



[VI]



[VII]



[VIII]



ARTWORK

- [I] Study for Black Madonna # 1, c. 1980 pencil on Fabriano, 90gsm paper, 24.2 x 17cm
- [II] Fashion design sketch and notes, 1980s made while working as a fashion designer, Sydney pencil on A4 paper
- [III] Raining at Parap Camp, 2023 pastel, pencil, texta on type C print on Ilford cottonrag paper 34 x 23.5cm
- [IV] Mrs and Mr Lee, 2022 pastel, pencil, texta on type C print on Ilford cottonrag paper 45 x 64cm
- [V] Antonio and Lily, 2023 pastel & pencil on type C print, Ilford cottonrag paper 26 x 37cm
- [VI] Stephen, 2006 - newly editioned 2023 from Darwin Lads series, type C print on Ilford cottonrag paper 44 x 31.94cm
- [VII] Stefan, 17, 2009 - newly editioned 2023 from On the Verge series type C print on Ilford cottonrag paper 25.95 x 31.94cm
- [VIII] Mei Kim and Minnie, 2006 - newly editioned 2023 type C print on Ilford cottonrag paper 29.7 x 42cm
- [COVER] Gary Lee, Self-portrait with Manish, 2002 - newly editioned 2023 from the Skin series type C print on Ilford cottonrag paper 44 x 31.94cm
- [GARY LEE] Self-portrait as Paul Foelsche, 2023 type C print on Ilford cottonrag paper 42 x 32.94cm



[GARY LEE]

Gary Lee is a Larrakia artist, curator, anthropologist and writer. He has written numerous articles, reports and papers over the past four decades, and his work has likewise been the subject of numerous articles, interviews and documentaries. In 1997, for example, he was one of six Aboriginal artists featured in the six-part documentary series Artists Upfront (SBS TV, directors Desmond Kootji Raymond, Paul Roberts). Strong critical reception of his play Keep Him My Heart - A Larrakia-Filipino Love Story (1993) led to an episode on his family's history in Australian Story (ABC TV, 1997) and a subsequent related publication. His 2011 solo exhibition, gorgeousness, in Auckland was the subject of Making Men Magnificent, Asia Downunder, Television New Zealand, 2011.

As a writer Gary has written on his own practice which has mainly focused on photo-based portraiture and through which he has held over 10 solo exhibitions in Darwin, Canberra, Melbourne, Perth, Brisbane and Auckland. He has also participated in many group exhibitions including nationally and internationally touring exhibitions. Recent group exhibitions include Queer, stories from the NGV collection, NGV International, Melbourne, 10 March - 21 August 2022, and Yellah Fellah, 21 December 2022 - 28 January 2023, Manning Regional Art Gallery, Taree. Recent touring group exhibitions include Ever Present: First Peoples Art of Australia, Art Gallery of Western Australia, 9 December 2021 - 18 April 2022; National Gallery of Singapore, 3 June - 25 September 2022.

Gary has also written widely on the work of other artists and on Indigenous art per se, including for numerous exhibition catalogues and contemporary art magazines, and for substantive publications including Aratjara: Art of the First Australians:

Contemporary Works by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artists (1993), Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Dusseldorf, Germany (for which he was co-editor), and The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art (2000), Oxford University Press, South Melbourne. Gary's art writing also relates to his work as a co-curator of exhibitions including: Larrakia and other Darwin Families, Lyons Cottage, Darwin, 1994; Love Magic: Erotics and Politics in Indigenous Art (part of the Art Gallery of NSW's Perspecta '99); Dirula, Contemporary Larrakia Art, 24HR Art, Darwin, 2002; and Billiamook, Charles Darwin University Gallery, 2004.

Gary's work as an anthropologist has involved him in sociocultural research relating to Darwin/NT (including for his play) and pharmacopoeia-related research, as well as considerable research into Indigenous gay male and transgender issues. His pioneering research into the latter led to publications such as The National Indigenous Gay and Transgender Project Consultation Report (1998, Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations, Sydney) and numerous other articles, reports and papers.

Gary's artwork is held in collections at the National Gallery of Australia, Art Gallery of Western Australia, National Gallery of Victoria, Museum and Art Gallery of the NT, Charles Darwin University, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Australian War Memorial, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, University of Canberra, and Museum of Old and New Art, as well as in numerous private collections in Australia and overseas. In 2022 Gary was awarded the Work on Paper Award in the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award for his hand-coloured photo-based portrait Nagi (2022) of his maternal grandfather Juan (Johnny) Cubillo.

