

DANIE MELLOR: *THE SUN ALSO SETS*

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Tolarno Galleries

An Aboriginal man sits cross-legged by a bay as the sun dips behind the horizon. Head slightly lowered, he is not gazing out across the water towards the developing township of Cairns or the Tablelands beyond, as the area appeared in the late nineteenth century. Rather, he seems lost in contemplation, foreboding or perhaps something worse. Lost to history. Rendered invisible. Extinguished.

Yet here he is, his profile resurrected before us in a bravura monochrome landscape painted by Danie Mellor. It's a view derived, in part, from the work of late colonial-era photographers such as Alfred Atkinson, who undertook field trips to document Aboriginal communities in the region while running a portrait studio in Cairns. A subject of his early portraits was Mellor's great-great-grandmother Ellen. A Ngadjon woman from the Atherton Tablelands, Ellen was photographed over many years in his studio for her collection of formal carte de visite portraits, often with Danie's great-grandmother May.

"There's an important sense of remembering throughout my work," says Mellor. "We're part of a conversation with history, one often mediated by images. I have a strong connection to, and feeling for, photography from that period because our family archive goes back to 1908. These and other early images have shaped how I approach image-making, as a way of re-examining nostalgia and how that relates to the emotional ache of separation and distance."

Recomposed in acrylic, oil and wash, the young man serves as a stand-in for the viewer, his head a counterpoint to the sun's diminishing orb, his demeanour the affective focal point of a triptych that forms the centrepiece of Mellor's new exhibition, *The Sun Also Sets*. Comprising sepia-tone paintings overlaid with iridescent wash as well as large-format photomontages, the series signals a new approach for the Mackay-born artist.

Mellor began showing photographs alongside his acclaimed works on paper back in 2015, having used the camera as a documentary tool in the field for many years. In turn, this has led him to experiment with the medium of painting as a means of constructing images that reference both the content and form of vintage prints.

"Archival photographs are like time-travelling objects," says Mellor. "Light from that actual moment has been captured in the silver-gelatin process, so there's a meta-narrative around how images travel and are read by people over time." In following that thread, Mellor seeks to tease out "how we move into the image, and into history as well".

Given our tendency to read sepia as a window on the past, it's no surprise the artist has embraced the aesthetic potential of the print-toning process, which was used to add warmth to photos before the advent of colour. But to reproduce that tonal range in a new register using layers and layers of fluid paint takes significant skill, uncommon patience and a great deal of time.

And in Mellor's deft handling, sepia becomes something else entirely – a conceptual filter that speaks to our limited understanding of the land and all that it contains, in contrast to the knowledge accrued over 60,000 years by its traditional custodians. It's a position implied in his title for the Cairns triptych: *On the edge of darkness (the sun also sets)*.

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“As a result of cultural erosion brought about by colonisation, we are unable to comprehend a ‘landspace’ through the eyes of Aboriginal people from that time, when there was a holistic understanding of environment relating to season, language, culture, spirituality, geography and kinship,” he says.

Just as Mellor’s palette of blue-and-white in his works on paper can be read as emblematic of the colonial gaze that empowered European settlers to transform what they regarded as *terra nullius*, what we ‘see’ here is only a partial representation – we’re not getting the full colour spectrum, the whole story. As a further distancing device, the artist has even replicated in paint the blotches and specks of aged-related deterioration, or foxing, found on old photos.

Complementing the paintings in the exhibition – among them, depictions of a deserted campsite in a state of slow ruination and an Aboriginal warrior in cockatoo feathers holding a shield – are four photo-based works that combine archival imagery with Mellor’s own photos taken while trekking through rainforest in and around the Tablelands.

We see the monumental edifice of a human skull, its hollows akin to entry points in a network of caves, superimposed on a skywards-looking forest scene. “That’s bushland near Topaz,” explains Mellor. “It’s pretty dense national park around there, an area where Ngadjon and Mamu country meets.”

There is the apparition of an Aboriginal man’s face, his septum pierced with a bone, hovering amid an abundance of foliage. And in two other works, a similarly spectral face displays the looping string patterns of cat’s cradle between mouth and hand like the manifestation of a silenced language.

“Walter Roth was the first northern protector of Aborigines, and he wrote about our family in his dispatches to Brisbane’s parliament,” says Mellor. “As an anthropologist, he made drawings and took photos of Aboriginal people engaged in string games like cat’s cradle, which was a way of sharing Dreaming stories.”

Shooting digitally and editing in Photoshop, Mellor prints the resulting images as C-prints on metallic paper. “It has a slight sheen, which is what it’s like in the rainforest when it’s hot and humid, especially after rain.” He’s also added borders to make the works resemble glass plate negatives, corroded slightly over time. Mellor converted one of his cameras to infrared to extend the possibilities of his image-making and was gratified to discover the range of visual effects it afforded him. “Infrared has symbolic implications around exposing the invisible and talking about that in relation to our connection to, and sense of presence in, the landscape,” he says. “So, some quite beautiful things have come up by accident.”

Increasingly, Danie Mellor is drawn to make work whose qualities accord with the reverence he feels for nature. In this way, the exhibition title nods to both Ernest Hemingway, who published *The Sun Also Rises* in 1926, and *Ecclesiastes 1: 5–11*, from which the American author borrowed his title.

“Hemingway and Ecclesiastes point to these enormous life cycles we’re part of, but which are almost beyond our intellect: ‘The sun also rises, and the sun goes down ... there is nothing new under the sun.’ Aboriginal people lived in a relationship of balance and harmonious existence with nature for tens of thousands of years. The question I often ask is: ‘are we making ourselves alone in the world?’ ”

Tony Magnusson
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