Some voices carry

Arini Byng

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Eands
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Contents

Arini Byng's *Some voices carry* seeks to reflect the multiplicity of Black life, and her tandem connection to and disconnection from it. Looking to navigate her way back to a culture that feels at once close and distant, Byng opens a window onto familial histories and intimacies often excluded from public presentation and finds that the only way back is through her parents' camera lens.

Some voices carry presents images captured by Byng's Anglo-Celtic Australian mother, Anna, and her Black American father, Travis, during the mid-1980s and early '90s. The earlier images document happy, everyday moments around the time of Byng's elder sister's birth and the acceptance and inclusion her mother experienced during those years. The later images reveal a small but important period of closeness and connection for Australian-born Byng, when her family returned to the US and she, at ages three and four, built core memories and feelings of Blackness.

The exhibition includes framed prints and photographs mounted on steel screens. These sculptural objects reference Byng's paternal line and attempt to create a tangible link between Byng and her father's birthplace, Pennsylvania, once the centre of steel manufacturing in the US.

The good times after the best times

Arini Byng

My father refers to the times in the 1980s when these photographs were taken as *the good times after the best times.*

He says that the best times for his family and many other American families were in the 1960s and early 1970s. It was a time of optimism, change and close to full employment. By working two and a half jobs his parents purchased their first home and then a second, larger home in a comfortably middle-class neighbourhood. The local public school was new and well-equipped, and the western edge of Philadelphia's Fairmount Park, then the largest city park in the nation, was three blocks away.

When he was 12 years old he and his 11-year-old sister, my aunt Aisha, had the run of the city. Unaccompanied, they would catch two buses and a train and spend days visiting their favourite museums. They went to movies two suburbs away and to the Philadelphia Zoo on the far side of the park. In the seemingly cavernous backseat of the family's Buick sedan, on highways that seemed to him as wide as the Nile is long, they took trips to the beaches on the New Jersey shore and to visit his older sister and her family in North Carolina.

His parents divorced when he was 16. His mother remarried a couple of years later and the family moved to Richmond Virginia where her new husband was from and had family. My father and his sister both went to university, they were the first in their family to do so. Life was still good for his family and there were still jobs for anyone who wanted to work.

Then in 1973, the country was hit hard by the first Oil Embargo. The price of oil rose by 300% and petrol was rationed. Big manufacturing companies had already started moving to parts of the country where company taxes were lower, as well as to other countries where labour costs were much cheaper. Jobs, especially in large urban centers on the East Coast, became harder to find.

His family was still safely middle-class but the mood of the country was changing. Many small businesses were boarded up and replaced by chains like 7Eleven. The go-forward optimism that the US had experienced since the end of World War II was over.

My father dropped out of uni to move to Seattle to live with a friend he wrote poetry with at uni. It was there that he met

my mother, who was backpacking through the US. They lived together in Seattle, then after her visa was about to expire, she returned to Australia. When she returned they travelled down the West Coast where they were married, and then to Mexico on an extended backpacking honeymoon.

When they returned to the US they moved to Richmond where my mother met my father's family and my sister was conceived a few months later. Most of the photographs exhibited were from this time.

It was a good time. My parents both found work and the family was very welcoming to my mother. When my sister was born it brought all of my American family together to meet her, and my mother's sister who lived in California also came to Richmond. It was a special time for everyone, that both of my parents remember very fondly. *New babies will do that.*

The last excursion that the family took together before my parents moved to Australia was to Virginia Beach on the Atlantic Ocean. It was a special day for everyone. The photograph of my cousin Rashida, her father Ronald and my cousin Imaani was taken on that sunny day at the beach.

My father drew my attention to the other figure in that photograph, the white man on the right edge of the photograph. He wondered whether the look on the man's face was one of disapproval of a mixed-race couple, or if he was simply squinting because the sun's glare was in his eyes. It made my father recall the one disturbing incident that they experienced during their time in the US.

One day, while my grandmother looked after my sister, my mother and father took their basketball and headed to the courts for a game with the local players. My mother was a good player and they had played together on the neighbourhood courts frequently. On this particular day, as they dribbled the ball back and forth and headed for the courts, two tall, long-haired white men watched them approach from their front porch. As my parents passed one of the men said, 'Don't let that ball hit my car.' My father doesn't remember what he replied but it wasn't much and they just continued on their way.

