

# Curtis Taylor

# Untitled (Uura)

This exhibition is dedicated to my  
Nana Karnu Nancy Taylor



Photo: Peter Cheng

**Curtis Taylor** is a Martu artist who grew up between Bidyadanga in the Kimberley Region, and Parnngurr in the East Pilbara. Currently based in Perth, over the past decade Taylor has developed a distinct practice that spans sculptural installation, painting and filmmaking. He presents urgent narratives that speak across generations, exploring identity, language, cultural practice and responsibility.

Taylor is an integral member of a generation of artists from the Pilbara Region who have asserted the strength of their culture and ongoing connection to country through vital projects such as *Yiwarra Kuju: the Canning Stock Route*, National Museum of Australia and FORM (2010-2013); *We don't need a map: A Martu experience of the Western Desert*, Fremantle Arts Centre (2012-2016); *Dream Mine Time*, FORM Gallery (2018); and *In Cahoots: artists collaborate across Country*, Fremantle Arts Centre (2017-2019). Taylor was part of the creative team working with Lynette Wallworth for *Collisions*, PICA (2017).

Recent projects include: *The National 2019: New Australian Art*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney alongside collaborator Ishmael Marika, and The Sydney Film Festival 2019 with film making partner Nathan Mewett. Taylor won 'Best Australian Short Film' for the 2019 Flickerfest for his film *Yulubidiyi – Until the End*.

Perth Cultural Centre  
51 James St Northbridge  
pica.org.au | 9228 6300  
Gallery Open Tue – Sun | 10am – 5pm



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19 October – 22 December 2019

The following text emerges from a conversation between Curtis Taylor and Glenn Iseger-Pilkington on October 3, 2019.

*Untitled (Uura)* and the works that comprise the exhibition operate in a number of languages and vernaculars, with modes of presentation speaking to both the museum and the white box gallery. Written and spoken word appears in both *Martu wangka* and English, and materials range from soft emu feathers and large carved wooden forms to red-neon coffins, self-portraits made of plaster and large format film projections. The exhibition is a declaration of the many spaces that Curtis Taylor occupies in life and in practice.

The title of Curtis Taylor's solo exhibition, *Untitled (Uura)*, is in itself poignant and telling. Its state of being untitled is a nod to the artworld, and to those practitioners who intentionally leave their works without a name for whatever reason, but simultaneously the title critiques practices in museums and galleries across the world. In these spaces, Indigenous Australian works of art and material culture are often publicly displayed with labels that simply state 'artist unknown' or 'unattributed' along with an estimated date of making. In some cases, works are labelled 'artist once known', as a way of paying tribute to the maker, and marking the loss of information resulting from various systems of colonialism, or the overt omission of key artist details collected during acquisition. For Taylor this disregard of the maker, and the reduction of cultural value that he sees in each of these museum labels evokes a great sadness. Equally this feeds the fire which propels him to make new *Martu* objects and artworks to fill these spaces, works offered together with comprehensive artist details and artwork information.

*I was interested in seeing works and objects in museums which are far away from country, countrymen and families and I was really sad to see them in these confined spaces. For me one way to bring them alive again is to make them again and to show them.* – Curtis Taylor, 2019

Taylor moves beyond the critique of the spaces that display Indigenous Australian material, employing works in the exhibition to reveal elements of ceremony in ways that preserve requirements for privacy around ritual, while offering abstracted forms which speak to ceremonial use or the fashioning of certain materials. These provide us a glimpse into the materiality of ceremony. In many ways, this revealing of certain elements is an act of reclaiming agency from non-Indigenous spaces where people encounter Indigenous cultures. Taylor takes the role of curator of his own culture, he decides what can and can't be shown, redacting those elements that fall beyond what we are allowed to know.

This can be seen in Taylor's significant new work *Marlkrri Jina Karpyil (Death of a Featherfoot)*, 2019. This work is comprised of a commanding life-sized neon coffin, with red light cascading across the room, accompanied by a bed of delicate emu feathers placed within the coffin, upon which a number of handmade elements have been placed. Positioned above the coffin are crucifix-like forms, that speak to both *Martu* and western mortuary practices. The work speaks to knowledge of the *Jina-karpyil* or Featherfoot, and conversations that Taylor has had throughout his life with family regarding the *Jina-karpyil*.

