

Black  
Sky

# Black Sky

Artists: Julie Dowling, Gobawarrah-Yinhawangka Traditional Owners and Michael Bonner, Tracey Moffatt, Tennant Creek Brio, Roy Wiggan, and Joseph Williams Jungarayi, Jimmy Frank Japarula and Lévi McLean.

During debates around Australia Day – celebrated in Boorloo (Perth) with fireworks – a pro-Australia Day image circulated of what possible cancellation could look like. The image was split in two. On the left-hand side, representing the current celebrations, was an image of the night sky with golden shimmering fireworks filling the frame. On the right hand-side, depicting future possible cancellation, was an entirely black square. Did you hear that X-ray technology found a racist joke under Malevich’s *Black Square* (1915)?<sup>1</sup> Isn’t it strange how black stories can somehow black out white ones, but blackness is supposedly never about race?

There’s a black square in the Aboriginal flag too, but it stands for the people. They are interlinked with the red rectangle below, symbolising the earth. The black sky is sovereign people on their country. In Julie Dowling’s painting, *Gamidhyu – Granddaughter* (2014), an Aboriginal flag t-shirt worn by a young woman sits within an artistic practice of continually asserting Badimia rights, one where portraiture is often used to unfold intergenerational relationships. In Dowling’s words – “These works are statements of identity, place and the fight for expression as Badimia.”<sup>2</sup>

Imagine the fireworks fade out to reveal, not a negated black sky, but the abundance of the night sky, and all that lives, shines, dreams, searches, continues, explodes. The black sky isn’t a single space or political vision. It’s an oscillation between all that colonialism covers up, all that pierces through the thin veil, and all the power that pulses beyond a destructive push towards abstraction and spatial containment.



“It’s been a loooooong time, I was down...”, sings the 1980s band Ilkari Maru (Pitjantjatjara for “Black Sky”) – “I’m on the black sky.”<sup>3</sup> The emptiness of heartbreak wrought across the sky, making it hard to see all that is there. Maybe the black sky is a sadness that obscures our sense of direction.

An ilma by the late Roy Wiggan is tied to a song that depicts the story of his father, Henry Wiggan, when he was swept out to sea in a cyclone. The sight of a jirrir (shooting star) gives him hope, and in the morning, he finds the sand bar that would save his life.<sup>4</sup> In desperation, the sky provides.

There are moments in the film *Gobawarrah-Yinhawangka* (2023), shown as an immersive cinematic installation for this exhibition, where dust from mining activity obscures clear vision of the stars, threatening to disrupt the on-going cultural ties to their eternal stories and knowledge.<sup>5</sup> This epic filmic project has been enabled by the late mother of Roy Tommy and Julie Walker, Jirriirdinku, who was an Yinhawangka language activist. Her knowledge, embodied through a staggering archive of recordings, serves as a passageway between the eternal and the present-day fight for cultural connection and sovereignty.

In a new installation by the genre defying collective Tennant Creek Brio, a winged appropriated pokie machine, *Fortuna Gold* (2022), appears ready to take

flight. It’s a work that distills many of the conceptual and material residues present across a roving and spiralling nightscape. Fortuna – the Roman goddess of fortune and good luck – the liquid pouring gold of a boom-and-bust mining frontier town – creative agency wrought from the wreckage – ambiances of ceremony and the night club entangled. A desire to get free of imposed limitations, to take off, while remaining grounded.



An Aboriginal baby is lifted into the sky by two nuns in their black and white habits in a photograph by Tracey Moffatt from her *Up in the Sky* series (1997).<sup>6</sup> It’s an image brimming with all the hope, beauty and power of a person’s new life, yet also tilts on an axis of dread – weighed down by histories of missions, conversions, and child thefts, where the heavenly plane of the sky takes on frightening connotations.

The sepia tones of Moffatt’s day scenes find affinity in the installation *Wirringkirri* (2023) (Warumungu for yellow ochre and gold) by Joseph Williams Jungarayi, Jimmy Frank Japarula and Lévi McLean, where the faded yellow tones of discarded mining maps and archival footage intermix with the brighter yellows of both gold and ochre – another pairing figuratively and materially unsettled by colonial extraction.



Williams’ narration for the film, *Walalaka (The Hunt)*, is from the perspective of an eagle hunting during a storm – “whose prey no longer walks on four feet but hunts for gold on two.”<sup>7</sup> From this perspective, the sky is no longer something to be gazed up at, and the black sky tilts again.

Jessyca Hutchens (Curator, Berndt Museum)

1. In 2015, X-ray specialists Irina Voronina and Ekaterina Rustamova from the New Tretyakov gallery found a racist joke underneath the visible painted surface that was taken from an 1897 satirical cartoon. For a discussion of this see Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll and Dina Gusejnova in conversation, ‘Malevich’s Black Square under X-ray: A dialogue on race, revolution and art history’, 9 September 2019, *Third Text* online, available at [http://www.thirdtext.org/malevich-blacksquare\(.\)](http://www.thirdtext.org/malevich-blacksquare(.))
2. From an artist statement by Julie Dowling for the exhibition *Black Sky* (2023).
3. Lyrics from the song “Black Sky” by Ilkari Maru, from the album *Ilkari Maru*, released 1984 by CAAMA Music, re-released as a digital download in 2020.
4. An ilma refers both to ceremony performed by the Bardi people and the objects used in ceremony.
5. The filmic installation *Gobawarrah-Yinhawangka* (2023) is by Gobawarrah-Yinhawangka Traditional Owners with Michael Bonner.
6. Tracey Moffatt, *Up in the Sky* # 9, 1997.
7. From an artist statement by Joseph Williams Jungarayi, Jimmy Frank Japarula and Lévi McLean for the exhibition *Black Sky* (2023).







## CURATORS' ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The University of Western Australia would like to acknowledge that this exhibition takes place on Noongar boodjar, and that Noongar people remain the spiritual and cultural custodians of their land, and continue to practice their values, languages, beliefs and knowledge.

## *Black Sky*

11 February - 22 April | Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery

**Presented as part of Perth Festival 2023 in association with the Berndt Museum, the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art and Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery.**

**Black Sky was curated by Michael Bonner and Jessyca Hutchens from the Berndt Museum, with Lee Kinsella from the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, and Joseph Williams Jungarayi.**

### Image Credits

Cover image:

Exhibition title design by James Vinciguerra

Images left - right:

Gobawarrah-Yinhawangka, *Night Sky Paraburdoo*, photo by Justine Kerrigan ACS

Tracey Moffatt, *Up in the Sky #9*, 1997, photographic series of 25 prints, edition 50 of 60, 75.5 x 105cm each, Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, The University of Western Australia, Copyright and courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.

Joseph Williams Jungarayi and Lévi McLean, *Walala-ka (The Hunt)*, 2020, film still, 1:20 mins

Inside poster image:

Fabian Brown and Rupert Betheras, *Headless Horse*, 2022, mixed media on canvas, 215 x 212cm, courtesy the artists and Nyinnka Art & Culture Centre

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