

Dean
Cross:

Sometimes I Miss
the Applause

5 Feb—
29 May 2022





Dean Cross

Sometimes I Miss the Applause

Melissa Keys

Consisting of dual projections *Sometimes I Miss the Applause* opens with an image dynamically panning along a wall showing a parked bicycle and a stack of chairs in what appears to be a traditional community hall. This vision is paired with a static shot from the stage that looks out across the empty room towards the front door. This sweeping sequence reveals a masked figure lying on-stage. At the same moment an identical figure suddenly appears on the parallel screen seated upright and directly facing the viewer as if scrutinising something behind the lens. The cacophonous sounds of an orchestra tuning up can be heard in the background.

Dean Cross was raised on Ngunnawal/Ngambri Country and is an artist of Worimi descent. Motivated by the understanding that his practice operates within a continuum of the oldest living culture on Earth and describing himself as a 'paratactical' artist,¹ Cross is interested in collisions between materials, ideas and histories. Encompassing painting, sculpture, performance, video and photography, his work intersects with and confronts dominant cultural and social histories, addressing pervasive erasure, ruptures and dislocations especially in the context of modernism, and enacting First Nations sovereignty.

For his Heide commission Cross has developed a searching moving image work that draws upon the persona, work and most recognisable imagery of the influential modernist artist, Sidney Nolan. In line with Cross's own performance background in contemporary dance and choreography, the inception of his piece derives from Nolan's work in the theatre and specifically his production design for Kenneth MacMillan's radical 1962 version of the avant-garde ballet *The Rite of Spring*.

Throughout *Sometimes I Miss the Applause* Cross performs sequences of awkward and jarring dance movements that are drawn from MacMillan's choreography. Nolan's powerfully striking designs for the production appropriated First Nations cultures, combining First Peoples' iconography with his own to create mythic, dream-like environments charged with a brooding intensity. For example, the painted unitards worn by the dancers were patterned with layered handprints derived from multiple sources including the majestic, stencilled ochre outlines and impressions on the sandstone walls of the Carnarvon Ranges (Kooramandangie) in central Queensland where Nolan visited in August in 1947, and pictures of a Marndialla (Dupi) initiation ceremony in Milingimbi, East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory taken by his friend, photographer Axel Poignant in 1952.² Poignant's images of the initiation ceremony are also the most likely source of inspiration for the flowing raffia headwear worn by the dancers. While Nolan's cultural appropriation resulted in a stunning stage spectacle, it also demonstrated the era's typically limited sensitivity towards the traditions and cultural practices of Australia's First Peoples.³

Originally premiering in 1913 for impresario Sergei Diaghilev's Ballet Russe Company with choreography by Vaslav Nijinsky and a celebrated score by pioneering composer Igor Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring's* foundational narrative is grounded in ancient Slavic Pagan mythology. Nijinsky's radical choreography included convulsive dance moves that shocked audiences and are thought to have been inspired by pre-Christian cave painting, 'in which the characters [are depicted] contorted, the[ir] knees turned in, [and their] arms twisted back'.⁴



Monica Mason in a costume designed by Sidney Nolan for *The Rite of Spring*, Photograph by Axel Poignant, 1962, printed in 1981, courtesy of the Axel Poignant Archive, London







Sidney Nolan
Self Portrait 1943
 Ripolin enamel on hessian sacking
 61 x 52 cm
 Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
 Purchased with funds provided by the Art Gallery
 Society of New South Wales 1997
 © The Trustees of the Sidney Nolan Trust/DACS.
 Licensed by Copyright Agency
 Image © AGNSW, Jenni Carter

Documentation of this early imagery was shared with Nijinsky by Nicholas Roerich, an artist, writer, philosopher and mystic who designed the peasant themed stage sets and costumes for the premiere production. With a background in archaeology and a fascination for eastern religions, faith traditions and theosophy, Roerich's interests informed the conception and aesthetics of the second act of the production.⁵ The applied artistic methodology of combining and weaving together diverse and unrelated cultural references, belief systems and mythological sources to create something new, may have sat comfortably with Nolan's own artistic process—with some of the original cultural material incorporated in the 1913 production also likely to have contributed to Nolan's own modernist approach.