While deep knowledge around the *Jina-karpyil* is very much restricted to initiated men, knowledge of the featherfoot, men who move between physical and spiritual planes, is widely known across the Australian continent, however is often contextualised through a lens of folk lore, as a dis-reality. For Curtis however, a *Martu* man whose cultural life sees him occupy space for ceremony, the *Jina-karpyil* is very much a part of his reality, as real as any other aspect of his life. The work itself emerges from a dream, or vision he had, where he travelled to places and saw things that ignited his curiosity about the life and death of *Jina-karpyil*, so while it shares knowledge of Indigenous ceremony and culture with audiences, it is at the same time a document of a particular moment in his life.

Just as *Marlkrri Jina Karpyil (Death of a Featherfoot)* speaks to the ceremonial, Taylor has for the second time created a wall installation using his own blood, a practice that also emerges from Western Desert ceremony. In this work, he is both artist and medium, and honours his cultural legacy through the use of his and his ancestors' blood, while re-contextualising the intent of the act of letting one's own blood outside of a ceremonial space.

This documentation of particular moments in time continues in a series of works of plaster masks of Curtis' face united with large traditional forms made of timber and wool that are used during ceremony. These works seem quiet and still, they are a kind of three-dimensional photograph, yet they are documenting Curtis as he moves through ceremony. Without us attending, the works offer us controlled insight into ceremony, they allow us to bear witness, from afar.

Taylor has a strong interest in the casts and moulds of Aboriginal peoples' faces and bodies that are contained within museum collections across the world, having visited collections in Australia and Europe. Through the act of casting his own face he is reclaiming a practice which was historically used to document the living and the dead, giving it new purpose and intent, which makes sense for him.

From our conversation whilst previewing the work it is clear that the exhibition concerns itself with mortality, it asks us to look at our lives, our deaths and to ponder possibilities of our afterlives. From a personal point of view, Taylor has accepted death as a natural part of the life cycle, and has come to understand this through a life of cultural guidance. This understanding, coupled with the joy of living a full life, gives him a sense of confidence in approaching works that explore mortality, the universal truth that comes to us all.

Taylor has included a number of intentionally hidden installations within the exhibition – audiences have to seek them out. Two peepholes have been drilled into the wall, and behind each of those runs a pornographic film, the first of a tourist performing a striptease on the top of Uluru in the Northern Territory, the second of a digeridoo or *yidaki* being used as a sex toy.

While both films offer immediate shock value, in this context, they are exhibited alongside newly created works and cultural objects informed by more than 40,000 years of continuous culture. Their inclusion speaks to continued disregard of Indigenous ways of knowing and being. The also make comment upon the sexualisation and objectification of Indigenous peoples, our ways of life, our physical bodies and our sacred places.

*Untitled (Uura)* seeks to reveal the personal and the collective, the individual and the community. Equally, it defines clearly to audiences the spaces that Curtis Taylor occupies as an artist and as an Indigenous man whose life has been informed through culture, all the while navigating two worlds. Naturally, there are tensions throughout the exhibition – public and secret, collective and individual, outsider and insider – but these are critical in understanding the work and understanding the artist. These tensions mirror cultural disquiet and deeply entrenched racism that lurks, ever-present, beneath the surface of Australian society, emerging from a human propensity to stereotype, systematic mis-education, ignorance and Eurocentrism.

*Untitled (Uura)* is an offering to the informed and the uninformed, a gift in which Taylor honestly and clearly shares his most personal spaces, cultural selfhood, realities, politics and agenda, in a way that encourages audiences to take time to look closely, to seek to understand, while paying tribute to his ancestors who continue to guide him through this life.

