

DANIE MELLOR
NARRATIVES
9 – 16 DECEMBER 2023

On display in Gallery 2, Mackay-born, Bowral-based Danie Mellor's latest body of work comprises paintings inspired by his time in the landscapes of Northern Queensland and photographic source imagery, both historical and contemporary.

The paintings are informed by images taken by late colonial photographers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in particular Alfred Atkinson. The Cairns portrait studio of Atkinson was frequently visited by Danie's Aboriginal great-great-grandmother Ellen and great-grandmother May to have their portraits taken. Atkinson even produced portraits of May and her children, including Danie's grandmother, with the family archive comprising photographs dating back to c1908.

Sources for the paintings also include Mellor's own photographs and observations recorded in and around the Atherton Tablelands near Cairns, the area from which Ellen and May, Ngadjon women, came from.

Painted in Van Dyke Brown to emulate the sepia tones characteristic of old photographic imagery, particularly the tradition of *carte de visite*, each work has then been over-painted in an iridescent wash that serves to subtly shift the picture from historical and fixed to something more enigmatic and emotionally engaging.

"*Narratives* continues an exploration in my work through which painting and photography are brought together in conversation, presenting open-ended narratives around the people and their relationship to one another, and the landscape surrounding them," says Mellor.

"I've titled the exhibition *Narratives* because I'm interested in the storytelling potential of images that have a sense of ambiguity – pictures without one clear or definitive reading. Viewers can then reflect on their own memories and experiences to respond to the work and explore personal readings of each image."

Recomposing archival photographs in acrylic and wash – blurs, blemishes, foxing and all – enables Mellor to draw attention to their physical history as time-travelling objects.

"I'm looking to capture the essence of each photograph without losing sight of the possibilities of painting," he says. "From a distance, they may appear very naturalistic or nearly photo-realistic but move closer and you see they are made up of painterly

brush strokes. That's part of the magic of those abstractions of mark-making coming together in a composition to make up a picture."

Interestingly, some of the scenes and people are blurred, indicating movement during the exposure time.

"I like that effect, because it implies a half-there, half-somewhere-else appearance – it's almost ghostly," Mellor says. "But the truly fascinating thing is that blurred photos literally capture extended moments in which time passes and you can see it."

Narratives has plenty of intriguing characters, from the strong young warriors confidently returning the viewer's gaze in *The sword bearer (balan bagur)* 2023 and *The man from Barron River* 2023 to the two rifle-toting gentlemen – one Aboriginal, one white – involved in some kind of drama in *The camp at midday (Jimmy's got a gun)* 2023.

As with others in the series, the latter painting is a montage of more than one source photograph, adding to a positive kind of interpretive ambiguity.

"Who are these people? Why are they at this campsite?" Mellor teases. "Here, I'm looking at relationships between Aboriginal and settler culture, between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people in the same frame, as that's reflective of my own family and heritage."

All but one of the paintings features iridescent wash. *At the edge of twilight (paradise)* 2023, a silhouetted land-and-seascape incorporating a tableau of palm trees and two warriors holding spears and shields, basks in a rosier hue thanks to an application of gold iridescent wash.

"I wanted to capture that feeling of liminal time during the golden hour, those 20 or 30 minutes of twilight when the setting sun transforms the environment with golden light," Mellor says. "I've been thinking about ideas of paradise in relation to the history of painting and the natural beauty of the landscape in northern Australia."

Mystery and beauty are delicately entwined in these numinous paintings, which reward careful and close contemplation.

"The paintings speak of place and Country, of people and ceremony and the emotions of life, offering narratives of history and memory, a remembering of the world," Mellor says.

Tony Magnusson, 2023