
trouble
may 2013

Bindi Cole
Faith In God & Prison

by **Naima Morelli**

Bindi Cole's voice sounds like that of a young girl telling a secret to her best friend in the schoolyard, but the quiet café near the railway where we were sitting didn't look like a school canteen at all. Likewise Bindi's walk through life has been far from that of a naïve girl strolling from classroom to cafeteria.

Bindi has passed through a troubled family history, through drugs and prison, she has gone through it all, but in the end she found hope and redemption in photography, challenging stereotypes, and consecration from the art world.

You can't see her turbulent past on her face just as you can't see she's an aboriginal woman of Wathaurung descent. Her face is smooth, her skin is fair. Her peaceful expression changed to cheerful when they brought her the banana pancake with chocolate and warm coffee she'd been waiting for. But what you cannot see in Bindi's face you can see in her art. >>

image this spread and previous page: *EH5452* 2012, digital video (still).

> Cole started making art as a photographer, mostly talking about her aboriginal legacy. In one of her latest artworks, *EH5452*, you can see a picture of her from the period in which she was in prison. Her smile in that photograph has nothing of a woman deprived of her liberty. It's a hopeful and quiet smile that corresponds to what she proclaims as her attitude toward life: "I'm the eternal optimist. I can't help it," she says.

Naima Morelli: *You studied photography at TAFE. Why have you decided to become an artist that used photography as medium, instead of, let's say, a photoreporter?*

Bindi Cole: At first when I studied photography I didn't know that I was going to use it as an expression of my voice in an artistic way. After I finished studying I actually thought about it. Do I want to be a commercial photographer, do I want to be a journalist, do I want to do social documentary? After thinking about it for years I realized that I wanted to do art. I was in Europe in that period and I wrote it in my journal and diaries. I remember reading it not long ago: "I've decided that what I'm going to do with my photography is to make art. I want to have a voice, I want to say something, I will use it in that way."

NM: *Do you think that your work* Sistagirls *(about the aboriginal transgender community of the Northern Territory's Tiwi Islands) has a sort of photojournalistic approach or were you interested to express other things?*

BC: I think that people sometimes look at *Sistagirls* and think it's documentary, but it's not because it's staged. I mean, apart from them being transgender they would never dress up like that. The whole setting, the costuming, the makeup, the hair, the lights, the positioning was all entirely staged. So it's not documentary as such even though it is capturing something real. It's a combination of taking something that exists and giving it a voice. But those works were constructed.

NM: *What about the artworks that the* Sistagirls *have in the photographs? They always pose with a painting or a statue.*

BC: I was inspired by ethnographic photography. In Australia we have a lot of ethnographic photography of aboriginal people from the early eighteen hundreds right through. And if you look at some of that particularly of artists from the photographer J.W. Lindt, you will see similarities with what I've done. So I was really inspired by capturing-the-exotic, which in a similar way was not real, because he staged it. Lindt said: "Here are the aboriginals from Australia" but his presentation was fake. I did the same thing. But at the same time I was celebrating it. I also gave them ownership over certain elements of their photographs and things like that, and people know who they are. They are not nameless people, they are celebrated through these photographs.

NM: *In your work you often challenge current views of aboriginal issues and perspectives. Do you seek to actually change people's minds or simply open them a little?*

BC: I don't know that I have the power to change the way someone thinks, but I know what I do has the power to create discourse and discussion. Some of the things I looked at in my earlier works were kind of taboo subjects. No one wanted to speak about those things at first. Now, a couple of years later, everybody is able to speak about it openly. It's nice to think that my work has contributed to that discussion. >>

"I'm quite fearless when it comes to having a voice but I'm nervous when it comes to being accepted or rejected."

> **NM:** *The installation* I forgive you *can be related to your personal experience but also with the wider issue of aboriginal people and colonial history, the Stolen Generation too. You said: "As I forgave I was able to take my power back." Could you expand on this concept?*

BC: I learned that when I've been through a traumatic experience that wasn't my fault. I develop resentment and anger about that. If I hold on to that for a long period of time, it creates dysfunction in me. When that experience happens it is like I'm disempowered, and for as long as I hold onto the resentment and anger towards that experience I stay disempowered. I'm still a victim to it. Even if it's ten years later I'm so angry and hurt by it that I'm still the victim. Forgiveness is about saying: "I will no longer be a victim of that situation, I'm going to take my power back, I release it. It's not going to live in my head anymore."

below: *I Forgive You* 2012, MDF and feathers.

