

gordon
bennett



fireworksgallery

A SECONDARY EYE



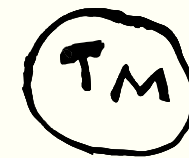
black velvet

Tm

A Secondary Eye acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognises the continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures; and to Elders past, present and emerging.

This exhibition and catalogue are produced with the support of The Estate of Gordon Bennett and we would like to sincerely thank Leanne Bennett for her assistance in the cataloguing of these works.

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Introduction

Welcome to this special exhibition featuring the works of Gordon Bennett (1955- 2014), presented collaboratively by A Secondary Eye (Sydney) and FireWorks Gallery (Brisbane).

This marks a momentous occasion being the first time in many years that Bennett's powerful artworks have been showcased in a commercial exhibition in Sydney, and we consider it a privilege to share these works with you.

The success of this exhibition is a testament to the power of collaboration. Our sincere gratitude goes to the private collectors from Brisbane, who have offered these exclusive artworks back to the market. Collectively, they have enabled us to bring together a comprehensive selection of seminal works that reflect Bennett's profound impact on contemporary art.

A heartfelt thank you is also extended to Leanne Bennett, who diligently manages Gordon's estate, for her unwavering support and commitment to preserving his legacy. Her notations and involvement in this exhibition have been paramount.

We would also like to acknowledge Simon Wright for his insightful introductory essay that provides invaluable context and depth to our presentation. His thoughtful writing beautifully illuminates Bennett's contributions to Australian contemporary art history inviting us to engage with his work on multiple levels.

This exhibition has truly been a joy to curate, reflecting the shared enthusiasm and dedication of all involved. We sincerely hope you enjoy exploring the work and ideas of Gordon Bennett. It remains our honour and pleasure to share and celebrate Bennett's remarkable vision; his imaginative wit; alongside his provocative and unforgettable imagery.

Michael Eather and Jesse-Jack De Deyne

Gordon Bennett: *Trademark*

by Simon P. Wright

Conventional understanding of a Trademark rests on recognising and protecting the authority of authorship where the holder can seek recourse for unauthorised use. While Gordon Bennett's recurring use of the ™ logo, along with © and registered idea symbols is at once nuanced and pointed, the irony and agency of their use is at the heart of his conceptual and painterly strategies which sampled, quoted and re-used found imagery. We might even say a trademark Bennett work rests on appropriation not simply, or merely, as his approach but also as the subject of his works.

Some of the earliest diary notes in the Bennett archive from 1987-88 focus on his deep interest and simpatico with "simulationism", a theory espoused by American art historian Eleanor Heartney in 1987 to describe the motivation and practice of artists who explored fictions and constructs within art history, advertising and the mass media, and who challenged the notion of artistic originality by borrowing – or appropriating - preexisting images and placing them in new contexts. Her writing struck a chord with Bennett, especially as it dawned on him that his purpose would become making art that performed a critique of representation itself. In the heady days of 1980's contemporary art, at the peak of New York's dominance over art movements and "isms", Heartney was seeking a brand name like 'simulationism' to update and coin ideas deeply rooted in early 20th century painting, from Duchamp's readymade (c.1910-15) through modernism's borrowings, into Pop and the Pictures Generation of American artists Heartney was studying.

Meanwhile, amid peculiarly topical Australian conditions at that moment, and despite being on the periphery of agendas being set by 'centres' like New York, Gordon realised he could



Perpetual motion machine, 1987-1988, oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 178 × 289cm
Collection of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

morph and re-centre such ideas by recontextualising colonial histories and attempting to subvert local identity stereotypes. He immediately set out to interrogate authorship and manipulate certain tropes that persisted in the language of school readers, media, and political rhetoric coincident with the framing of Australia's bicentenary in 1988. His perspectives on the tension that arose when examining the pioneering spirit of discovery and progress, and absence of First Nations voices during the 'celebrations of a nation', highlighted the irony of those who openly adopted signs and signifiers - like Indigenous design, motifs, artwork and related content to simulate national identity, along with props like tea towels, T-shirts and souvenirs.

Importantly, this leap was also a seismic moment of learning for Bennett too. A single footnote in Bennett's major retrospective catalogue offers critical hints as to how these factors manifest:

Not knowing any ancestors who could pass down their Indigenous stories of designs to him, Bennett had learnt early in his career about the inappropriateness of working with imagery that he was not empowered to show.