Glenn Iseger-Pilkington, 2019

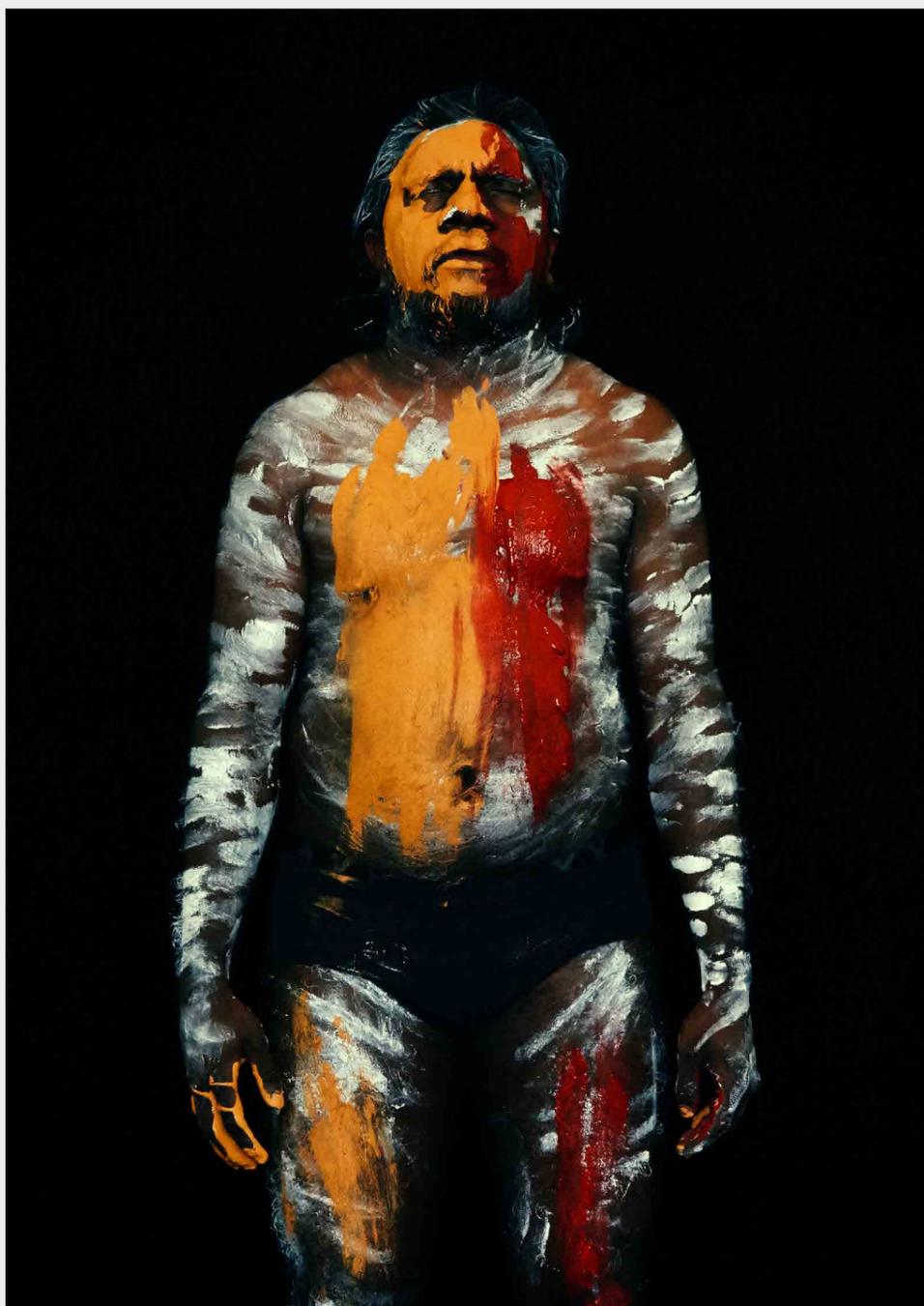


Image: Curtis Taylor, *Portrait*, 2019. Photo: Hank Gibney and Rob Simeon



Image: Curtis Taylor, *Nyunyjila – (Tongues)*, 2018. Carved wood sourced from the artist's Country, iron ore dust, ochre and paint, dimensions variable. Photo: Bewley Shaylor