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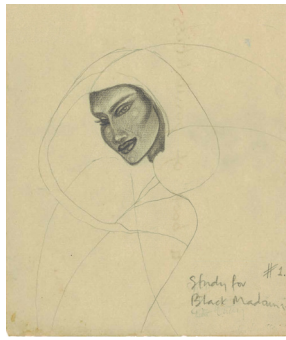
# Gary Lee: midling



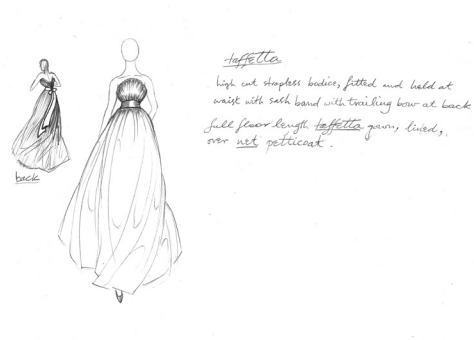
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# Time Being



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Midling (Larrakia: together) – the sound, the saying of the word evokes its meaning, the syllables coalescing or, as Stephanie (Martin) suggests, an ‘entwining’. This exhibition does entwine several strands of a practice that formally began five decades ago, in the early ’80s when Gary left his hometown Darwin to pursue visual arts studies in Sydney. By that stage Gary had already been in the workforce. He had already travelled overseas, spending a few years abroad including a lengthy period in India. On his return to Darwin after this trip he returned to school as a mature-age student to obtain his year 12 matriculation in step with his plans for university.

In year 11 and 12 art was one of Gary’s favourite subjects, along with English. He excelled in it and throughout his schooling was the one that fellow students turned to, to do their drawings or be enthralled by his own. He still has his final year 12 assessment work, his first and only oil painting, a version of the Madonna and Child framed by a halo of rich-red Darwin frangipanis. The Madonna, however, has the face of a baboon in a pallid turquoise hue. The child she holds in her slender hand is the skull of a baby baboon. Apparently this work was a bit too anti-creationist for Gary’s art teacher at the time but he passed.

Post-high school, Gary worked and travelled and continued to make art on the side including his first forays into fashion design. An image from this time, Study for Black Madonna #1, is included in midling, one of several remade works as part of the exhibition’s archival vein. Here, Gary’s original pencil drawing is translated through a risograph print medium to give it a pop-vintage feel. While continuing the Madonna icon theme, this work also belies a ‘black is beautiful’ sentiment inspired by black fashion icons of the time Beverly Johnson and Iman. It’s also a nod to Karel Kupka’s Black Madonna painting at St Mary’s Cathedral, Darwin, an image which Gary had known about since a kid.

On arriving in Sydney Gary soon realised he was a year early for his enrolment at Sydney College of the Arts (SCA). He stayed on nonetheless, studying art at Alexander Mackie for a year while teaming up with ex-Darwinite Andrew Trewin in fashion design and with his cousin Laura Lee for a stall at Paddington Markets. He did attend SCA the following year but soon after, fashion designing with Andrew led to a full-time enterprise. midling doesn’t include any examples of Gary’s fashion work but it does represent his photo portraiture for which his practice is best known. The parallels seem obvious – the focus on youth and beauty. As a fashion designer though, despite his love of fabric and form and his evident skill in design illustration, Gary grew tired of the demands of clients and of the industry per se. “If I met another model”, he said of this time, “I would have spewed because a lot of them were very beautiful but, oh, you know, not very thoughtful about other people.”<sup>1</sup>

Fashion design also proved lacking for Gary as a vehicle for his growing politicisation within the Aboriginal struggle for land rights and cultural recognition. By this time, he was an active claimant in the Kenbi Land Claim for Larrakia people which was a catalyst for a cultural revival which continues today. He went on to become an anthropologist mainly with a view to working as a curator of Aboriginal art as reflected by the subject of his Honours thesis, From Artefact Into Art: The Commoditisation of Paintings on Bark from Arnhem Land (1990). Towards the end of 1994 he was a guest curator for the Department of Foreign Affairs in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and India which is when his photo portrait series Nice Coloured Boys began.

Gary is not a trained photographer. He has little interest in technical details apart from making the best use of natural light. He has happily called himself a point-and-shoot photographer. Yet he is keenly aware of the politics around the pointing and shooting and, as suggested above, his artist’s eye was in train from a young age.

midling brings together works from a number of series related to Nice Coloured Boys which have been newly editioned for the exhibition. As with Nice Coloured Boys these are photo-based portraits which explore the nexus of masculinity, beauty and ethnicity. Unlike Nice Coloured Boys, these series – Skin, Darwin Lads and On the Verge – forego a street photographic method for a staged approach whereby Gary has pre-arranged the subject and setting with the series concept in mind. Self-portrait with Manish is set in an old-school (Ayurvedic) gym in Varanasi overlooking Mother Ganga (Ganges River). Gary is pictured with Manish, then a bodybuilding champion and one of Gary’s favourite Varanasi muses. The Skin series to which this image belongs is the only series where Gary has put himself in the frame, prompted by Alistair Foster (then director, Australian Centre for Photography) and Gary’s own experience of cultural camouflage while in South Asia. Gary refers to this image as his ‘NATSIAA reject work’ as its entry in the 2003 edition of this award was rejected on the spurious grounds that he hadn’t pressed the shutter and the subject was not ‘Aboriginal’.

