

Thomas Bock and Edmund Clark: Savagery and Redemption in Ikon's criminal portraiture, colonial and contemporary

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Collection: Ikon

Two forthcoming exhibitions at Ikon juxtapose portraits of and by violent criminals, in the nineteenth-century penal colony of Tasmania, and Edmund Clark's contemporary photography at Grendon Prison.

Key words: Colonialism, Outsider Art, Art Therapy, Australian Art, Thomas Bock, Edmund Clark.

This paper will discuss the curatorial juxtaposition of Thomas Bock and Edmund Clark in adjacent spaces of Ikon, by Jonathan Watkins, the gallery's director. The nineteenth-century convict artist Bock (fig.1) and the contemporary photographer Clark (fig.2) are situated on adjacent levels. Clark's photography of spaces of incarceration draws on forensic architecture; previous subjects include Guantanamo Bay, the CIA Secret Prisons Program and the detention of terrorism suspects in England on control orders. Yet he has spent three years inside Grendon Prison with prisoners, prison officers and therapeutic staff, in therapy meetings and art workshops, thereby reflecting the effect of the life term behind bars in his portraits of the interred. Thomas Bock (Birmingham c.1793–1855 Tasmania) was transported to the penal colony of Van Diemen's Land in 1823, and is regarded as one of the most important early colonial artists in Australia.

Though notions of redemption from savagery and crime are central to these Ikon exhibitions, the religious icon is far from what the Ikon Gallery represents. These images of and by criminals, in a process of redemption through art, are characteristic of the politically and aesthetically adventurous program that makes this central Birmingham contemporary art institution unique to England. Since his exhibition *Stories of Australian Art* in 1988, Jonathan Watkins has pioneered a particular interest in Australian art for eighteen years at Ikon (an anomaly in the UK).¹ He is the reason that the first ever exhibition outside of Australia of Thomas Bock's work comes to Birmingham from 7 December 2017 – 11 March 2018. It then travels to Hobart to repatriate to Tasmania for the first time the works by Bock which have been housed at the British Museum since the nineteenth century.

Thomas Bock and Edmund Clark's In Place of Hate is a parallel hanging of portraits from the nineteenth-century convict artist's oeuvre, and portraits of criminals made by the contemporary artist in Grendon Prison (2015–17). The life stories of the Grendon prisoners today are tragedies that echo the nineteenth-century penal colony.² It is also a restitution of

the category of the incarcerated, outsider artist (Bock) to the central Birmingham white cube gallery, in which the works can be reassessed in new terms. These two displays enable Bock's works to be contextualized in a transnational framework beyond the concerns raised in previous scholarship.³ 'Bock's portraits do not produce the ruggedness and savagery of the original people' the historian Norman Plomley wrote in 1965, raising the question as to the very terms in which savagery and redemption are seen to be evidenced and overcome in artistic practice.⁴ Bock's portraits of Aboriginal people are sensitive and personal (fig.3, fig.4), individuals can well be recognized and a new set of papers on these images alone will be presented in December 2018 at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Ikon and the Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, Kings College London. At Ikon, Julie Gough, a descendent of one of the Indigenous portrait subjects, will discuss Bock with Jane Stewart on Tuesday 12 December, 6–8pm. At the Barber Institute of Fine Arts on Wednesday 13 December, Gough will present a research paper on Bock [5]. On Friday 15 December, the Menzies Centre will host a conference with papers by Gaye Sculthorpe on Aboriginal Tasmanian men and women portrayed by Bock; Malcolm Dick (University of Birmingham) on Birmingham at the time of Bock; Judith Allen on the Intent to Cause Miscarriage (the crime that Bock was deported for); David Meredith on the transportation system and Van Diemen's Land; Clare Anderson on convicts and penal colonies in nineteenth-century science and collecting; Julie Gough on Thomas Bock and his contemporaries' representation of Tasmanian Aboriginal people, from a contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal perspective; Jane Stewart on Bock and the history of art in Tasmania; Ian Henderson on art and sociability in Hobart Town (1830s–50s); Jonathan Watkins, and myself, on the exhibition.