My father was working as a chef in a neighbourhood restaurant and he finished work around 11:00PM. One night about two months later and a few weeks before they left for Australia, as he left the restaurant to walk home he heard a loud

whistle. It was like a signal, but the streets were all but empty. When he looked ahead he saw a tall, long-haired white man a half a block ahead. Wondering if he had actually been signalling someone he looked down the cross street to his right where he saw another tall, long-haired white man approaching from about a half a block away. He returned to the restaurant and called the police. A policeman arrived fairly promptly but by then the two men had disappeared.

For the remaining two weeks of nights at the restaurant, my father varied his route home and carried with him his chef's knife, which previously he'd left at the restaurant. Two weeks later my mother and father were in Australia, and four weeks after that it was Christmas and they were at my mother's parents' home in country New South Wales, playing cricket in the backyard and drinking overproof rum on the front veranda. Good times.

Two years later I was born.

My father says that there are far more mixed-race couples in the US now but the people who disapprove are far more likely to be loud and abrasively vocal about their disapproval. He also says that life has taught him not to assume what the man on the right edge of the photograph may have been thinking.

Observations, collaboration and proof

Sebastian Henry-Jones

As someone whose ancestry is Anglo-Australian Chinese and not Anglo-Celtic Australian and Black American, I drew this (very rudimentary) diagram to make sense of my involvement in Arini's project. Through it, I have tried to describe a set of relations that help me to understand my own (and this text's) role as a witness to *Some voices carry*, and furthermore, to interrogate the meaning of presenting photographs within public forums today. I was interested in the way that images are viewed by people in the 21st century, and in relation to this exhibition, specifically images that present the black body.

I wanted to compare the modes of looking we employ when reading images that appear in forums of art and in law, as I think there are similarities. It was important to consider what the objectives are when presenting images in each situation, and in turn how our expectations of what these are might effect the kinds of images that are produced.

I think that in both spaces, images of 'The other' are read much the same as evidence, to be interpreted by those that look rather than as things with the potential to produce relations of being together. In societies growing in the shadow of colonial and racist histories, when the non-majority is visible only in proximity to the witnessing of the majority, I wonder where the meaning and efficacy really lies in conventional practices of image-making and presentation. When I showed my friend the graph I had made she wondered whether 'justice' was the right word. Her gripe was that the ideologies, systems and suppositions that underpin the graph itself are idealistic at best, totally broken at worst.* She thought that perhaps there could be a bigger circle, to demarcate a space of ideals as they give way to reality.

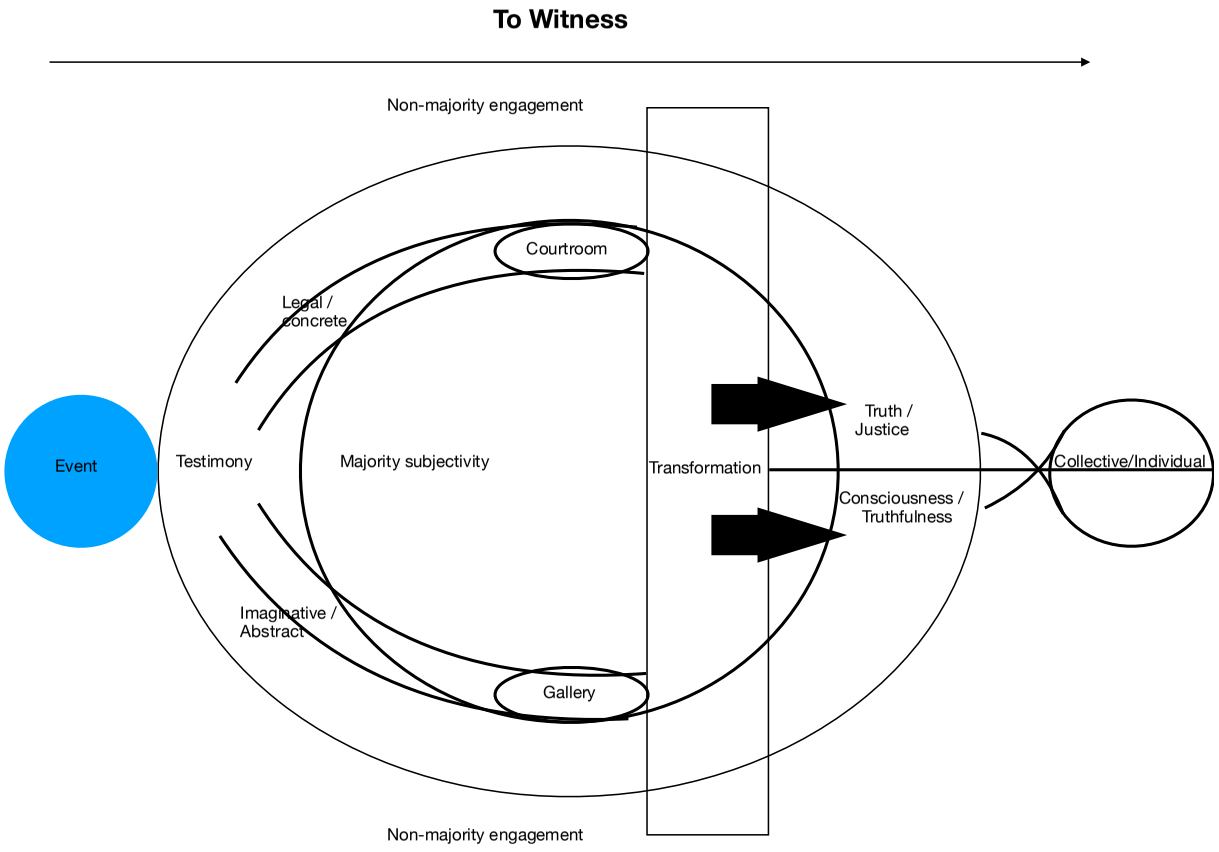
I've found that particular elements of this diagram might be swapped depending who the witness is. Layer upon layer of witnessing through time: The camera, each of Arini's parents, Arini herself; the majority-white audience that makes up the Melbourne art scene. Context is important, and one's work should be critical to the powers that govern the set of relations that give it meaning.

