

Destiny Deacon on humour in art, racism, 'Koori kitsch' and why dolls are better than people

Three decades of the photographer's work is now showing at the National Gallery of Victoria, but she still gets people saying it's 'not art'



Artist Destiny Deacon in front of her Lounge Room installation, part of *Destiny*, the retrospective of her work showing at NGV Australia.

Stephanie Convery
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“Everyone thinks that God’s a white man, but actually it’s a black woman,” says Destiny Deacon.

The artist – who descends from Kuku (Cape York) and Erub/Mer (Torres Strait) people – is standing in front of a series of four photos featuring a black doll in a tutu. The doll hovers over a simple tableau of neon green plastic palm trees, and a pile of smaller white baby dolls.

“So there’s white people living in paradise,” she says, describing the images. “And God has a look. And then God *really* has a look. And then God does a triple take, and pisses off and leaves them.”

The 1994 series is titled *Waiting for Goddess*, in Deacon’s typical tongue-in-cheek style. It’s one of the earlier works in the photographer, film-maker and artist’s three-decade oeuvre. We’re walking through the ground-floor gallery at NGV Australia, the

National Gallery of Victoria's Federation Square locale, and the building is busy with preparations for the long-awaited post-lockdown reopening.

The NGV claims its Destiny Deacon retrospective is the largest of her work to date. It is its flagship reopening exhibition, and its first since Covid-19 shutdowns put Melbourne's arts scene in stasis for nearly nine months.



Destiny Deacon, *Waiting for Goddess* (1993), Lightjet print from Polaroid original,

like many of her works, was initially shot on Polaroid. For the retrospective – simply titled *Destiny* – those Polaroid snaps have been blown up. The

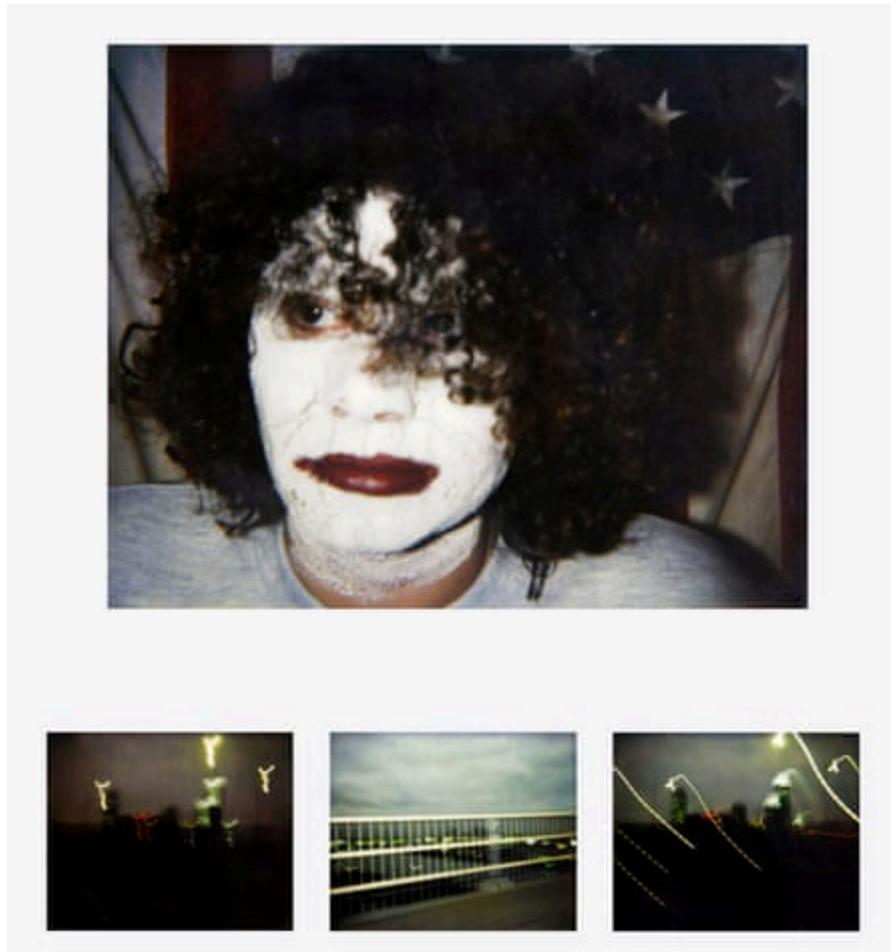
size is more appropriate for the cavernous gallery walls, but it belies their more humble origins.

That distinctive visual aesthetic was a product of necessity. When Deacon decided she wanted to take photos, she was put off by the rigmarole of the rudimentary dark room used by her longtime friend and collaborator, artist Virginia Fraser. She opted for the simplicity of Polaroids instead. But “it was very expensive,” she says. “Every time you clicked it was a couple of dollars. Being poor, especially in the early 90s ... A bloody rip off.”

Taking photos of dolls, she said, made things cheaper: they would keep still. “They could pose better for me than humans.”

