fauna and Aboriginal people holding cultural artefacts, they are set within idealised landscapes referencing decorative blue and white English Spode-chinaware, surrounded by floral borders dotted with glitter and Swarovski gems elevated by ornate gilded gold frames – aesthetic devices to further interrogate the tension between Indigenous and non-Indigenous readings of Australia’s pre and post-settlement history.

In these works Mellor redraws Bama (rainforest people) from nineteenth century photographs in order to challenge historical discourses and critique anthropological representations of Indigenous Australian people, and to examine the relationship between people and place, question nature-culture dualism and subvert notions of ‘otherness’. Understanding landscape on a very basic level, and peoples’ relationship to place, space and time, is an ongoing preoccupation in Mellor’s practice. One of the traditional stories that threads its way through the works in this exhibition is the story of Gurruggar; the eel-like ancestral being who travelled through the rainforest waterways, acquiring names and language for everything, sharing knowledge with people. It’s almost like Gurruggar brought this anthropocentric understanding through language and landscape, but for me the core sort of question I’m interested in is ‘what’s this landscape like’ or ‘how can we even perceive it beyond interpreting it through philosophy and theory.’

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