The portrait of Stephen (from Darwin Lads) is of an Aboriginal man, a bodybuilder like Manish and of Aboriginal-Asian descent like Gary. Stephen is photographed in Alfred’s, a well-known Darwin gift store associated with the prominent Chin family. The knife display in the background creates a playful if not disturbing edge though Gary’s focus is firmly on Stephen’s physique in an iconic Darwin locale. Although after his initial NATSIAAs rejection Gary vowed never to enter this award again, Stephen was selected as a finalist work in 2007 – the first of Gary’s seven NATSIAAs finalist entries to date.

On the Verge was Gary’s first new series after suffering a major stroke in late 2007 which left him with a partial right-side paralysis and confined to a wheelchair. It’s his only series to focus on white boys though he did exhibit a later version which also

included portraits of similar-aged ‘boys-to-men’ from India. The portrait Stefan, 17 from this series is an image of classic youthful beauty and is classic Gary Lee: the way the foliage frames and caresses Stefan; the teasing peak of Stefan’s Petroleum underwear; his knowing and not-yet-knowing gaze.

midling presents an ancestral togetherness, gathering the diptych portraits Billiamook and Shannon and Mei Kim and Minnie and Gary’s hand-coloured photo-based prints of his maternal great-grandparents (Mrs and Mr Lee<sup>2</sup>, 2022, and Antonio and Lily, 2023) and of a Larrakia public ceremony photographed by the colonial photographer Paul Foelsche in 1891. Larrakia woman Minnie (Annie) Duwun is the mother of Lily, while Foelsche is also the photographer of Minnie and Billiamook’s portraits (in 1877 and 1879 respectively) in the diptych works. Billiamook and Shannon, writes Gary, “is a celebration of Larrakia male beauty and male identity over 130 years of change and disruption.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, for Mei Kim and Minnie: “I am reappropriating the colonial Larrakia photograph of my great, great alap [Larrakia: grandmother] and re-presenting her as the strong, beautiful Larrakia woman that she was, and not as the subjugated ethnographic specimen as she was first portrayed.”<sup>4</sup> As Gary affirms, “The two works reconnect contemporary Larrakia to their ancestors and to place – to Darwin – gwal’wa daraniki – our land.”<sup>5</sup>

Gary’s exploration of the hand-coloured print began with the work Billiamook as Icon (2020) based on another portrait of Billiamook by Foelsche taken around 1880. Given that he now uses his left hand, Gary’s mark-making is a little less refined when compared with the draughtsmanship evidenced by the drawings on which this exhibition’s four risograph prints are based. Yet the eye for colour and composition remains, guided by his concept for each of these works in midling of using colour to subtly highlight particular elements. In Mrs and Mr Lee, for example, the hand-colouring is contained to the side of the image where the couple stand, with the red-dotted field encompassing them like a billowing love heart.

There are four portraits of Gary in midling including three self-portraits. The first is Gary as a four-year-old, the boy closest to the rainwater tank in Raining at Parap Camp (2023), a hand-coloured print based on a photo taken by his uncle, Gerald Lee, in 1956. The second is Self-portrait with Manish with Gary as a 50-year-old. The third is Gary’s Self-portrait as Paul Foelsche (2023) with Gary aged 70, around the same age as Foelsche in the photograph Foelsche with camera on knee (c. 1900) which inspired Gary’s self-portrait. And finally, there is the publication Heat, Gary Lee: selected texts, art & anthropology which launches with this exhibition, a voluminous anthology which traverses five decades of a distinctively multifaceted creative life, all brought together – not at last but for the time being.

Maurice O’Riordan, Curator, 2023

1. Lee, G. & Hodge, D. (2023). So in that sense, Aboriginal gay. In M. O’Riordan (Ed.), Heat, Gary Lee: Selected texts, art & anthropology (p. 173). Darwin: dislevel books. Originally published in D. Hodge (Ed.), Did you meet any malagas? A homosexual history of Australia’s tropical capital (Chapter 4, pp. 47-72). Darwin: Little Gem Publications.

2. Gary has the surname Lee on his father’s and mother’s side. Mrs and Mr Lee depicts Widji Lee (Nelson), a Wardaman Aboriginal woman from the Katherine region, and Harry Lee, a Chinese man, at Adelaide River Station in 1912. Their daughter Louisa (Cubillo) was Gary’s maternal grandmother.

3. Lee, G. (2006). Artist statement.

4. Lee, G. (2006). In F. Green (Ed.), Togart Contemporary Art Exhibition, exhibition catalogue (p. 21). Darwin: Toga Group.

5. Lee, G. (2006). Artist statement.