

EXHIBITION GUIDE

Karrabing Film Collective
Night Fishing with Ancestors
7 Oct 2023–14 Jan 2024

‘Don’t think that it’s not happening today, that it is only in the past. It’s still happening.’

This exhibition brings together four films by the Karrabing Film Collective, a media group of approximately 30 members, mostly Indigenous and living in the Belyuen Community, in Australia’s Northern Territory.

Connecting the films is the concept of theft; both the traumatic historical theft of land and children (the Stolen Generation), but also an ongoing theft of a future through environmental destruction. The exhibition proposes an ultimate connectedness, from the specificity of the Karrabing experience, to the wider global population, under the conditions of climactic emergency, which is underwritten by extractive capitalism. The exhibition includes *Night Fishing with Ancestors* (2023), shown in the UK for the first time.

Comprising members from different family groups, Karrabing is both an Emmiyengal word and a concept that describes the tide withdrawing to its lowest point. The term connects groups from across the northwest coastline, and gestures towards an opening-up of land to new possibilities. The collective use film-making as a ‘school-house of film’, to reinscribe shared histories and connections to the land that have been suppressed and partially erased through centuries of settler colonialism. Working together forges intergenerational relationships, allows for their version of real events vs mainstream media representations, and, through the international art world, attracts funds with which to support physical access to difficult to reach territories.

The films are multi-layered manifestations of complex Indigenous stories but have multiple entry points; a vivid and hallucinatory quality, absurd sense of humour, and references to genre films (such as horror movies). Early films were made using a small film crew external to the Collective. Later ones are self-shot on phones and other mobile technologies by various members, including children, embracing multiple viewpoints, improvisation, and immediacy.

The narratives of the films are based on real stories and deploy what the collective terms as ‘improvisational realism’ in which everyday events, such as a boat breaking down or police interfering in daily life, are entangled with the ‘ancestral present’. Particularly striking is the technique of superimposition, in which overlaid images relate contemporary events to historic

ones, and to a complex system of totems. These totems, such as the Barramundi fish, are foundational to Karrabing culture and are active across a sedimented time scale, which the films make palpable. People inherit connections to a totem, which exists simultaneously in the past time of Dreaming, where they actively shaped the landscape, to the present where they are tangible forces in daily life and need to be maintained through ritual journeys across territories. But these ancestral totemic relations demand far more than the fact of inheritance—they demand that their human kin show ongoing presence and care.

1.
*Windjarrameru, The Stealing C*nt\$, 2015*
36:33

This film follows four teenagers discovering cans of beer that have been abandoned in the forest – or is it a trap? Other community members, working for a mining company, inform the police, who give chase, until the group hide out in a toxic contaminated swamp. Their families converge on the scene to defend them and to berate their relatives for working with the mining company that has poisoned the land and the police for targeting their children. Weaving together Indigenous storytelling with the lived realities of police discrimination and mining company exploitation, this story begs the question; who are the real thieves?

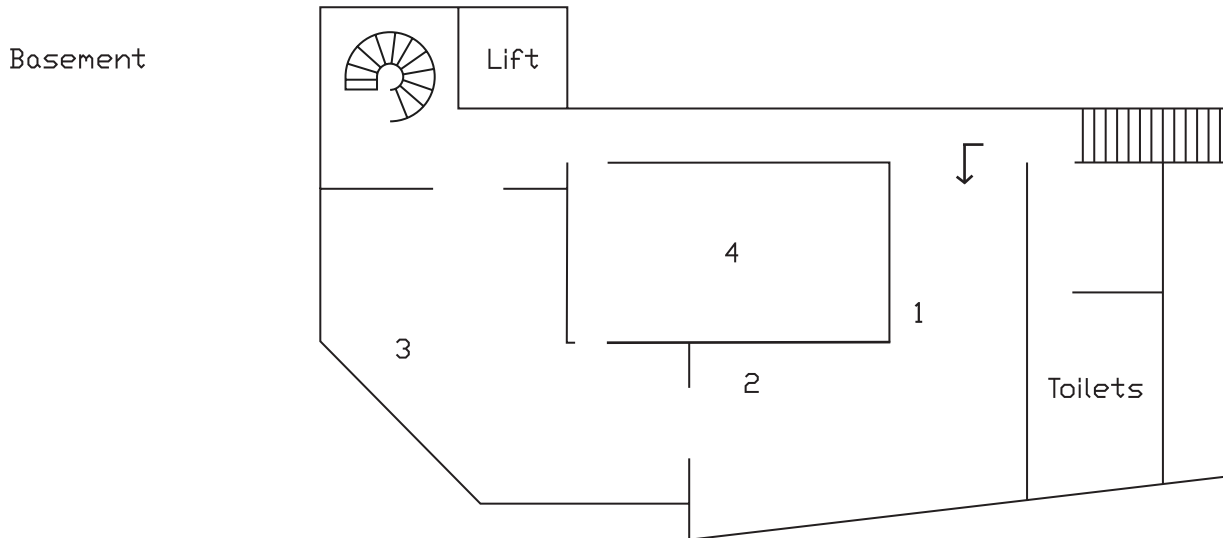
2.
Wutharr, Saltwater Dreams, 2016
28:51

