

Afraid of the dark

Drawing on patterns in modern life, from the street lights lining highways to the repetitive lines on bank statements, Jonathan Jones creates dazzling installations of light. Story by **Andrew Frost**. Portraits by **Kirstin Gollings**.



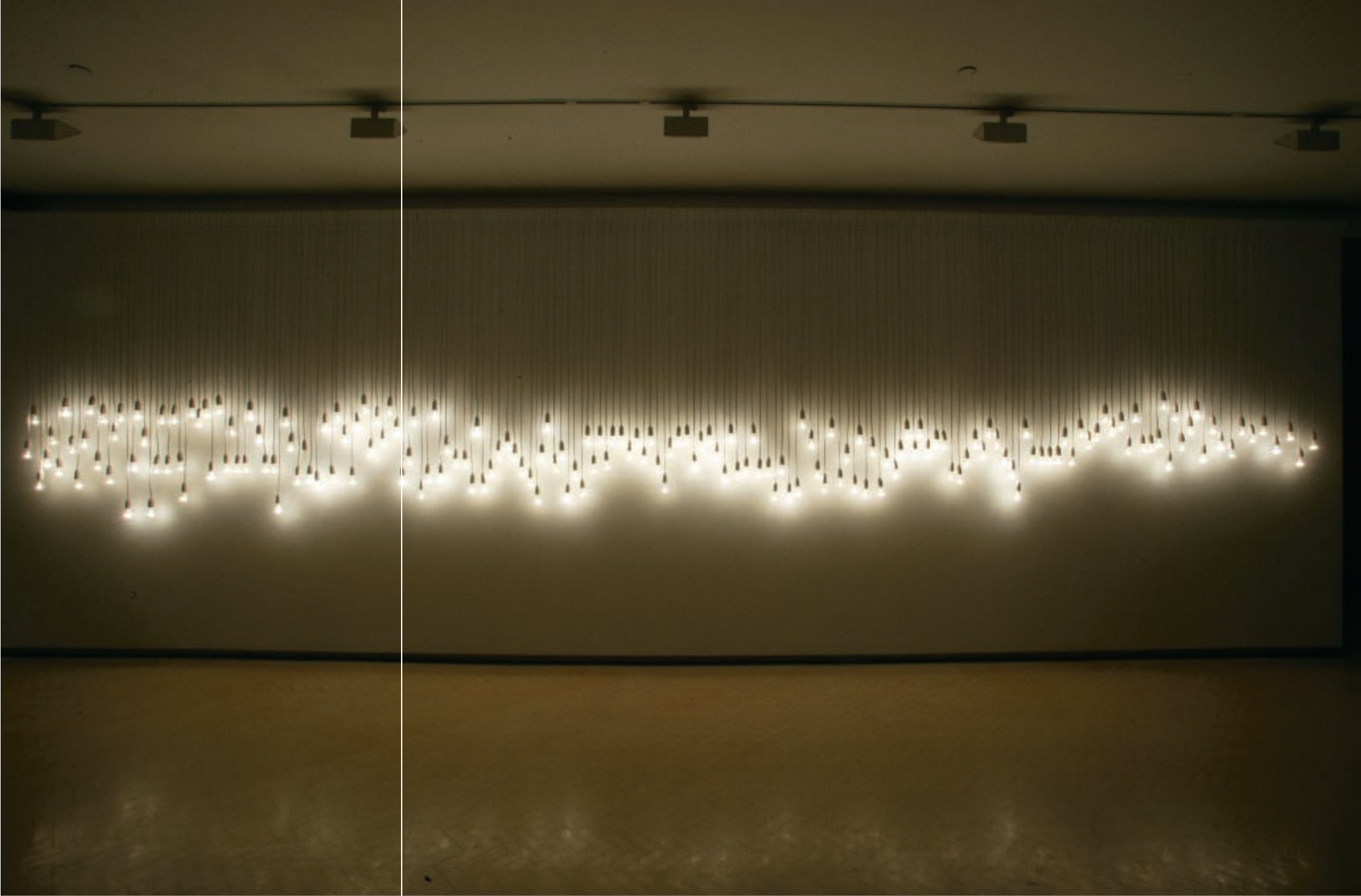
All art is collaborative. There’s the artist who made the work, and the audience who helps create its meaning. And then there’s the process of getting from the initial idea to the end result. **Jonathan Jones** claims the whole thing – the audience, the work and the process – as his art. He believes in the idea of community and the idea of the individual, and although he admits both ideas are also probably fictions, he explores the connections between these concepts through subtle and beautiful metaphors.