In *Thomas Bock* we see portraits from Australia in the aesthetics of the Birmingham engraver returned to be on exhibition in Birmingham for the first time. To return just short of 200 years after the artist's deportation is a poetic spatial and temporal disjuncture. Bock himself is repatriated to the Birmingham that he would have seen so often in his mind's eye. His trial and the circumstances in which he was removed from his family in Birmingham is a trauma that drawing could only slightly calm, if at all. And yet that quiet sketchy redemption that an art practice seems to offer the incarcerated persists not only as the cliché of the prison, but perhaps because it is some way of memorializing and of offering tribute in a life that is stripped of most relations, 'in place of hate'. The perverse founding principle of Grendon Prison (established 1962, fig.5) is that the inmates agree to improve themselves, making a commitment to intensive group therapy and democratic decision-making, whilst holding each other to account, and this process has become strongly linked to art as therapy. The crimes committed by Grendon inmates are among the worst imaginable, and in an early conversation with Clark he spoke about the chilling gravity of shaking hands with violent murderers.⁵ It is these backgrounds that the artworks made in Clark's sessions often begin to explore. This is the therapeutic element in which drawings draw out the dark subjectivities of the interred, of the 'criminals'.⁶ These are largely far more heinous crimes than those committed by the convicts who were sent to Australia in the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries to build the colony on the premise that they had broken the social contract of the motherland. Of course, the motherland is not always as mothering as one might hope or need. The expulsion of her children into the harsh unknown of Australia is just one of the many vicious methods of mothering that England has shown over the years.

The conjunction of these two sets of portraits of and by inmates crystalizes a sense that the portrait and the self-portrait are mirrors of each other. Bock's portraits give us a view on a colonial society in Tasmania, including Aboriginal people, landscapes, and houses. Hung alongside portraits of contemporary prisoners they become indexes of masked affect that must have been powerful in a British penal colony, as the context I will outline below should show.

The appropriation and re-enactment of classical forms – of classical theatre, the *Orestia*, in Edmund Clark's installation – and the saccharine conventionalism of Bock's portraiture contrasts with the context of incarceration. The Aboriginal girl *Mathinna* (fig.1) in her pretty dress and Sunday smile quickly turns to the horror of the attempted genocide of all Tasmanian Aboriginal people.⁷ Thomas Bock and Governor Arthur had arrived in Tasmania (then Van Diemens Land) in the same year, 1824. As Governor for twelve years, Arthur is infamous for his penal policies and devious martial strategies in the Black War (1824–31) against the remaining Aboriginal people in Tasmania.⁸

Bock's portraits of Aboriginal people that form the core of the Ikon exhibition were commissioned from 1832 by George Augustus Robinson, the so-called 'conciliator'.⁹ As was so often the case in Australia, the Tasmanian Black War was not won in armed conflict, guerrilla tactics, nor through the record numbers of public hangings. The insidious violence of introduced diseases such as smallpox and influenza, and the exile from access to natural resources, made Robinson's 'friendly mission' a far more devastating plan than Governor Arthur's administration. As sovereign as the smiles in Bock's portraits are, the political context in which they are made is gruesome.

Attempting to pacify the long conflict between Indigenous people and British convicts and settlers, Governor Arthur turned to visual representation to help achieve his governance strategies.¹⁰ Additionally, the fact that the British administration perceived Tasmanian Indigenous people as 'savage' and 'uncivilized' meant repeatedly that the 'justice' proffered by Arthur's regime was brutal. Recourse to several examples demonstrates the frequently callous character of British treatment of Indigenous people despite the advertised redemption of their state of savagery.

The colonial government would make examples of hanged bushrangers like the infamous cannibal Alexander Pearce, whom Bock drew post-mortem on 19 July 1824.

