

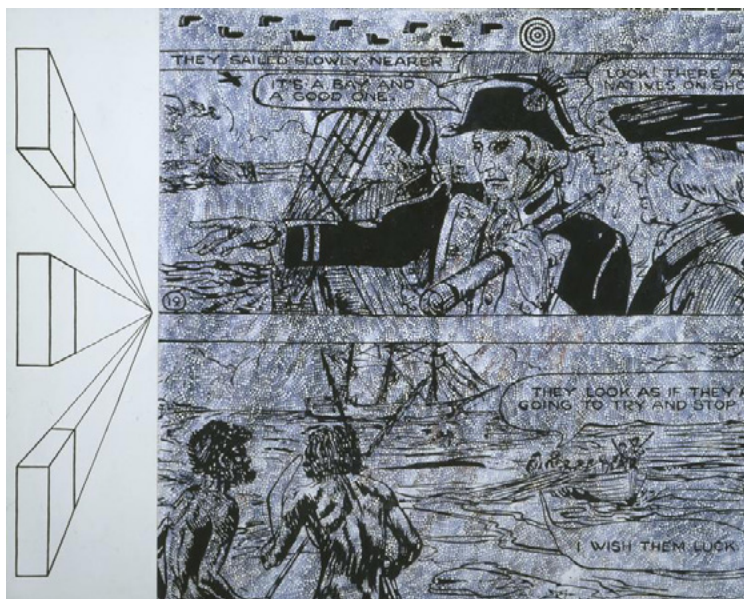
Gordon Bennett

Prologue: They Sailed Slowly Nearer 1988

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.



Gordon Bennett
Prologue: They Sailed Slowly Nearer 1988
oil on canvas
118.2 x 148.3 cm
Heide Museum of modern Art
The Baillieu Myer Collection of the 80s

Analysing an artwork

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

Bennett created *Prologue: They Sailed Slowly Nearer* in response to the bicentennial celebrations of the arrival of the First Fleet, led by Captain Arthur Phillip at Botany Bay in 1788. First Nations peoples increasingly call for the beginning of what Anglo-Australian history has termed 'settlement' to be acknowledged as an 'invasion'.

The dialogue on the painting between Captain Arthur Philip and a crew member reads:

“It’s a bay—and a good one.”

“Look! There are natives on shore!”

“They look as if they are going to try and stop us.”

“I wish them luck.”

Whose viewpoint is being highlighted here? What other viewpoints does the artwork suggest and how does Bennett present them?

Considering Bennett's childhood, how does it change your interpretation as a viewer to learn that the image is a reworking of images of Cook's landing used in many school textbooks, such as the image below?



Emmanuel Phillips Fox
Landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay, 1770 1902
oil on canvas
192.2 x 265.4 cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Gilbee Bequest, 1902

Consider the composition of Bennett's artwork, and what elements are foregrounded. The British colonisers are juxtaposed with Aboriginal figures, one image stacked above the other. The geometric forms to the left draw the viewer's attention to the horizon line as well to as the upper and lower sections of the painting.

How does composition impact your interpretation of the work?

Consider style. Pop art was highly accessible to European audiences and widely recognised in the 1980s. Here Bennett uses pop style pointillism and the speech bubbles of comic books to encase the dialogue spoken by the British colonisers. The pointillism suggests the mass reproduction of imagery through printing while also referencing the well-known dot painting style of Aboriginal Western Desert painting.

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

What might the footprints at the top of the artwork symbolise or represent?

How has Bennett used the Art Elements of shape, colour, tone and line 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?

*If I were to choose a single word to describe
my art practice it would be the word question.*

*If I were to choose a single word to describe
my underlying drive it would be freedom.*

*This should not be regarded as an heroic proclamation.
Freedom is a practice.*

*It is a way of thinking in other ways to those
we have become accustomed to.*

*To be free is to be able to question the way
power is exercised, disputing claims to domination.*

*Such questioning involves our 'ethos',
our ways of being, or becoming who we are.*

*To be free we must be able to question
the ways our own history defines us.*

—Gordon Bennett, 'The manifest toe' in Ian McLean & Gordon Bennett,
The Art of Gordon Bennett, Craftsman House, 1996, pp. 10–12.