

Ryan Presley: 'Blood Money'

My 'Blood Money' series is an ongoing project which consists of a newly designed suite of Australian banknotes created as watercolour paintings on paper. These works of art explore contemporary Australian history through the lens of important and notable Aboriginal people. These key figures can teach us valuable historical lessons in regards to their experiences of dispossession, oppression and the suppression of contrary legacies. From them we can learn valuable insights that tell us much about cross-cultural histories and Aboriginal relationships with 'white' or non-Aboriginal Australia.

A primary aim of the series is to broadcast and promote important Aboriginal people within the context of Australian history and experience, testifying to their intelligence, perseverance and maneuverability. Their actions and legacies are not only respectable in terms of their general achievements in Australian society, but they also dispel many of the myths circulated via colonial occupation: particularly that Aboriginal people were passive and lacked the will to resist colonial encroachment.

The facts pertaining to the decision-making and consequent actions of these Aboriginal figures are an important testament to their strength and, crucially, their humanity. Such education is a key element of this project because for the past two centuries the derision and denial of our humanity has been a key tool used to excuse our lands' occupation and the attempted extermination of our people. These issues are important to address in our current time because the treatment of Aboriginal people that was so prevalent in past generations is also arguably reflected in

contemporary realities experienced in our communities. These include, for example, a high and rising level of incarceration and suicide within some of our communities.

Today the systematic selection and canonisation of heroes is made and evident, aided by monetary imagery. European concepts of 'pioneering heroes' and their ingenuity (with their portraiture circulated on items of value) stand in direct contrast to many examples of Aboriginal heroes that are purposefully silenced by the Australian majority. Malcolm X taught us that Black people as leaders of culture and civilisation, who stood their ground, have shrewdly been written out of the history books in order to be forgotten. White heroes are often canonised so that European people can easily teach their children these accomplishments to achieve themselves. However, for disenfranchised Black people, especially in the Australian situation, there are no visible 'heroes'. No creators and protectors of civilisation and culture are promoted in the same respectful manner, or often in any manner. Malcolm X stated that, 'if you can be convinced that you never did anything, you can be convinced you can never do anything'.¹ This current series of work is a contribution to the respectful promotion of notable Aboriginal people that continually fought to protect and retain their complex society and law.

'Blood Money' seeks to contribute to a stance against the historical and contemporary exploitation of our lands, culture and people. This exploitation is reflected in the title of the series. It is a reference to European traditions of *wergeld* (or 'blood money') where a payment for conciliation – as a result of responsibility for death or murder – was agreed on and made.² Through this title there is also the implication of Aboriginal blood (and/or death) for European money (and/or material

gain). By overt and systematic brutality, transferral of Aboriginal possession and prosperity has been converted into European 'ownership' and capital, physically 'embodied' in banknotes and coinage. This ownership is seen as a personal possession yet, paradoxically, is depersonalised and foreign to the owner, especially in a monetary form with a value enforced by British-developed law, institutions of power (for instance, courts, police and military) and corresponding customary transactions.

¹ Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, Secker & Warburg, London, 1966, p. 169.

² See *Money: from cowrie shells to credit cards*, British Museum Publications, London, 1986.