Working with installation and sculpture, with drawing, filmmaking and found objects, Jones’s use of light is the formal element that binds together all his various solo and collaborative projects. Works such as *68 Fletcher Street Bondi*, 20:20, 8.6.03 [2003] and *White Lines* [2005] suggest the stark beauty of the work of **Dan Flavin** and **Donald Judd**, yet their simple materials – hanging light bulbs in the case of *68 Fletcher Street* and fluorescent tubes in *White Lines* – reference the pattering found in Indigenous wood and rock carvings. Jones’s works are also profoundly connected to the landscape, both as it is, and as it was. *68 Fletcher Street Bondi* is a three dimensional drawing of the Bondi headland, while works commissioned for corporate clients such as Jones’s massive installation of *White Lines* for Westpac in Sydney’s CBD, are built up from research into the site’s history.

Born in 1978, Jones claims Kamilaroi/Wiradjuri heritage. He grew up both in Sydney and in a small town outside Tamworth, moving between members of his extended family. In the country he stayed with his grandmother, a Wiradjuri woman from Bathurst. Jones describes his grandmother as someone “relaxed with her Aboriginality. I got to absorb a sense of that [Aboriginality] from her, and probably more from her than from my grandfather or my mother.” Jones says this maternal influence had a great effect on him, not just in his sense of Aboriginal identity, but as an artist. “I think that those influences were the reason I took the turn I took, as opposed to the rest of the family, who never really embraced their ancestry, their Aboriginality,” says Jones. “I came along as an artist and I’ve been trying to figure that [influence] out.”

As Jones shifted back and forth between city and country his education was fragmentary and incomplete. He dropped out of high school, then went to TAFE. After a stint at NSW University’s College of Fine Art – which he describes as an “inevitable” career choice – he worked as a curator at Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative in inner city Sydney. While at Boomalli, Jones continued to experiment with art making. “I was interested in materials,” he says. “I was making Vegemite photograms and coating things with vegemite. I was interested in that because it’s a black Australian substance that you either hate or love. Then I was interested in corrugated iron. My great-grandfather was a fencer who used to travel around and apparently lived under a piece of corrugated iron. It was a material that had that association, it was him, but something that’s very Australian. It had a dual meaning.”

It’s this notion of the dual meaning of materials that informs much of Jones’s work. His interest in using lights came about because those were the materials to hand, and his grandfather had shown him how to wire up light fittings. The formal metaphors are another matter. How does he see his work in relation to Western modernism? “What’s Modernism?” he asks, maybe joking. Well, like Flavin and Judd and the concept of the repeatable unit in sculpture? “It came down to what my Pop taught me how to fix around the house,” he says. “I’m not sure why I went towards that. I’ve always liked lights since I’m really scared of the dark. I sort of only became aware of those artists at art school. I don’t see Judd and Flavin as coming



Jonathan Jones, *68 Fletcher, Bondi, 20:20, 8.6.03, 2003*. Extension cords, household light bulbs, movement sensors, 200 x 900 x 50 cm, installation at Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.
PHOTO: PAUL GREEN. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND GALLERY BARRY KELDOULIS, SYDNEY.

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Jonathan Jones, *White lines*, 2005. Fluorescent tubes and fittings.
PHOTO: SCOTT STROTHERS. COLLECTION: WESTPAC BANK, SYDNEY.
COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND GALLERY BARRY KELDOLIS, SYDNEY.

from the same context [as me]. But the materiality is similar."

Jones is probably also joking about being afraid of the dark because, as I ask him how he sees his work in relation to other artists, to various traditions, he calls up a work on paper called *Illumination Interplay* on the Gallery Barry Keldoulis computer. The work is a series of circles of various sizes laid out in rows, their intersecting circumferences creating complex patterns. Jones traces the outlines of the circles with his finger as he talks. "I've become aware of various other artists and what they were doing, but what [my work] comes down to is trying to capture the notion of a community. It's an idea that perhaps there is one point of light and it's producing a body of light. What if you put another light with it? There's an overlap, a linking."

Illumination Interplay describes Jones's concept of the intersection of light sources as a metaphor for the connection between people and communities. "That idea starts to feed into the idea of how we define the question, what is it to be part of the community? To be part of Australia? How do we communicate? How do we operate? We get this notion of the massing of light, but in the end we're all individuals."