*500 Aboriginal deaths in custody on this continent since the Royal Commission, and a crisis in the way Black Life is understood so great as to prompt the global-reaching, 'Black Lives Matter' Movement in North America.

For non-majority movements to grow, it is important that artworks and images that testify to the complexity and nuance of a non-majority identity are recognised by the mainstream, and engaged with critically by members of that non-majority community. But should we always expect art to drive social transformation of this nature in the first place?

In re-presenting photographs taken by her parents, Arini is engaging with practices of image-making and presentation in a critical way, that acknowledges a space beyond the diagram and the rigid structures it represents. Rather than expecting to be addressed as an audience, perhaps we should think deeply about what it means to witness the semi public, semi private communication of this kind between Arini and her family, here on unceded Boon wurrung and Woi wurrung Country. I'm still unsure whether witnessing is something that one should carry out passively or actively.

Sebastian Henry-Jones is a curator led by an interest in writing, DIY thinking, and the potential of the exhibition format to cultivate forms of collectivity and social responsibility, that communicate across social difference. He looks to embody these ideals in his work by centring the needs, ideas and requirements of those that he works with, and so his practice is informed by striving for a personal ethics with sincerity, generosity, honest communication and learning at its core. Sebastian joined West Space in 202 as Associate Curator.


To Witness
Non-majority engagement
Courtroom
Legal /
concrete
Event
Testimony
Majority subjectivity
Transformation
Truth /
Justice
Consciousness /
Truthfulness
Collective/Individual
Imaginative /
Abstract
Gallery
Non-majority engagement

Artist Biography

Arini Byng makes body-based work. Born on Gadigal land, she is a multidisciplinary artist of Black American and Anglo-Celtic descent. Trained as a photographer, Byng's work comprises video, performance, photography, sculpture, painting and installation.

Byng works with the affective qualities of materials, gestures and settings; undertaking exercises in image, movement and form to negotiate political scenes. Byng's videos and performances are complex, intimate studies in gesture and action. Her practice endeavours to illustrate a haptic or tactile phenomenology of the body as it encounters the physical world. In her work to date, Byng has used the body in motion as a means of unpacking familial ties and histories; physical intimacy between friends; the interrelation of performance and the screen; the potential generated by structural collapse and our means of experiencing and holding space in the world. Byng's practice often operates through collaboration with other practitioners such as contemporary dancers, musicians and visual artists.

Her work has been presented nationally including Blak Dot Gallery, Gertrude Glasshouse, Darren Knight Gallery, FUTURES, The Centre for Contemporary Photography, TCB, Bus Projects, Watch This Space, Neon Parc Project Space, MPavilion, Margaret Lawrence Gallery, c3 Contemporary Art Space and Blindside. Selected works have been published by Perimeter Editions, Higher Arc, Le Roy and Photofile; with work held in the publication collections of V&A, MoMA, MOCA and Tate Modern. Arini lives and works in Naarm (Melbourne) on the unceded sovereign lands and waterways of the Boon Wurrung and Woi Wurrung (Wurundjeri) people of the Kulin Nation.

Arini Byng
Some voices carry
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Caves
The Nicholas Building, Room 5,
Level 8/37 Swanston St,
Naarm (Melbourne), Victoria

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Caves

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