(Stanhope, Zali 'Unfinished Business: The Art of Gordon Bennett' page 19 / Ref 13 QAGOMA 2020)

One of his rare early interviews, in 1989, affords a better sense of context and the genuine significance of Bennett's first test and tangle with the authority of authorship, authorised use and recourse, and how it would underpin his practice, especially in relation to works in this exhibition.

In late 1987/1988 Bennett was considering a range of potential source imagery and was especially drawn to the conceptual and visual power of Mimih spirit figures, central to the creation stories of Kuninjku people from Maningrida, Western Arnhem Land. He appropriated one for a major work titled *Perpetual Motion Machine* 1987-1988 (NGV Collection). That work, also featuring a line-up of red roofed houses referenced in *Notes to Basquiat: Noise* (2000), was subsequently selected as a finalist for The National Aboriginal Art Awards and exhibited in Darwin. At the time, Bennett did not think he was breaking any copyright law because he based 'his' Mimih figure from a photograph of a three-dimensional version and acknowledged his sources verso of the work. However, when dancers from the Maningrida community visited the show they instantly recognised the reference as belonging to an elder, Guningbal (Crusoe Kuningbal c.1922-1984), and were concerned that law pertaining to their Country was being breached by the unauthorised reproduction of ancestor figures. What ensued was a two-part negotiation of acknowledgement and recourse:

Thankfully the situation was explained to them by people there who knew my work. Recently, when I went up there, I spoke to the relatives of Guningbal, his son in fact (Crusoe Kurddal 1961-2020), who inherited the rights to the design...

You have to understand my position of having no designs or images or stories on which to draw to assert my Aboriginality. In just three generations that heritage has been lost to me. Dots are my bridge to my Aboriginality. They connect to their obvious relationship to Western desert paintings and in their relationship to reproductions and representation... I

am continually searching for ways to connect, to express my Aboriginality, and dots obsess me for now. (Lingard, Bob 'A Kind of History Painting' (interview with Gordon Bennett) in Tension Magazine Vol17, August 1989)

One of the central characters in Bennett's trip to the region to acknowledge and seek remedy for this localised variant of authorial protection was Michael Eather, who acted as an intermediary between community members and artists involved.

Gordon was very anxious not to offend the artist or the family involved in the making of his own art. Gordon and I flew up to Maningrida... where we stayed for almost 2 weeks with my (extended) family there. Gordon brought with him bound folders with photos and descriptions of many of his artworks. He always immaculately prepared and documented his works, and they became wonderful flipbooks that were passed around among many of the people in community, particularly my extended family and Crusoe's son.

Everyone loved Gordon's work, for them it was interesting and unique. They were wildly excited about his creativity and how he threaded multiple stories and references together. Gordon was able to explain and contextualise something of his predicament whereby, with his non-Aboriginal father and Aboriginal mother, loss of language and association to country was a completely different narrative to those in tribal Arnhem Land where for countless generations not a lot had been disturbed.

(Michael Eather, Notes, October 2025, unpublished.)

Eather concludes the story that after much deliberation between Crusoe, his family and the out-of- towners, it was decided that Gordon's explanation, unique situation, efforts to visit and understand their issues was greatly admired and appreciated, and was to be "resolved with his gifting of a pair of new Levi jeans and an Elvis Presley VHS tape."

(Michael Eather, conversation with the author at Fireworks Gallery, 05 June 2026).

Gordon initially didn't feel comfortable with future permission to refer to the Mimih again, but in later works they reappear, notably pared back and less conventional as with the background layer of *Abstract Boy* (2000). In subsequent works highlighted by the remarkable *Figure Series* (1993) of works on paper, we may also see what Gordon alluded to in his earlier

thoughts on the universality of dots, through what Ian McLean described as another “Bennett trademark: the simultaneous submission of an appropriated image to both Aboriginal and Western language systems”.

(McLean, Ian ‘Philosophy and Painting: Gordon Bennett’s Critical Aesthetic’ in McLean and Bennett, *The Art of Gordon Bennett*, p87, Craftsman House, 1996)

Remarkably, works in this project that openly use the ™ symbol, like *The Reverb (Black Velvet)* 2001, and *The Reverb (Bad Hair Day)* 2001 also each enjoy a connection back to Bennett’s trip to Maningrida and Elvis Presley. Although the term ‘black velvet’ is primarily a pointed reference to the exploitation of Indigenous women ‘on the frontier’ and stands in for untold stories, such as those of the Bicentenary spectacle, it was also an international chart-topping song released in 1989 apparently as a blues/rock tribute to Elvis. In that uncanny way Bennett’s work often circles back and yet stays ever more prescient we cannot unsee black velvet as the highly visible substrate of kitsch ‘aboriginalia’, with their grotesque and stereotypical images of First Nations people (made in China, Indonesia, and elsewhere) so redolent with his *Home Décor (After Margaret Preston)* 1996 works and now riffed on by contemporary artists who identify Bennett as a role model.

