



Restricted Images: Made with the Warlpiri of Central Australia

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Restricted Images: Made with the Warlpiri of Central Australia

Patrick Waterhouse, 2018, SPBH editions

Gemma-Rose Turnbull

Patrick Waterhouse's work *Restricted Images* (2018) seeks to use collaborative methodologies to renegotiate a history of culturally invasive documentary practices in Aboriginal communities, by "symbolically returning ... the agency over their own images" (SPBH editions, Self Publish Be Happy 2018). This work, made partly with Aboriginal artists at the Warlukurlangu art centre, is Waterhouse's response to a history of colonialist photographs made of Aboriginal people and places. He specifically references *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, published in 1899 to significant attention from European audiences. Anthropologists Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen sought to "set forth an account of the customs and social organisation of certain of the tribes inhabiting Central Australia" (Spencer and Gillen 1899, i). Their studies treated Aboriginal bodies as research material, violating cultural protocols by depicting sacred sites, and publishing photographs of people who had died.

Waterhouse seeks to address these significant representational issues by inviting artists from Warlpiri country in Central Australia to intervene on images he has made of them. The Yeundumu and Nyirpi participants "restrict and amend" (Waterhouse 2018, 1) his photographs through painting, and the combination of visual approaches is compelling. His black and white photographs are made striking with the additions, primarily in the form of Aboriginal dot or Papunya methods, such as dot patterns, colour, and other graphic techniques that are elements of traditional storytelling. The paint frequently conceals the identity of subject and place, but one of the last plates, "Whiskey is my dog," made with Ruth Nungarrayi Spencer leaves identity intact. The photograph has a magical quality—Waterhouse has caught the sun low to the horizon, throwing long shadows, which stretch down the curved spine of the dog half hidden in grass, and transform the woman subject's hair into a light burst (she is presumably Nungarrayi Spencer, but it is not clear if artists specifically worked on images of themselves). Her painting, fine white dots almost hidden in the leopard print dress, rounded cheek and curly matriarchal halo, transform the woman into a heavenly body. In my



RESTRICTED IMAGES
Made with the Warlpiri of Central Australia

Patrick Waterhouse

SPBH Editions

Figure 1. Waterhouse, Patrick. 2018. Patrick Waterhouse: Restricted Images: Made with the Warlpiri of Central Australia. London: SPBH Editions.



Figure 2. Patrick Waterhouse restricted with Ruth Nungarrayi Spencer, *Whiskey is my dog*, 2018. From: Patrick Waterhouse: *Restricted Images: Made with the Warlpiri of Central Australia*. London: SPBH Editions. Plate 130.

reading, she is a constellation of stars in the desert night sky, an earthy sliver of the Milky Way. It is a work which balances both artist voices well.

The trope of participants responding to their own image has a small but significant history in documentary practices, in the works of photographers including Wendy Ewald, Eric Gottesman and the Sudden Flowers collective, and even myself.¹ Jim Goldberg's *Rich and Poor* (1985) is a notable early example for having subjects comment directly on photographs. The handwritten notes on portraits of people from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in their San Francisco homes greatly deepens audience insight into what might otherwise be well-rendered

but common portrayals of wealth and poverty. Most significantly these comments are often about what his choice of portrait depicts, and how accurate the subject believes the representation is.²

This retrieves some of the representational power from Goldberg, rendering his role as the invisible observer who has special capacity to see the story, less absolute. But subject handwriting is also another way of authenticating the vision of the photo maker. The danger of this approach is that it implicates those people pictured, presenting them as the willing co-signers of 'their own' representation. When seeking to evaluate practices like these, it is important to address just how much actual

control the represented have over the final image published to public view. It is easy to slip into disingenuous modes of 'collaboration' under the auspice of a term which is broadly used, and poorly defined in the documentary field. Here, given the history of heroising the photographer as 'special seer,' (Wells and Price 2015, 19) it is crucial to be critical of projects in which aesthetic resolve pretends a narrative of collaboration which may not exist. Natasha Christopher describes this as promoting a "feigned authenticity" to captivate the viewing audience (Christopher 2014, 88), and this is endemic as the term 'collaboration' becomes contemporarily popular.

Spencer and Gillen's original work sought to pay special attention "to matters concerned with the social organisation of the tribes." (1899, i) The photographs made by Waterhouse over four years are also clearly analysing the contemporary social organisation of the people under his gaze. The silhouettes return us to anthropological image constructs, and other photographs seek to illustrate the conditions of living in a politically contested place. But more significantly for this 'collaborative' project there is no mention of the process of making this work: how the images to be painted on were chosen, nor how much autonomy participants had over the ways in which image interventions could be made. We don't know if every painted image is presented, or if the process of final image selection and curation was done by painters *and* photographer. For a project which aims to symbolically return image-agency, neither Waterhouse nor his publisher have given us enough information to evaluate how much ownership has actually been returned to the Aboriginal artists this work validates itself with. We are shown a refined aesthetic dialogue, but are not given insight into how the image–outcome represents the broader political dialogue between artist and participants (Orton 2019).

At best, collaborative approaches to documentary image making can be a chance to reconfigure structures of power by seeking to address colonialist, racist and sexist notions of photographic authorship. At worst, these works can be misleading,

tokenistic, and reinforcing of problematic stereotypes. Documentary photographers have always asked us to trust their vision of the world while having great power to conceal their means of acquisition. Using collaboration to address issues like agency in photo-making must mean the artist loses the privilege to keep viewers from the ideological structures which shape the production and experience of the photograph (Rounthwaite 2015, 60). In this kind of work it is crucial for collaborative projects to make visible the process of creation, considering it an element as important as a resolved image outcome.

Notes

1. In collaboration with Emily Fitzgerald.
2. A long-standing favourite is OJ's response: "This picture does not reflect my personality."

Gemma-Rose Turnbull studies collaborative photographic methodologies as a PhD candidate at the University of Queensland. She runs the website *Photography as a Social Practice*, and co-wrote the *MA Photography and Collaboration* with Anthony Luvera at Coventry University. An authenticity read of this review was kindly done by Ms Treesa Heath, Indigenous New Career Academic, School of Education, University of Newcastle.

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