Wutharr, Saltwater Dreams opens with the true story of a boat breaking down – a vital way Karrabing members access particularly remote sites. What follows is a series of versions of why the breakdown occurred. Some link its wreckage to neglected ancestral spirits, some blame a lack of Christian devotion, and others the effect of saltwater on wiring. These answers are delivered in phantasmal, overlapping narratives, mirroring the knotted and complex colonial histories which continue to constrict contemporary Indigenous families today.

3.
Night Fishing with Ancestors, 2023
24:17

Night Fishing with Ancestors is the latest film by the collective. It follows the story of the Macassan traders who sailed to the Australian coast from Indonesia, to collect trepang (sea cucumbers) around 1700. This moment of contact between Asia and Indigenous people from Australia predates European settlement, and was peaceful and collaborative - a model of contact that highlights the extreme violence of white colonialism.

FLOORPLAN



White settlers make an incursion in the film through the figure of a zombified Captain Cook. A reoccurring presence in recent Karrabing films, on this occasion insisted upon by the junior members. The ongoing nature of extractive capitalism is present toward the end of the film in images of a Lithium mine, opened to provide materials for the electric cars that the world hopes will be a solution to climate change.

4.

The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland, 2018
26:29

Set in a land and seascape poisoned by capitalism where only Indigenous people can survive extended periods outdoors, the film tells the story of Aiden, a young Indigenous man taken away as a baby to be a part of a medical experiment to save the white race. He is released back into the world to his family to travel with his father and brother across the landscape. He confronts two possible futures and pasts embodied by his own tale, and the narratives of multinational chemical and extractive industries. The psychedelic and fragmented nature of the film reflects the insidious violence that corrupts the psychology of those who are structurally, economically, and politically displaced. As a stranger in his own land, he is reinserted into existence, and becomes acquainted with totems; mermaids, a bee, and a cockatoo, staging a pertinent inquiry of whose lives matter.

EVENTS

06 Oct, 5–6.30pm TALK

Elizabeth Povinelli (member of the Karrabing Film Collective) in conversation with Kathryn Yusoff, drawing on the central figure of the Zombie, the undead quality of settler colonialism, and the refusal of dividing lines, such as between the dead and undead, within Indigenous culture.

25 Oct, 7–8.30pm KEYNOTE LECTURE

Drawing on years of dialogue with the Collective, writer and curator Filipa Ramos attends to how their films are based on real-life events in which past, present and future are implicated in one another, and explores the multiple demands and inescapable vortexes of contemporary Indigenous life. Ramos will be joined by Dr Ros Gray (Goldsmiths College) as a respondent.

13 Jan, 2–4.30pm READING GROUP

Footnotes on a Timeline: Feminist Duration Reading Group x Karrabing Film Collective

This session will build on the groups' parallel ethos of collectivity. Bringing together extracts of poetry, fiction and essays, this informal workshop will delve into the value of communal working methods and the complex experience of indigeneity in contemporary Australia.

For more information on upcoming events and to book tickets visit goldsmithscca.art

If you are interested in booking a school's workshop please contact learncca@gold.ac.uk