How prescient, and fitting, that one of his most enduring critiques of representation - challenging the authority of authorship - now propels future generations of leading Indigenous Australian artists... any wonder he trademarked his own name, and that of John Citizen, his alter ego.

Simon P. Wright

Simon worked closely with Gordon Bennett during his tenure as the gallery manager of Bellas Gallery in Brisbane. He has subsequently worked on a number of curatorial publications and exhibitions featuring Bennett's work, including in his current position as the Assistant Director at Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art.





The Reverb (Family)
2001

chalk pastel on colourfix paper
70 x 50cm



The Reverb (Bad Hair Day)
2001

chalk pastel on colourfix paper
70 x 50cm

The Reverb (Black Velvet)
2001

chalk pastel on colourfix paper
70 x 50cm



The Reverb (Cyclops)
2001

chalk pastel on colourfix paper
70 x 50cm





The Reverb (Mirror Beast)
2001

chalk pastel on colourfix paper
70 x 50cm



The Reverb (Shaman)
2001

chalk pastel on colourfix paper
70 x 50cm

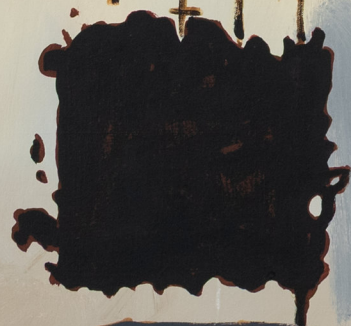


Notes to Basquiat: Noise
2000

synthetic polymer paint on linen
signed, titled and dated verso
152 x 152cm

cosmography
hypsography
hypsometry

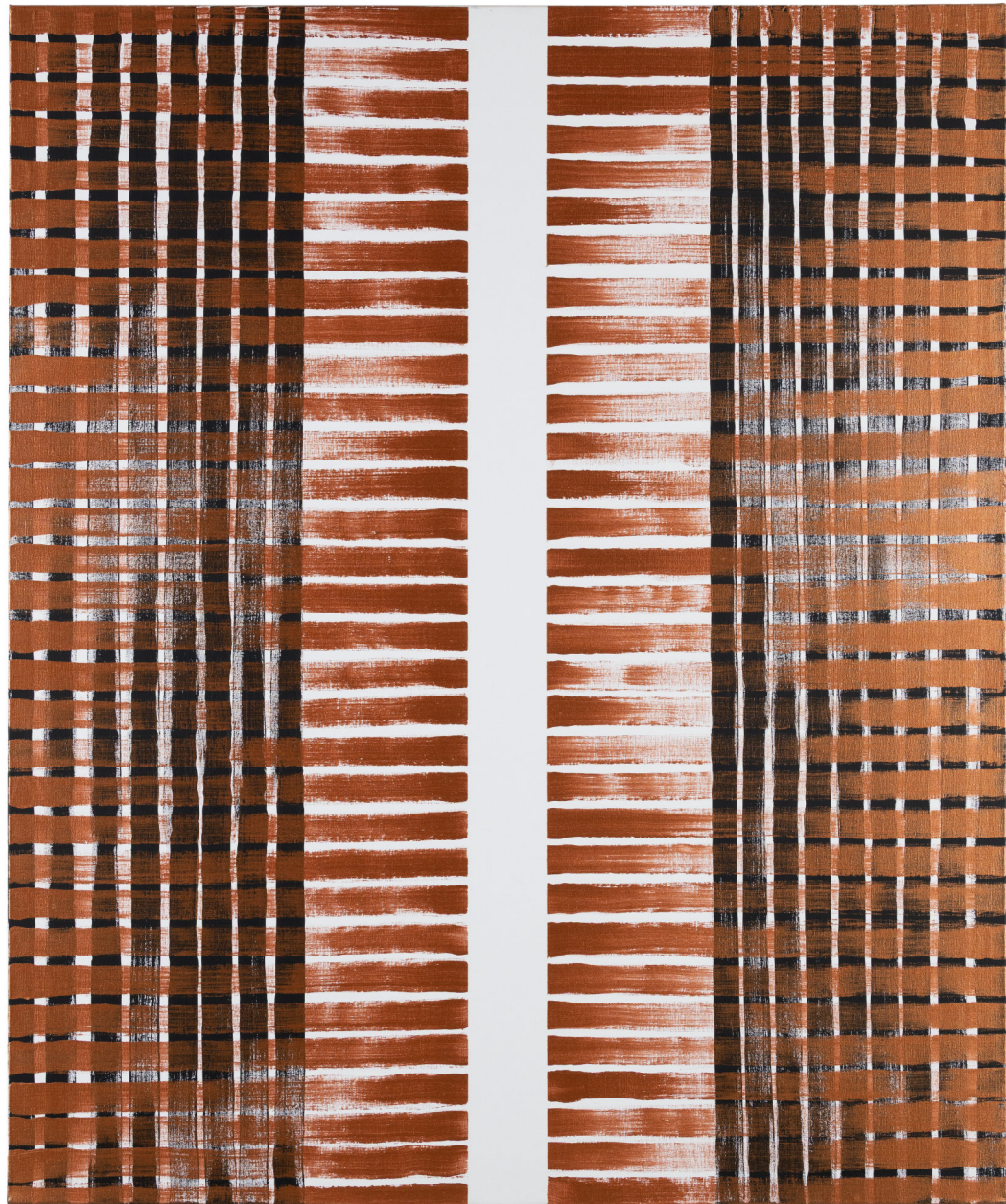
removal
abstraction
avulsion
deracination
dislodgment
eradication
exsection
extirpation
extraction
purge
remotion
remove
ripping out
shift
stripping
uprooting
withdrawal