Many of Jones's sculptural works use repetition and patterning to create dazzling installations of light. His work for the Westpac offices in Sydney and his current project for AXA in Melbourne draw on Indigenous pattern making and the patterns and repetitions we find in modern life – from the lights strung along highways and streets to the repetitive lines on bank statements. Writing on Jones's work, Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) curator **Hetti Perkins** observed that "in Aboriginal ceremonial life, where participation



is structured according to the position of the individual within the community, cultural affirmation is conducted and achieved through iteration. From these nuclei of society – like the collective brilliance of overlapping light sources – enacts a radiance that illuminates the darkness that surrounds us.”

At 29 years old, Jones has already had a remarkably successful career. In 2002 he was awarded the NSW Ministry for the Arts Indigenous Arts Fellowship. In 2003 his work was included in the Museum of Contemporary Art's *Primavera* exhibition. In 2006, a version of Jones's *White Lines* was included in *Adventures In Form and Space* at the AGNSW and the exhibition of site specific sculptures *Ten[d]ancy* at Elizabeth Bay House featured a work by Jones – *Gurrajin [Elizabeth Bay]*. Along with Jones's major corporate commissions for Westpac and AXA, the artist somehow has also found time to collaborate on projects with the Maori artist **Jim Vivieaere**, work with artists **Ilaria Vanni** and **Panos Couros** on a project for The Performance Space, create a film installation with **Darren Dale** and **David Page** at the Australian Centre for Moving Image in Melbourne, and carry on a seven year long collaboration with artist and poet **Ruark Lewis**. “I really like collaborations,” says Jones. “Everyone seems scared of collaborations but I really like them.” But isn't working collaboratively one of the biggest trends in contemporary art right now? “They usually end in tears,” says Jones with a shrug.

His most recent work with Lewis, *Homeland Illuminations* [2007] is a capsule of all of Jones's concerns. Sited at The Carriage Works, a former rail yard and now a cultural centre, Jones and Lewis created a series of rectangular boards covered with texts based on the life stories of Jones's grandfather, while underneath the boards were illuminated with lights. “We're both passionate about the materials we were using and our directions that we'd been taking,”

This page: Jonathan Jones, *Gurrajin (Elizabeth Bay)*, 2006. Fluorescent tubes and fittings. PHOTO: JENNI CARTER. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND GALLERY BARRY KELDOULIS, SYDNEY. This work was originally commissioned for the exhibition *Ten[d]ancy*, curated by Sally Breen and Tania Doropoulos, for Elizabeth Bay House, Sydney, and generously supported by the Historic Houses Trust and the Australia Council.

Opposite page: Jonathan Jones photographed at the AXA Centre in Melbourne, the location of his latest installation.

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This page: Jonathan Jones & Ruark Lewis, *Homelands Illumination*, 2007. Acrylic and gouache on timber with fluorescent lights, dimensions variable. COURTESY: THE ARTISTS AND GALLERY BARRY KELDOLUIS, SYDNEY.

Opposite page: Jonathan Jones & Jim Vivieaere, *NICE (Maal)*, 2007. Water and sound, dimensions variable, installation at UTS Gallery, Sydney. PHOTO: MARK ROGERS. COURTESY: THE ARTISTS AND GALLERY BARRY KELDOLUIS, SYDNEY.

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says Jones of the collaboration. "We thought it might be fun, a bit tongue in cheek with slamming our two approaches together, whacking my lights onto Ruark's boards. We started dealing with where the text would come from. My granddad is dying. I've been getting stories from him, recording his stories. Old people won't shut up when you get them to tell you their stories." The duo conceived the size and shape of the boards to be analogous to both the size and scale of The Carriage Works site, and that each board was made to a scale that echoed the original use of the site. "The work was constructed to fit into a rail carriage size – the shape, size and width of a carriage," says Jones. "The whole building was constructed to accommodate a carriage. So the 40 sticks, stencilled with the text of my pop's stories, make up these modules."

As we conclude the interview, Jones says the most important aspect of what he does, not only as an artist or in his job as an assistant curator at the AGNSW, is as a person who makes connections between people. "There are two ideas of culture. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture," he says. "There is an overlap even if people don't admit it. At the very least, we're sharing this country so there's an overlap there. People constantly focus on things that are not shared and focus. I'm interested in how we can look at that connection."

Jonathan Jones is showing new work at Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney from 3 October to 3 November 2007.