Cross admires and has closely studied Nolan's artistic legacy, holding his practice in high esteem. While he acknowledges Nolan's appreciation of First Nations cultures, his project incisively reveals how Nolan's adoption of Aboriginal imagery for *The Rite of Spring* reflects and perpetuates colonialism and the dominance of western culture. Cross counters this historical dynamic by deploying one of Sidney Nolan's most recognisable self-portraits as a mask fitted to his own face. This theatrical and critical interplay of personas is conceived to suggest a complex shifting exchange in which autobiographical moments and imagery from both Cross and Nolan's lives become intertwined, and alludes to possibilities for cultural convergences, collisions and slippages in time.

The Nolan self-portrait that Cross wears throughout his video was painted in bright pigments, a palette of primary coloured house paints applied to a rough hessian ground. The original is simply rendered and naïve in appearance

and Cross further simplifies the form by removing the head from its painted background, as if to reinforce and repossess the image's primitivist, mask-like qualities.⁶ Made in a training camp located in the Wimmera during military service,⁷ the painting simultaneously presents as a portrait and landscape,⁸ the artist depicting himself as a painter and an artist warrior with coloured stripes like war paint applied across his brow, asserting his identity as a fierce soldier of the modernist avant-garde. The image was painted early in his career, prior to the creation of his celebrated Kelly series. Cross, who is also an ascendant practitioner, appropriates the image to further complicate and fracture the already complex confluence of personal, cultural and historical reference points between the two artists.

By applying a cut-out image of the face to a paper bag Cross creates a double mask, and a triumvirate Nolan/Kelly/Cross identity, with its boxy shape suggesting the distinctive square form of the iconic Kelly helmet. Throughout the video Nolan's face continually shifts from the front to the side, and the back again, suggesting alternating perspectives as if one is looking backwards, forwards and across time and space. In presenting Nolan's face at the back of his head Cross directly references Nolan's iconic *Ned Kelly* of 1946 that represents the anti-hero on horseback. In this painting Kelly's body appears to move forward with his steed, while the eye slot in his helmet, cut all the way through from one side to the other, creates a strange aperture effect of looking in multiple directions at once.

Shot in the humble public hall in Gundaroo, a small village in the Southern Tablelands of New South Wales, close to where Cross grew up, the installation presents the



unfolding actions of the hybrid Nolan/Kelly/Cross identity. The work explores what Cross refers to as ‘deviations and delineations of time’ and the changing nature of cultural discourse.⁹ The paper bag fitted over his head is both literally and metaphorically suffocating, while a slight green tinge cast across the projected visual field, adds to a sense of airless oppression.

In the ambient soundtrack we hear the distinctly British voice of Dame Monica Mason, who performed the role of the maiden in MacMillan’s production. Recorded at a rehearsal six decades on from her first performance in the role, Mason authoritatively intones timing for the movements of the dancers. At a different point in the video Cross appears on screen, clapping and setting his own tempo and sense of time—adding a layer of rhythmic disjunction to the work.

Notably Cross chose to perform his piece in an adidas tracksuit—classic eighties breakdance attire—perhaps viewing street wear as performing the function of ‘another dislocated dance costume and form that has been adopted and truncated across time’.¹⁰ Breakdance by its very nature is a hybrid culture that combines dance, gymnastics and martial arts movements, and is often presented in the format of dance battles. These performative sparring matches between two or more competing rounds of presentation are ironically (in this instance) referred to as ‘face offs’. Cross’s tracksuit also mirrors the three stripes painted across Nolan’s brow extending these motifs down his arms and legs. Wearing his painting sneakers, splattered with pigment Cross, like Nolan, asserts himself as a painter—an artist critically engaging history and affirming his own identity. Characterising the performance as a rehearsal Cross

alludes to history and culture as a dynamic work-in-progress, a complex unfinished trajectory in which ideas, practices and gestures are constantly shifting, being contested, challenged, redefined, rewritten and realigned.

Cross’s performance specifically references MacMillan’s choreography from the second and final act in *The Rite of Spring* titled *The Chosen One*. In this tumultuous scene, a youth is selected by a group of elder males to dance themselves to death to appease the god of spring. This role was initially conceived to be performed by a female, a ‘sacrificial maiden’, however the role has gradually shifted to be less gendered over time. The urge to re-make *The Rite of Spring* never seems to be exhausted with leading choreographers continually taking different, often radically divergent approaches to the material to deconstruct societal values and notions of power.

The title of Cross’s project, *Sometimes I Miss the Applause*, refers in part to his own history as a professional dancer and the gratifying display of audience appreciation at the end of a show. The title is also one of numerous references to hands throughout Cross’s project. There are the outstretched pleading hands borrowed from MacMillan’s choreography that riff off Nijinsky’s movements before him, the appropriated aboriginal handprints on Nolan’s costumes, and the sequence in the video of Cross painting his own hands red, in a reclamatory response to Nolan’s theft.