NM: *In* Post-us *you collected original propaganda posters from the eighteen hundreds to the fifties and you painted on them, replacing the white models with Koorie models. How did people react to this artwork?*

BC: The aboriginal community loved it. Because they get that immediately. We have not really seen that kind of advertising before, because Australian television is very white, homogenous, you know. It's always hard for me to answer how people react to things, because I don't really know.

NM: *But you are there at your openings, so I guess you get a certain kind of feedback…*

BC: I hate openings. I really don't like them. I go, but I'm uncomfortable. In fact at the opening of *Post-us* I almost hid at the back of the gallery. I'm okay with people but when it comes to an opening and it's my work, and everybody is there … it's too intense for me! If I look at all my work instead of just one series there's not much in the middle. Most people love it or hate it, because it challenges people to think about uncomfortable things.

NM: *At the same time you do that in a very positive way. It's not about complaining, it's not a focus on negative things, it is more how to overcome difficulties.*

BC: That's good, I like that. I think it's true. When I started making art I made that decision. I didn't want to be negative, I wanted to challenge things but I want always to be positive about it. I can't help that. I'm the eternal optimist.

NM: *You are often questioned about your aboriginal heritage, so you made the series* Not Really Aboriginal *portraying yourself and your family. Why did you decide to expose yourself in first person when at the same time you hide yourself at gallery openings?*

BC: If I put myself in a photograph it's not me face to face to somebody, it's different. I think I'm quite fearless when it comes to having a voice but I'm nervous when it comes to being accepted or rejected. In a weird way I'm sensitive, I'm strong and sensitive together. But even with that, those photos for me are serious but funny. They are meant to be quite humorous, so I probably underestimated the effect that they would have. A lot of people got quite mad about them. There are a lot of people who think that that aboriginal people who are fair skinned are only trying to get money and other things through our aboriginality. The politics are complicated in Australia, so those photos drew a lot of this complexity into the open and within that complexity there's also a lot of anger.

NM: *So you decided to use yourself and not a model because it was too personal a concept to express?*

BC: Yes, it's very personal. Well, that's the thing: I don't want to speak for other people, I just want to speak for me. Particularly when I'm making such a loaded comment, I didn't feel like it would be right for me to use anybody else. My experience is the only thing I can talk about. People can argue about everything, but you can't much argue about personal experience.

NM: *In 2007, you created the* Heart Strong *series out of a response to the very one sided and negative view of Aboriginal communities by media that doesn't matched with what you've experienced. What has your involvement in your community in St Kilda brought to your art?*

BC: All my early work was about stereotypes. I was annoyed by the negative view of aboriginal people and at the same time I was trying to find my place. Having experienced that aboriginal community through my family and friends was a privilege. It gives me insight into the community that most people don't have. I was trying to challenge that negative view in some way. I think it is probably changed now, but definitely at the start I think I was trying to reconcile myself with the world. As much as my work was about the aboriginal community, it is always about me, going where and how I feel. >>

> *The Original* 2009, pigment print on cotton rag.

"Nobody outside of my friends and family knew I'd been in prison at all."

> **NM:** *It was your grandmother that instilled in you this pride for your heritage, isn't it?*

BC: That's right. She did. My dad too. But mostly her when I was a child and my dad in my later years. It's not something I can even get away from, it's just part of who I am. At my wedding my dad tried to make it an aboriginal thing. I mean, it's my wedding, can it be just … a wedding? My dad was suggesting aboriginal dances and didgeridoo players and I was like no, no, no, I don't want any of this stuff! I just wanted my simple wedding. Moreover my husband is from Greece, so his family wanted to do an orthodox wedding. We end up not doing anything of these things. But even then my dad continuously referred to our roots during his speech, he had this aboriginal smoking and gave my husband a special name and he made a speaking in our language. He still got it in and he couldn't help himself.