Deacon takes me over to one of the first works in the exhibition, a set of four images titled *Dreaming in Urban Areas*. One features her friend the late Goernpil poet Lisa Belleair, in what appears to be white face paint (in typical Deacon style, it was actually face scrub), the other three are of streaky street lights. They were taken while crossing the West Gate Bridge in a car, Deacon says, and one of the pictures ended up on the cover of Belleair’s 1996 book of poetry by the same name.

“I got 50 bucks for that!” Deacon says. She elbows me. “Queensland University Press, mate.”



Dreaming in Urban Areas by Destiny Deacon (1993) laser print from Polaroid copies. Photograph: Destiny Deacon

Fraser is here too, and shadows us as we walk the exhibition, occasionally dropping in contextual information. In front of *Adoption* (1993), Deacon speaks of Belleair again, who was adopted by a white family as a child. “She told me that white people come to the hospital and they pick which baby they want,” Deacon says. Suddenly the image of little brown dolls in patty pans becomes freighted with historical weight.

The dolls are part of Deacon’s obsession with “Koori kitsch” – everything from tourist tack (fake boomerangs, teaspoons, biscuit tins) to golliwogs. She’s been collecting it for years, her use of it laying groundwork for artists like [Tony Albert](#), and in the exhibition there is a huge installation devoted to it: a lounge room replete with gaudy carpet, ceramics, prints and toys – so many toys.

“I wanted to get rid of the dolls so I had some more space,” Deacon says. “So they’re on holiday here. I’m glad there’s more space in my house.”

I am a funny person, I am a bloody comedian really. I’m hilarious. If you watch those videos, you’ll see the comedy

The effect is striking. What is a doll but a signifier, a simplified representation of self and other through which we try to understand the world? Children practice social codes and behaviour in play; by re-contextualising those playthings, Deacon draws attention to the simplistic, often unacknowledged assumptions we make about people and the world, and skewers them with humour and horror in equal measure.

The literature on her work would suggest that she hates this kind of talk: her antipathy to “art speak” has been well-documented. But she agrees with this interpretation of the dolls.

“That’s right, you’ve got it very much right,” she says. “The dolls, the black dolls, I felt sorry for them, and the kitsch stuff. And they sort of represent us as people, because white Australia didn’t come to terms with us as people ... [the dolls are] objects, and that’s the way that white Australia saw us: the flora, the fauna, and the objects. And I just thought, well, they’ve just as much to say.”



A little further over, there are three portraits – of the artist Richard Bell, the late writer Peter Blazey, and activist Gary Foley – all standing shirtless, holding a towel to their heads as if drying themselves off. They’re posed in an echo of Australian artist William Dobell’s 1932 painting, *The Boy at the Basin*.

“They’re very alpha male,” says Deacon.

“They’re all men who can be very charming, and also *really* irritating,” Fraser chimes in.

Bell and Deacon go back many years, and he has written an essay for her exhibition catalogue. “Being political and an artist does not bring popularity in this country, Australia. Even when you can hide it really, really well,” he writes.

“I’m a political person. Most artists are. We have to be political, especially Indigenous artists,” says Deacon now.

The politics in Deacon’s work arrive hand-in-hand with a dark comedy. “I’m glad people find it funny,” she says. “I get people saying, ‘Oh that’s not art,’ but I am a funny person, I am a bloody comedian really. I’m hilarious. If you watch those videos, you’ll see the comedy.”

“Those videos” include collaborations such as 1987’s *Homevideo* (with Lisa Bellea and Tommy Petersen) and 1999’s *I Don’t Wanna Be a Bludger* (with Michael Riley) featuring Deacon as the manic troublemaker Dolores. Less funny, more eerie is *No Place Like Home* with Erin Hefferon, a loop of a woman standing on the road in Perth’s King’s Park at night, a piano tinkling out *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*, road signs lit up by cars flashing by in the darkness. Deacon says she took the video around the time of the Claremont killings.

As for those people saying her work is “not art”: “The joke’s on them, I’m blue chip, it sells in the auctions ... but I don’t get any money from it,” she says.



Installation view of Destiny Deacon and Virginia Fraser’s Colour Blinded 2005 and Snow Storm 2005 on display in Destiny at The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia, Melbourne, 2020. Photograph: Tom Ross

In the centre of the exhibition is *Colour Blinded*: a 2005 work in which a room is lit with low-pressure sodium lamps that turn it yellow and change the colour of visitors’ skin so that they appear uniform. Doll photos line the walls, and a pair of transparent

perspex boxes stuffed with golliwogs and white styrofoam balls – a micro-installation called Snow Storm – sits in the centre of the room.

“Ask me if I understand Australia. I think I do,” Deacon says. “Ask me, do I understand being black?”

She mentions the recent revelations about war crimes allegedly committed by Australian soldiers in Afghanistan, and draws a line between the language they allegedly used about Afghan people and the language used by white Australia about its First Nations people.

“Racism is never ending and I think that’s the biggest problem we have, everything is based on that. And you know, we’re not good enough – Indigenous people are still the bottom of the ladder. It’s just unending,” she says.

“But we’re still fighting. It’s still a bloody racist country, and there’s still a bloody long way to go ... but the younger generation are fighting, mate, that’s the main thing.”

• *Destiny is showing at NGV Australia until 14 February 2021*