Cross has commented that he finds MacMillan’s choreography of the sacrificial solo ‘awful and unintentionally funny’, which is also part of its appeal to him. To create his version of the work he watched a YouTube clip of the dance piece on his laptop, the same



recording from which he sourced his sound.¹¹ Viewing and digesting short sections at a time. Cross then stepped into the performative space in front of the camera to enact as much of the choreography as he could recall. The resulting outcome is a performance that retains many of the key choreographic motifs of MacMillian's original combined with brief passages of improvisation. The accompanying complex, dissonant and fragmentary structure of Stravinsky's score, adds to the maddening sense of disorientation throughout. At the end of the solo component of Cross' video, the performer makes their way from the hall emerging into the bright light of the present day. Moments later the split screen dissolves into a single frame and the mask—featuring the likeness of Nolan—begins to lift as the image is swiftly cut away.

Endnotes

1. Cross notes of the description 'paratactical' that 'It's a word the I have invented as an extension of parataxis, which is a sort of strategy I employ. I am interested in how I can communicate ideas but with bits missing. A paratactical sentence is a sentence that can be read without the conjunctions.' Dean Cross, 'Revisiting the past to generate new meaning: Dean Cross | Primavera 21,' online interview, Museum of Contemporary Art, Australia, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0Wsk_SrfTY posted January 16, 2022, accessed 10 January 2022.
2. 'While [artist D.] Harding found possible synergy between hand stencils in the Carnarvon caves and those Nolan placed on the performers' leotards, hands also cover the male dancers in the Marnialla (Dupi) ceremony. For Nolan these hands represent the first human markings, the primitive beginnings of art. See Nancy Underhill in, 'The ongoing Aboriginal—white Australian entanglements', in *D. Harding: Through a Lens of Visitation*, exhibition catalogue, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2021, p. 46.
3. While Nolan travelled to Queensland's central highlands and throughout Arnhem Land, his research for *The Rite of Spring* primarily involved reference to Axel Poignant's reportage of Aboriginal communities, archival materials and anthropological publications, with little direct engagement or consultation. 'The bundle of Axel's Arnhem Land photographs lent to Sidney probably helped to fuel his own recollections, and it seems they also provided a visual stimulus which he used in discussions with Kenneth MacMillan, the choreographer.' Roslyn

Poignant, 'Natalie Wilson and Roslyn Poignant: In Conversation', in *Indigenous Connections: Sidney Nolan's Rite of Spring*, Photographs by Axel Poignant, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2007, see <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/education/online-catalogues/indigenous-connections/>, accessed 4 January 2022.

4. Millicent Hodson, in 'Nijinsky's choreographic method: visual sources from Roerich for "Le Sacre du printemps"', *Dance Research Journal: Russian Folklore Abroad*, Vol. 18. No. 2, Winter, 1986–87, pp. 7–15, published by Dance Studies Association, Cambridge University Press, New York.

5. Ibid.

6. 'The development in modern artistic theory coincided in later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with a rapid growth of anthropological study and collection, as scholars and curators sought to make sense of the various appropriations of empire. For those already engaged with modern art, the association of formal expressiveness with authenticity led to substantial revaluation of the generally non-naturalistic images produced by tribal cultures. Recognition of the formal inventiveness—the originality—of such images involved reconsideration of their supposed primitivism...artists now claimed kinship with their supposedly unsophisticated counterparts in pursuit of the authentic grounds of feeling and expression hidden behind the veil of appearances.' See Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, 'The Legacy of Symbolism', in *Art Theory, 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2002 pp. 15–16.

7. In 1942–43, Sidney Nolan spent twenty-two months in an army training camp in regional Victoria before going AWOL. During this time he experimented with approaches to landscape painting and read the writings of European Modernists. See Ann Stephen, Andrew McNamara and Philip Goad in 'Sidney Nolan (1917–1992), Faithful Words' 1943, in *Modernism & Australia: Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917–1967*, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne University Publishing, Melbourne, 2006, pp. 447–48.

8. Art historian Andrew Sayers says that 'in the 1943 self-portrait the images imposed on the face create a landscape: in the lower part we can read the rooftops and smoking chimneys Nolan has been painting in Ballarat; the eyes are blue Wimmera lakes; and above them are furrowed horizons of wheatfields and the desert beyond.' See 'Me Myself I', National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, September 2001 <https://www.portrait.gov.au/magazines/1/me-myself-i>, accessed 6 January 2022.