NM: *In your recent work* EH5452 *you refer to the time you were in prison. Why do you decided to think about that experience in this particular moment of your life?*

BC: Because over the last few years I developed a deep faith in God and just in the last couple of years that became really important to me. I first started looking at God when I was in prison. I looked back to that, because that was a turning point for me and it changed my life and led me to this point. It's not that I thought: "Oh I can make a work about being in prison". Nobody outside of my friends and family knew I'd been in prison at all. I kept it completely quiet. I was also interested in the fact that I had hidden it, and the shame that was around that. It was a cathartic process. I thought: "I don't want to be this person here and a different person here". I just wanted to be the same person everywhere. I wanted to take this thing that I've hidden and take it to the light and get rid of any shame. And to speak of who I am, really, everywhere.

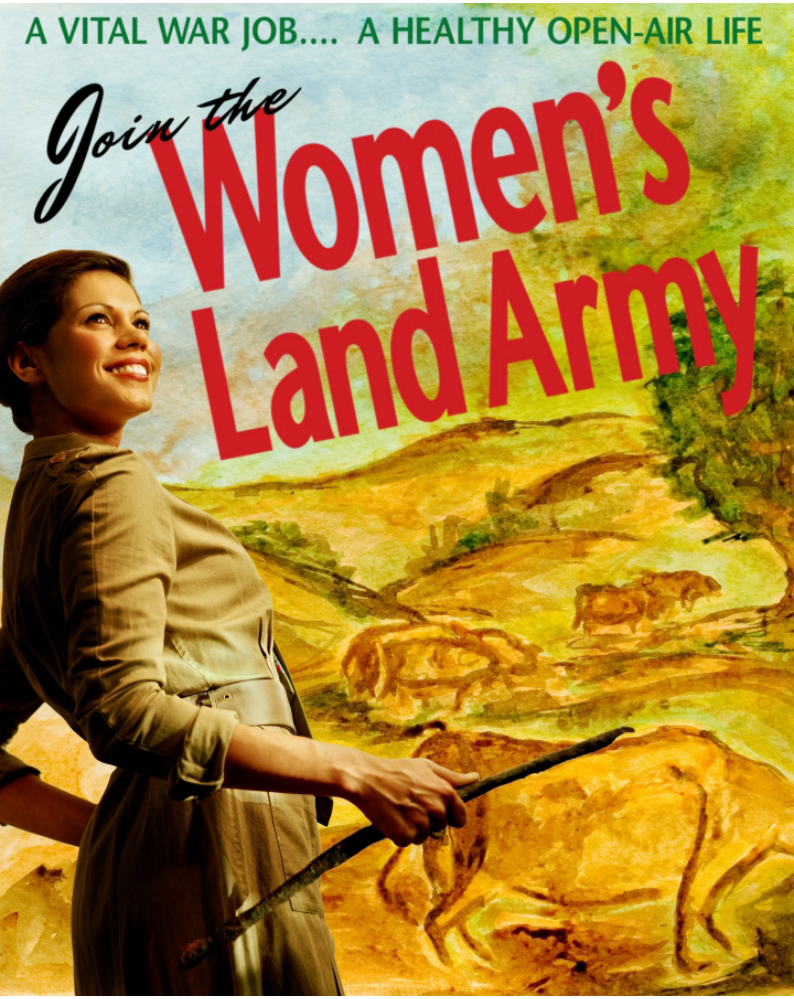
NM: *It's a very strong work. You show diaries, photographs…*

BC: That work is probably the most personal that I've done. And it had the best effect on me personally, cause all of a sudden it was like there was this artist who made works about aboriginal issues and there was also that artist who had been in prison and was making works about God. There was no resistance or transition. I thought people would say: "What does it mean she has been in prison? She was making works about aboriginal issues and now she's making works about Christianity and God and being in prison". I was expecting that but it didn't happen.

NM: *I've noticed you're working more and more with installations. Is photography still your main focus?*

BC: I don't know. If I look at all the work that I've done and the things that are more successful I think I'm probably best in photography. But I enjoy installations. I like using my hands, I enjoy making things, building ... and this year I'm doing a new photographic series and I'm doing installations too. So it's probably come down to video, photography and installation. I'd say I'm the most elegant with photography. My video can be a little funky.

Naima Morelli is an art critic and journalist with a particular interest in Italian and Indonesian contemporary art. She has written for *Art Monthly*, *NY Arts*, *Artkey* and now *Trouble*, and is a regular contributor to *Art a Part of Cult(ure)* and *Artribune*. She is also an indipendent curator with a special interest in New Media.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