

Jonathan Jones

Born 1978, Sydney. Wiradjuri / Kamilaroi peoples. Lives and works Sydney.

Jonathan Jones is a member of the Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi peoples of south-east Australia. He works across a range of mediums, from printmaking and drawing to sculpture and film, utilising everyday materials in minimal repeated forms to explore and interrogate cultural and historical relationships and ideas from Indigenous perspectives and traditions. He is well known for his evocative site-specific installations and interventions in space that use fluorescent light tubes. Jones' poetic light works also express the artist's interest in the idea of positive contact and connection, illuminating a bridge between cultures and spaces of exchange.

Jones has exhibited both nationally and internationally since the late 1990s, including exhibitions at Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, Sydney; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane; National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; National Gallery of Canada,

Ontario; Palazzo delle Papesse Contemporary Art Centre, Sicily; and Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art, Winnipeg, Canada. The publication *Jonathan Jones: Untitled (The Tyranny of Distance)* was published by the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation in 2008. Jones' work is represented in major public collections throughout Australia and in a number of public collections overseas.

From the *MCA Collection Handbook*

Jonathan Jones' drawings, sculptures and installations evolve from a desire to remember the past in the present. Similar to the idea that the sky and earth are visually equivalent, his black-and-white drawings of patterns drawn from his Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi ancestry achieve a synthesis of opposites – between the soft, densely applied graphite and the white strips torn from the surface of the paper. His light installations transpose this idea into a three-dimensional experience that inverts the traditional hierarchy of figure over ground, implicating the viewer in a conversation about black and white. In this sense, Jones' work creates a space of sensation.

Light is integral to Jones' work, functioning as a structuring device that relates to forms of late modernist art, and as a reference to his childhood experience of being taught by his grandfather how to wire light fittings.¹ The light emitted by his work encourages viewer participation – it urges us to engage with it closely, and, as in the case of *naa (to see or look)* (2015),² to traverse the space and length of the work. This exchange between artwork and viewer is important to Jones, because at the heart of his concerns is the notion of communal relations – or, as he explains, 'the operations of the community and the individual, in the interests of a national community'.³

The arrangement of fluorescent tubes in *naa (to see or look)* represents star trails in the night sky over Sydney. The work also draws on the history of Warrane (Sydney Cove), in particular the narrative of the First Fleet astronomer Lieutenant William Dawes (1762–1836) who built an observatory at Tarra (Dawes Point). Dawes' records reveal his deep engagement with the Aboriginal people of the Eora nation – including his friendship with Patyegarang, a young Aboriginal woman whose voice is heard throughout his notebooks and who was vital in helping Dawes understand and document the local Aboriginal language.

The shift between light and dark in *naa (to see or look)* is a metaphor for the friendship between Patyegarang and Dawes. Each fluorescent tube is both a star and a word, and their arrangement on the wall a representation of the words spoken; in its entirety, the installation is an embodiment of Dawes' charting of the night sky and of the Eora language.⁴

Along with star trails, *naa (to see or look)* also refers to the earth and to specular reflections of moonlight on water. Shadows resembling coiling rivers emerge from the blinding whiteness of the installation. In this way the whiteness of Jones' work speaks of its blackness. Metaphorically, physically and historically, in *naa (to see or look)* all elements are interdependent: earth, sky, water, light, dark, man, woman. In this way it is ultimately optimistic – it illuminates a different way of seeing, translating past symbols and stories into allegories of hope about future possibilities.

Natasha Bullock

Natasha Bullock is Senior Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney.

Notes

1 Jonathan Jones, in Andrew Frost, 'Jonathan Jones: afraid of the dark', *Australian Art Collector*, issue 42, October–December 1997, <http://www.artcollector.net.au/JonathanJonesAfraidoftheDark> (accessed August 2016).

2 This artwork was made with the support of Uncle Charles 'Chicka' Madden.

3 Jonathan Jones, in *Jonathan Jones*, exh. brochure, Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney, 2003, unpaginated.

4 Jonathan Jones, artist statement, 2016.

Works by Jonathan Jones



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naa (to see or look), 2015

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