

Gordon Bennett's
The Aboriginalist (Identity of Negation: Flotsam) 1994

Gordon Bennett (1955–2014) is regarded as one of Australia's most important contemporary artists. His Aboriginal heritage was integral to his exploration of culture and identity.

Gordon Bennett was born in Monto, Queensland in 1955. His father, Don Bennett, was an Anglo-Celtic migrant and his mother Grace (née Bradley) was a Birri Gubba/Darambal woman, though Gordon was unaware of this until he was a teenager. Grace had been raised in an orphanage as part of the stolen generation, and her true identity was kept a secret to protect the family from the racism towards Aboriginal Australians that was tragically common at the time. Gordon was raised in the suburbs and his Eurocentric education alienated him from a vital part of his personal history. He came to art later in life, leaving his job as a linesman with Telecom to pursue art studies at the Queensland College of Art at the age of thirty. His work questions both history and identity, highlighting the bias in traditionally accepted colonial history as taught in Australian schools from the 1960s until quite recent times.

The Heide Collection includes two of Gordon Bennett's works; remarkable in their succinct encapsulation of complex ideas. They offer important readings of Australia's colonial history and how its brutality impacted and continues to impact our communities.

Analysing an artwork



Gordon Bennett
The Aboriginalist (Identity of Negation: Flotsam) 1994
synthetic polymer paint on
canvas and wood, reflective glass
3 parts: overall installation dimensions
226 x 192 x 100 cm
Heide Museum of Modern Art
© Estate of Gordon Bennett

What does the title of the work suggest? What mood, tone or feeling does it provoke?

What does the word 'flotsam' mean?

How might Bennett be giving the word additional, implied meaning in the context of his work?

Mabo Day occurs annually on 3 June to commemorate Eddie Koiki Mabo (1936–1992).

Mabo was a Torres Strait Islander who campaigned for eighteen years for Indigenous land rights. His legal battle culminated in the landmark decision of the High Court of Australia, which, six months after Mabo's death on 3 June 1992, overturned the legal fiction of *terra nullius*. The European concept of *terra nullius*—or 'land belonging to no one'—had characterised Australian law regarding ownership of land and title since James Cook's voyage in 1770.

The Aboriginalist (Identity as Negation: Flotsam) shows an Aboriginal man carrying a crate to shore, presumably from the grounded row boat in the background. The crate is labelled as if it contains a commercial product branded 'Nulla-Nulla,' with the tagline, 'Australia's White Hope, The Best Household Soap'. The crate has an image of an Aboriginal person with a sign labelled 'DIRT' hung around their neck, and being struck on the head with a boat paddle. Their face is framed with boat paddles and the words, 'Knocks dirt off the head' are written around the outside of the frame.

What do you think the words 'Nulla-Nulla' refer to?

How does Gordon's use of this text and imagery reference Australia's history and treatment of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?

For further information about Eddie Mabo, this is a useful resource:

<https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Lets-Talk-Mabo.pdf>

The crate in Bennett's artwork is also rendered as a 3D sculptural object placed in front of the painting—emphasising its physical nature as a 'real' product. The lid has been taken off the crate and rests on a metal grid (a motif often found in Bennett's works) atop a board painted to look like a rocky landscape.

What do you think the metal grid represents?

The crate's lid is covered in reflective glass that functions as a mirror, and has been carefully positioned in the installation. What do you think is its symbolic purpose in creating meaning for the viewer?

Consider style. Pop art was highly accessible to European audiences and widely recognised in the 1980s. Here Bennett uses pointillism, a pop style made famous by Roy Lichtenstein that suggests the Benday dots of the mass reproduction of images, while also referencing the well-known dot painting style of Aboriginal Western Desert painting.

Why do you think Bennett chose to appropriate these styles and what meaning does their use communicate to viewers?

How has Bennett used the Art Elements of colour, tone, shape and form and how do these add meaning for the viewer?

How has Bennett used the Art Principles of movement, unity, scale and proportion and how do these add meaning for the viewer?

If you could interview Gordon Bennett, what questions would you ask him?

*[Perspective] is an ideological fabrication ...
both a mirror of the world and a mirror of the self.
Aborigines caught in this system of representation
remain 'frozen' as objects within the mapped
territory of a European perceptual grid.*

—Gordon Bennett, 'The manifest toe' in Ian McLean & Gordon Bennett,
The Art of Gordon Bennett, Craftsman House, 1996, p. 36