Europeans had since settlement in 1803 committed atrocities against the Indigenous Tasmanians with impunity, yet commentators during the 1820s were already asserting that European hostility was justified in light of the acts of rape, torture and murder perpetrated by the dispossessed Indigenous Tasmanians. One story of inhumanity, lodged in Plomley's account, described an Indigenous woman being chained to a tree, forced to watch her husband murdered, and then wear his severed hands around her neck.¹¹ The Governor did not have the judicial power to prosecute free settlers for these crimes. He could only postpone the pardon of the convicts like Bock, who had been found guilty in Birmingham of deviously seducing a nineteen-year-old girl, getting her pregnant and then trying to affect a miscarriage on their child. Between 1803–53 around 75,000 convicts were transported to Tasmania. Bock is one of thousands of criminals who in his case bring Victorian portraiture, but also violence with them to the colony.

The incommensurability between crime and punishment for free white settlers in the Tasmanian colony is evidenced in many examples.¹² In another case of brutality perpetrated on a group of Indigenous women in November 1824, a convict received a punishment equivalent to what a slave would have received for insolence to his master – 25 lashes.¹³ The punishments also did not have the desired effect of terrifying the Indigenous tribes into obedience. Terror was – according to Arthur – to 'have the effect which no proffered measures of conciliation have been capable of inducing'. Yet this 'alternative of force' was 'no means of tranquilizing their vindictive feelings.'¹⁴ The euphemisms found in the text of Arthur's proclamations were obviously in contradiction to actual government policy.¹⁵ Hence after Arthur's hundreds of hangings there was an *increase* in the numbers of those Indigenous tribes who went to war against the government. There was some sympathy among the settlers in Tasmania for Aboriginal retaliations, with a growing sense that violent dispossession and ignorance of Indigenous modes of knowledge and ownership was an injustice to the Aborigines. As one colonial magazine put it in 1828 'our claim to the country was not exclusive, as the blacks had prior possession.'¹⁶ Another writer justified Indigenous murder of settlers by saying they were actually just 'following the example we have set them, and acting on the principle that *might is right*.'¹⁷

Illegal violence towards the Indigenous populations was in effect encouraged by January 1829 when Arthur called forth 'the most energetic measures on the part of the settlers themselves' to win the Black War. Words – the proffered measures of conciliation – could try to reconcile the unequal and dichotomous relation between winner and loser during the war for colonial expansion. They could not, however, change the dynamics of the war which at that time pitted a 5000-man army against around 1000 remaining Indigenous Tasmanians. Abuses and imbalances of power underlie both the situation of Aboriginal people in Australia and the Grendon inmates (who often as the therapy shows have suffered terrible abuse themselves). The delicacy with which the human subjects are treated in Bock inevitably reflects back on his own crimes even as they are so far from

representing them visually. The violence is potentially unseen in these quiet and careful portraits, but its presence is there.

The failure of Australia towards its Aboriginal owners is a lasting stain on the many administrations since. The fate of one convict from Birmingham and his potentially redeeming oeuvre draws a complex picture of colonial society at its inception. At the end of his career Bock turned to photography, working with daguerreotype, an early form of photography which produced images on a silvered copper plate. Early forms of photography are another point of resonance between Bock and Clark, the colonial and the contemporary artists in this exhibition. The haunting faces of Grendon's black and white self-portraits are taken through a pin hole camera that both redacts the individual features and reflects the cell they are locked in (fig.2). At Grendon, as in other British prisons, one cannot make images that reveal the identity of inmates or the infrastructure of the sites that might compromise their high levels of security. Hence the redaction of the face that is created by the slow writing of light through the pinhole camera has a double function.

In these parallel exhibitions, Ikon is a space to reflect on crime and the evangelical notions of redemption upon which both the colonial missionaries and Grendon's founders base their penitentiaries. Art is attributed a valuable role in the criminal's personal and civic process of 'civilization' in both institutions. Bringing them together gives a haunting portrait of violence across oceans and ages.