Sacrum
Coccyx
hip bone
sacroiliac joint
acetabulum
pubis symphysis
pelvis foramina
dorsal foramina
sacral canal
sacral hiatus
sacral promontory



male Pelvis



Number Thirteen
2005

synthetic polymer paint on linen
signed, titled and dated verso
183 x 152cm

Abstract Boy

2000

synthetic polymer paint on linen
signed, titled and dated verso
60 x 40cm



Lineman

2000

synthetic polymer paint on linen
signed, titled and dated verso
60 x 40cm





**Man and Shadow (Stairway to
Heaven)**
1993

watercolour on paper
44 x 38cm



Net
1993

watercolour on paper
44 x 38cm



Net (A Fisher of Men)
1993

watercolour on paper
44 x 38cm



Leaping Man
1993

watercolour on paper
44 x 38cm



Sacred Dance
1993

watercolour on paper
44 x 38cm



Birth
1993

watercolour on paper
44 x 38cm



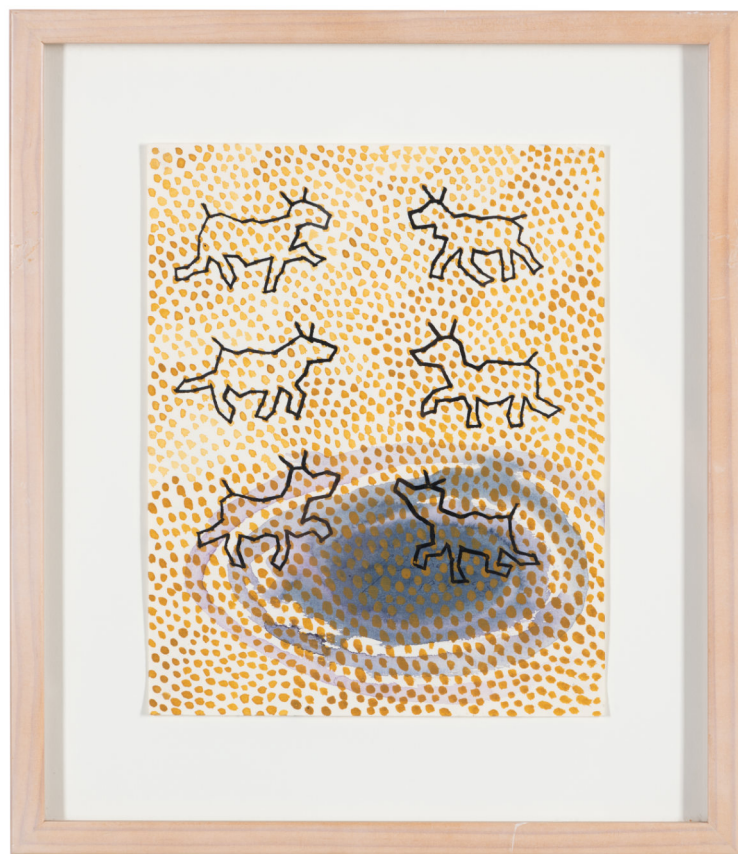
Sacred Cows
1993

watercolour on paper
44 x 38cm



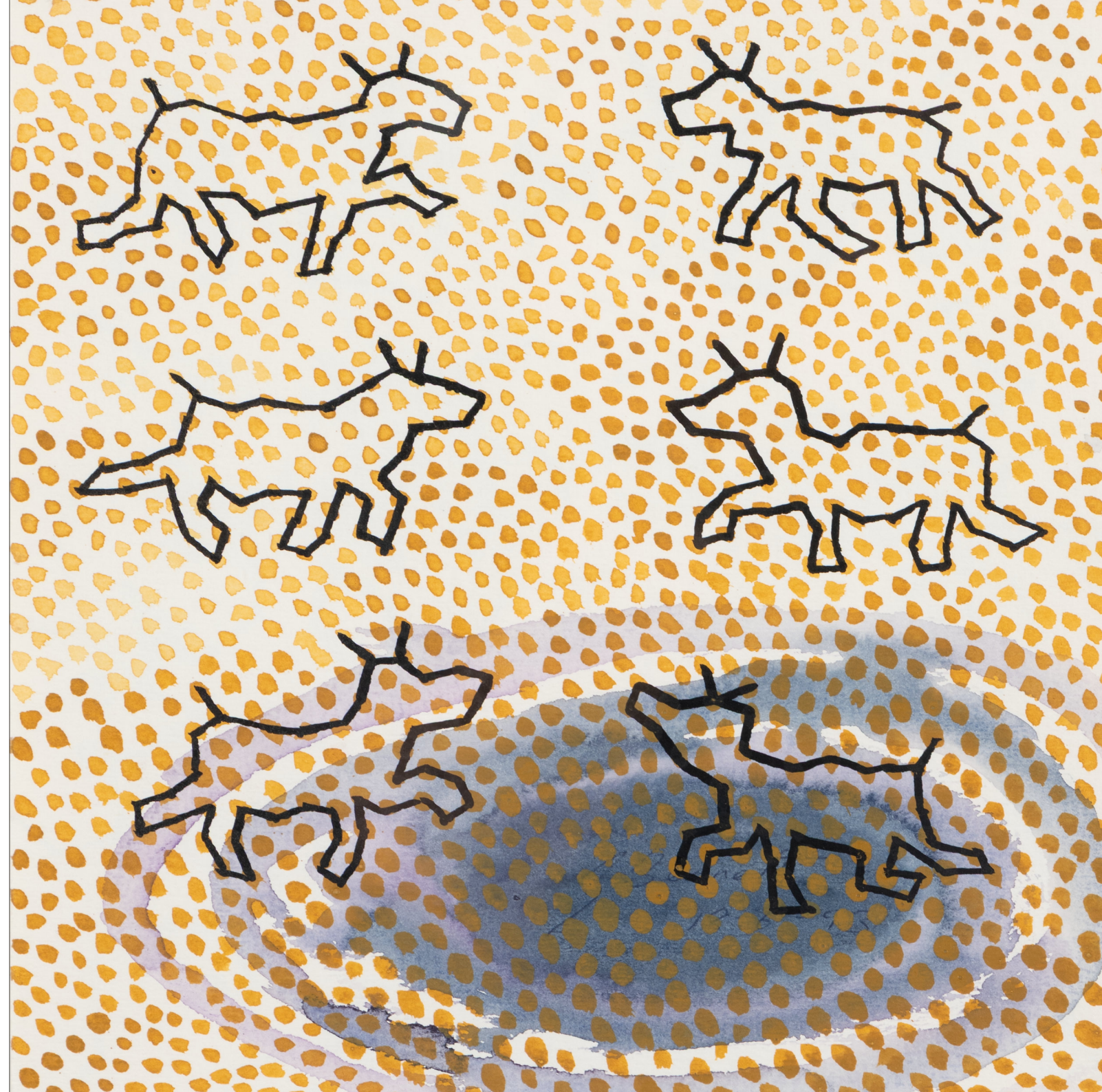
Man with Whip and Sacred Cows
1993

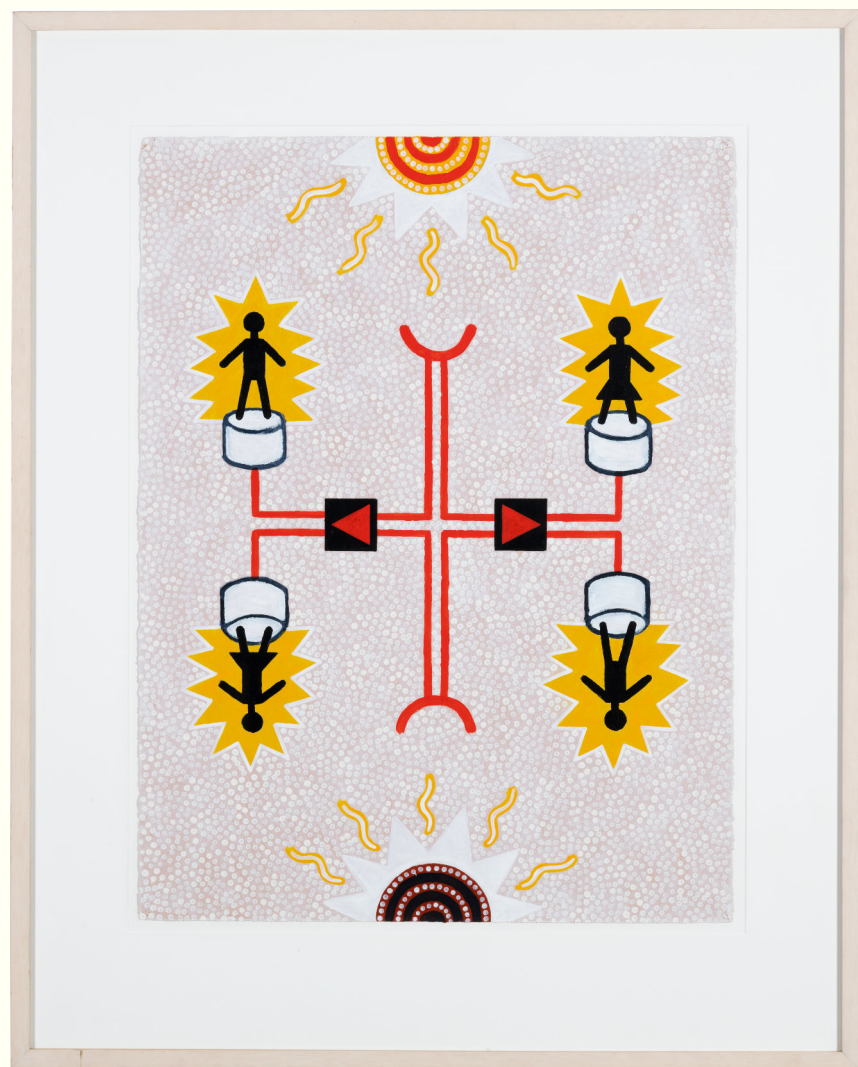
watercolour on paper
44 x 38cm



Sacred Cows Sacred Water
1993

watercolour on paper
44 x 38cm





Between Heaven and Earth
1990

synthetic polymer paint and oil on paper
104 x 83cm

Sandstorm

2003

archival print on paper, edition of 5
74 x 107cm





Home Decor (Preston + De Stijl = Citizen) Black Swan
1997

inkjet print on paper
edition 14 of 20
40 x 31 cm



Home Decor (Preston + De Stijl = Citizen) Meccano
1997

inkjet print on paper
edition 15 of 20
40 x 31 cm

Home Decor (Preston + De Stijl = Citizen) Horseman and School of Thought
1997

inkjet print on paper
edition 20 of 20
40 x 31 cm



Home Decor (De Stijl + Preston) Boomerang
1996

inkjet print on paper
edition 4 of 10
40 x 31 cm





JOHN CITIZEN
Interior (Throw rug)
2004

synthetic polymer paint on linen
signed, titled and dated verso
152 x 152cm

Exhibition dates: 1 August - 4 September, 2026

Provenance for all works are Private Collection, Brisbane
purchased directly from Bellas Gallery and Milani Gallery.

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