

Daniel Boyd

December 12, 2020 | By Maddee Clark

Page 1 of 5

After the tumult of 2020, Kujjla–Gangalu artist Daniel Boyd aims to find the beauty within chaos, as he continues to reframe the mythologies of colonialism. By *Maddee Clark*.



Daniel Boyd's work in progress at his studio. CREDIT: DANIEL BOYD

Daniel Boyd is a Kujjla–Gangalu artist from Cairns who works in Sydney's inner west.

His works *We Call Them Pirates Out Here* (2006) and *Sir No Beard* (2007) are acclaimed for how they reframe historical myths about Australian history.

More recently, he has been delving deep into these myths with a focus on the Enlightenment, using archival research and museum objects as entry points for explorations of fiction, perspective and multiplicity. During a recent exhibition in Sydney University's Chau Chak Wing Museum, he "veiled the entire Penelope Gallery in light and darkness" to invoke multiple ways of seeing.

We met in late November to speak about his perspectives on chaos, the abyss, fiction and pirates.

You wrote to me earlier this morning with a passage about Édouard Glissant, utopia and the abyss. How has Glissant informed your work?

So, in 2015 I was included in the Venice Biennale which was curated by Okwui Enwezor, called All the World's Futures. The exhibition model was kind of in line with a lot of Glissant's thinking and Okwui and his peers saw Glissant in my work. That was my introduction to Édouard Glissant. I was also introduced to people like Molly Nesbit and Rirkrit Tiravanija from the Utopia Station that they do with Hans Ulrich Obrist in Venice. I became friends with these people. And for the Venice Biennale, I created a series of works that referenced this particular navigation chart of the Marshall Islands. Can you see that?

I can see it.

If you look up close, the surface is kind of made up of these clear dots, like lenses. And then there's this black space between all of those lenses. For me, it's about perception. I was interested in creating a collective way of seeing. I was always interested in trying to create like a duality, where you had to acknowledge the Other, the unknown.

Glissant's idea about utopia was that it exists as a trembling, a chaos, it isn't static, and that this chaos is the only way to resist globalisation. This exhibition called Mondialité in Brussels that was curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Asad Raza took up this idea of resisting the homogenising forces of globalisation and trying to hold on to local understandings or relationships to landscape.

You've spoken before about your interest in Gestalt principles and pattern recognition. In some of these works I can see that at play.

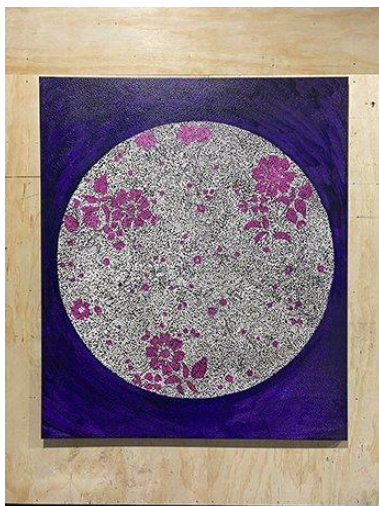
I'm interested in the threshold between two things – the abyss and chaos. There's a quote from Glissant where he says that the experience of the abyss exists both inside and outside the abyss. You can't have one without the other. That space to me is about the unknown, about memory, about the space between, and the point of departure. The idea that you only exist in relationship to the Other.

His [Glissant's] idea of that "trembling" exists in my work in different ways. I'm working on paintings at the moment that look at volcanoes. I'm thinking about the surface of water, the entrance to a cave – where the darkness inside the cave and the light from the outside of the cave make a threshold between the two.

The cave and the light come with all their associations historically. I had a show called Yamani or Rainbow Serpent at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery a couple years ago looking at light in many forms. I wanted to draw our relationships between all of these different things to create a narrative. I'm interested in acknowledging the beauty in difference, that process of acknowledging the Other, and acknowledging the space that is about the unknown. It allows me to work in many different directions using chaos as a visual language to connect all of these things.

You've spoken before about how painting helps you to create a feeling of safety. Glissant's words, though, reflect an idea about walking towards chaos, towards unsafety, refusing to withdraw into yourself.

In the chaos of the last year, I think, I'm most interested in holding on to difference. In that sense, there's a beauty in the chaos. I feel comfortable within that.



I've been following this theme of piracy through your body of work, from when you were in art school, up until the present.

The Treasure Island idea. It related to that early painting from when I was in art school that's at the National Gallery [Treasure Island, 2005]. It was a way for me to be able to follow along with interests I've had in Robert Louis Stevenson. I'm interested in fiction, in how it can inform someone's perceptions of landscape. With this Marshall Islands navigation chart, what I was doing was charting the movement of an object between different contexts. It was created as a tool to be memorised, so that you could navigate the Marshall Islands, and then it becomes a part of Robert Louis Stevenson's personal collection, and then when he dies it goes to auction and the Pittsburgh University museum acquires it. So then I've also, as a part of this, been looking at the history of museums in relation to the Enlightenment, tracing this object that I need to look at in different contexts and then trace it through those contexts.

Your work stages, then, a meeting point between concepts, cultures and forms. What images are you looking at right now?

Let me show you the painting in the back here. It's Robert Louis Stevenson's dinner plate, that he had at his residence in Samoa. It's in the University of Sydney's collection. I recently did research in their archive for a show called Pediment/Impediment at the Chau Chak Wing Museum in Sydney University's contemporary [art] space. The portrait of Robert Louis Stevenson, concepts of Treasure Island, this plate, all relate to each other. This is a variation on the colour of the plate. It plays with the idea of fiction. I began looking [for] an original, and creating the plate as closely to the original as possible. Then the ones after that will be in different states, different colours.

Looking at it, I think about a piece of crockery retrieved from a shipwreck or something.

Many people projected many things onto this object and through time and space.

This year, the pandemic interrupted the planned celebrations of the 250th anniversary of Cook's voyage to Australia. I wondered about your thoughts, as somebody who has worked with Cook as a figure in the past.

Well, there are more and more points of view when it comes to Cook. There's a lot more dialogue around what he means to nationhood in Australia. I must admit I hadn't heard a lot about that anniversary. I think more and more people are understanding the mythologies and historical narratives, those fictions and their relationships to state-building, colonialism and the British Empire. I think there's a lot more freedom now, I think about how there's more information, and how it kind of moves around. I think that things are getting better.

In Progress is a new weekly column written by Maddee Clark and Kate Holden, in which they talk to artists about work they are in the process of making, rather than the work they have completed.

This article was first published in the print edition of The Saturday Paper on Dec 12, 2020 as "Daniel Boyd".