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Images

- Fig.1. Thomas Bock, *Mathinna* (1842), watercolour, 30.1 x 24.6 cm, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, presented by J. H. Clark, 1951.
- Fig.2. Edmund Clark, *In Place of Hate*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 6 December 2017–4 March 2018, ikon-gallery.org
- Fig.3 Thomas Bock, *Manalargenna* (1831–5), watercolour, 25.5 x 22.3 cm, Oc2006, Drg.61 ©The Trustees of the British Museum.
- Fig.4 Thomas Bock, *Woreddy* (aka Woureddy or Woorrady) (1831), graphite and watercolour, 24.4 x 20.6 cm, Oc2006, Drg.55 ©The Trustees of the British Museum.
- Fig.5 Edmund Clark, *In Place of Hate*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 6 December 2017– 4 March 2018, ikon-gallery.org

¹ He also curated the 11th Biennale of Sydney: Every Day, in 1998. Author's interview with Jonathan Watkins, 7 July 2017, Ikon Gallery Birmingham.

² See Alicia Stevens' work on the men's experiences of the 'therapeutic community': A. Stevens, *Offender Rehabilitation and Therapeutic Communities: Enabling change the TC way* (Abingdon, 2013). Also Leonidas Cheliotis (ed), *The Arts of Imprisonment: Control, Resistance and Empowerment* (Farnham, 2012).

³ This is a much more successful strategy than for example Tate's huge survey of Empire. See Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll and Natasha Eaton (eds) 'Artist and Empire: Part 1', *Third Text Forum* (2016), <http://thirdtext.org/artist-empire-tate>, accessed 22 September 2017.

⁴ N. J. B. Plomley (1965), cited in Diane Dunbar (ed), *Thomas Bock: Convict Engraver, Society Portraitist*, exhibition catalogue, Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery and the Australian National Gallery (Launceston and Canberra, 1991), p.41.

⁵ Conversation with the author at Koestler Trust Exhibition, Southbank Centre, 8 November 2015.

⁶ These ideas are explored further in the ongoing work with the law faculty at Oxford. See Mary Bosworth and Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, 'Art and Criminology of the Border: The making of the immigration detention archive', *Oxford Artistic and Practice Based Research Platform*, 1 (2017), www.oarplatform.com/art-criminology-border-making-immigration-detention-archive, accessed 10 October 2017.

⁷ Mathinna is the subject of Richard Flanagan's novel, *Wanting* (New York, 2008). On the contested definition of genocide see Adam Jones, *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction*. (London, 2010).

⁸ Penelope Edmonds, "'Failing in Every Endeavour to Conciliate": Governor Arthur's Proclamation Boards to the Aborigines, Australian Conciliation Narratives and their Transnational Connections', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 35.2 (2011), pp.201–18.

⁹ N. J. B. Plomley (ed), *Friendly Mission: the Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson* (Hobart, 1966).

¹⁰ Gaye Sculthorpe, 'The Ethnographic Collection of George Augustus Robinson', *Memoirs of the Museum of Victoria: Anthropology & History*, 1.1 (1990), pp.1–95; N. J. B. Plomley, 'A list of Tasmanian Aboriginal Material in Collections in Europe', *Records of the Queen Victoria Museum (Launceston)*, 15 (1962), pp.1–17.

¹¹ N. J. B. Plomley, 'Aborigines and Governors', *Bulletin of the Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies*, 3.1 (1990–1), pp.1–18.

¹² For a recent legal perspective see Desmond Manderson, 'Not Yet: Aboriginal People and the Deferral of the Rule of Law', *Arena Journal*, 29–30 (2008), pp.219–272.

¹³ George Arthur, 'Despatch to Under Secretary R.W. Hay, 20 November 1830', Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office, 280/25, f.426.

¹⁴ James Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians, or, The Black War of Van Diemen's Land*

(London, 1870), p.77. Bonwick reports that the execution of 'Jack and Dick' failed to induce terror and thus obedience.

¹⁵ This is the subject of Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, *Partial Proclamations*, HD video (2006–2012) <https://vimeo.com/44032596>, accessed 10 October 2017. See also Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, *Art in the Time of Colony* (Farnham, 2014), chapter 2.

¹⁶ Roger Oldfield, 'New Holland', *South-Asian Register*, 2 (1828), p.115.

¹⁷ Robert Lyon, *Australia: An Appeal to the World on Behalf of the Younger Branch of the Family of Shem* (Sydney, 1839); Stuart Banner, *Possessing the Pacific: Land, Settlers, and Indigenous People from Australia to Alaska* (Cambridge MA, 2007), p.328, note 34.