9. Dean Cross, email to the author, 20 January 2022.

10. Dean Cross in conversation with the author, 11 January 2022.

11. *The Rite of Spring in Rehearsal* (The Royal Ballet) dancer Claudia Dean, with rehearsal director Dame Monica Mason, YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZ97W_rRGiQ&t=287s, accessed 10 January 2022.



The Chosen One seized by Elders, scene from Kenneth MacMillan & Sidney Nolan's *The Rite of Spring*. Photograph by Axel Poignant 1962, printed in 1962, courtesy of the Axel Poignant Archive, London





Biography

Dean Cross (b. 1986, Australia) was raised on Ngunnawal/Ngambri Country and is a Worimi man through his paternal bloodline.

Cross is motivated by the understanding that his practice sits within a continuum of the oldest living culture on Earth and enacts First Nations sovereignty through expanded contemporary art methodologies. Through his work he aims to traverse the poetic and the political in a nuanced choreography of form and ideas.

Multi-disciplinary in approach, Cross works across painting, sculpture, video and photography. His artistic career commenced as a contemporary dancer and choreographer and he subsequently trained as a visual artist, graduating with a Bachelor of Visual Arts from Sydney College of the Arts, and First-Class Honours from the School of Art and Design, Australian National University.

Cross has exhibited widely across Australia and beyond. His most recent solo exhibitions include *Icarus, My Son*, Goulburn Regional Art Gallery and Carriageworks, Sydney, in 2021; *Dean Cross: A Sullen Perfume*, Yavuz Gallery, Sydney and *I Love You, I'm Sorry*, Firstdraft, Sydney, in 2020. Group exhibitions include *2022 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art: Free/State*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; *From Impulse to Action*, Bundanon, New South Wales in 2022; *Primavera 2021: Young Australian Artists*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; *Ramsay Art Prize 2021*, Art Gallery of South Australia, *Eucalyptusdom*, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney; all 2021; *27th Hatched: National Graduate Show*, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, Perth, 2018 and *Taranathi*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2016.

His work is held in numerous public and private collections including the Art Gallery of South Australia, National Gallery of Victoria and the Queensland University of Technology Art Museum.

Cross is represented by Yavuz Gallery, Sydney and Singapore.

List of works

Dean Cross
Sometimes I Miss the Applause 2022
HD video with sound, 8:38 mins
Courtesy the artist and Yavuz Gallery, Singapore and Sydney
© Dean Cross.

Curator's acknowledgements

It has been a pleasure and a privilege to work with Dean Cross on this important and timely commission *Sometimes I Miss the Applause*. I commend Dean on the creation of an engaging and critically compelling project that incisively attends to contemporary Australia and to the construction of the nation's history, and would also like to recognise Dean's unwavering commitment to the project throughout a period of sustained uncertainty. I extend my appreciation to Heide's dedicated team of staff and volunteers for their contributions to the development and public reception of this presentation. Thank you to Julia Powles for her adept exhibition management and to the talented installation and technical team: Carly Fisher, Patrick Pantano, Rob Graham and Damien Perkins. For the publication I thank Michael Gibb for the elegant design, Artistic Director Lesley Harding for her insightful copy editing and Head Curator Kendrah Morgan for supporting this project from inception.

A special thank you to generous donors Phil Taylor from Pressroom Philanthropy and Clive Scott from Sofitel Melbourne on Collins for their invaluable support and patronage and to Development Director Barb Taylor for her stewardship.

Dean Cross: *Sometimes I Miss the Applause*
Curated by Melissa Keys
Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne
Kerry Gardner & Andrew Myer Project Gallery
5 February – 29 May 2022

ISBN: 978-1-921330-79-7
© 2022 Heide Museum of Modern Art, the artist,
author, designer and photographer

This book is copyright. Apart from any use permitted under the Copyright Act 1968 and subsequent amendments, no part may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means whatsoever without the prior permission of the copyright owners.



Catalogue design: Michael Gibb
Copy editing: Lesley Harding
Photography: Christian Capurro

Exhibition partners

PRESSROOM
PHILANTHROPY

SOFITEL
HOTELS & RESORTS

Heide Museum of Modern Art
7 Templestowe Road, Bulleen
Victoria 3105, Australia
T + 61 3 9850 1500
heide.com.au

Heide Museum of Modern Art acknowledges the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation on whose land Heide is located. We pay respect to their Elders past and present and recognise the rich traditions and continuing creative cultures of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia.





HEIDE
MUSEUM
OF MODERN
ART